

Star Gate 571

Chapter 571: Walking Out of Silver Moon (II)

“Ah, you guys can go to the Sword Sect for a look. Martial Uncle Hong is of a mind to build a sacred land of sanctuary...”

“What sacred land?” Hong Qing blinked.

“A sacred land in the mortal world!”

Hong Qing gaped at Li Hao. What...? My dad? Creating a sacred land in the mortal world? Has the leader lost his mind today?

“You don’t understand and neither do I. But we’ll understand sooner or later.” Li Hao borrowed some words from the old guys of Silver Moon. “The gap between you guys and me is growing bigger and bigger. I need to mull over my progress, as do you. You guys need to accumulate and experience certain things. Martial uncle’s sanctuary won’t be easy to establish.

“Many of you come from the Sword Sect and should understand that it’s not difficult to create a place for a thousand people. But when it comes to ten thousand, one hundred thousand, a million...? That can be very, very hard! I’m not sure what is required, but I know that creating such a place is beneficial to everyone. It would be a journey of tempering the heart.”

Everyone looked at Li Hao. No one was in the mood to consider Hong Yitang’s grand endeavor. Not even his daughter was thinking of her father’s ambitions. The only thing they knew was that their leader seemed to have made up his mind to leave.

“Leader... then we’ll go find you when we become Dominators. Will you still accept us then?”

“There’s nothing to question when it comes to acceptance,” Li Hao chuckled. “You are all of the Demon Hunters and... of the Battle Heaven Army!”

The Battle Heaven Army!

Being equipped with the armor made them part of the city's army. The group turned over his words in their mouths; Hong Qing didn't say anything.

"Then we'll go find you when we're Dominators," Liu Yan said off to the side. "Wait for us in the central region, don't proceed so far down your path that we cannot see you."

"Hahaha, I hope!" Li Hao laughed. Parting ways wasn't necessarily a sorrowful affair, but it could bring down the mood. "Then you guys should disembark when we reach White Moon City in a bit..."

"What about us?" Hao Lianchuan suddenly asked. They were supernaturals.

"Director, you forget that you're the head of the Night Watchers," Li Hao burst out laughing. "What will they do if you leave?"

"Senior brother, I'm not!" Wang Ming volunteered eagerly. "I'm a Solar now!"

"You should stay with the director. You guys have made decent improvements and the director is almost a Nova. I'm going to kill White Shark before I go, that will throw the White Shark Raiders into complete chaos. You can use them as training targets. Of course, we can also forget about that if I don't succeed.

"Violet Moon's locked up in the Inspectorate. Under these circumstances, Inspector General Kong may not be willing to let me take her. They might not want to make a complete break with Ying Hongyue at the moment..."

"Who cares!" Wang Ming exclaimed. "Senior brother, I'll go to the Inspectorate in a bit and kill that Violet Moon! It must be Red Moon creating trouble for you!"

“Forget it, let’s not make things difficult for them.” Li Hao grinned. “Just one Violet Moon won’t really affect anything and there’s no need to go against the leaders of Silver Moon. We all nurse our own thoughts, I won’t force mine on someone else. In the same vein, their thoughts won’t affect me at all.”

The young man thought for a bit, looked at the group, then at Liu Long. “Chief, I leave them to you. I’m not a very worthy leader. If anyone wants to back out, just hand in your black armor. There won’t be anything else to the process.

“I know you have a weapon soul!” He suddenly knocked his sword on the ship. “I now transfer your command to my deputy leader. The Divine Kun Ship is suited for naval battles. It would inconvenience everyone if I took it with me, so I leave it for the Demon Hunters.”

The ship trembled after a round of knocking. Li Hao shot out a ray of sword qi and pierced Liu Long’s bare arm. A drop of blood landed on the ground in short order. Moments later the man frowned and looked at Li Hao without a word. He could sense that he held control over the ship now.

They were almost at White Moon City. Li Hao looked into the distance and continued giving instructions.

“You guys can go to Martial Uncle Hong if you find yourselves in trouble, or you can also go to Light Sword. Tell her I said so and that I’ll help her fully suppress her light energy when I return. But she needs to help you guys when you need it. She may even have to anchor the formation for you!

“When it comes to Kong Jie and Huang Yu... Kong Jie has a more straightforward personality and can be trusted with a thing or two. The others can be ignored! Additionally, I have a senior sister in the city whose husband is Hu Dingfang. He’s a high ranking officer in the military—you guys should all know them. Try not to have anything to do with them even if they come to you. Just ignore them!”

Li Hao gave orders in great detail. Liu Long listened silently. The young man of prior might not have said this much. He would more likely just leave without a word and not consider so many aspects. Li Hao now, however, made arrangements for everyone. He spoke of their avenues of retreat, prospects, and future...

“If you’re lucky enough to obtain sufficient mysterious power stones or origin weapons, you can return to where we just were and ask that one to help you cultivate. It should not reject you. But remember, do not reveal the existence of the ruin in case you attract unnecessary trouble!

“If you really get into trouble, chief, or Silver Moon proves impossible to stay in, then you can bring everyone to Battle Heaven for shelter. There shouldn’t be an issue since you are an official member of the army. Just head directly in after the ruins are open.”

“Don’t worry, I understand.”

White Moon City was in front of them now. Liu Long looked at the city, then at Li Hao. “Are you going in?”

“I am. How else will I quietly slip away otherwise?” Li Hao laughed. “Oh yeah, I’m not leaving any treasures for you guys. You can collect them yourselves!”

The ship flew over the city and landed at the Silver Moon Guards base with a rumble. Li Hao led the Demon Hunters in disembarking and shoved a small flask to Liu Long as they walked. “There’s a drop of Water of Life inside,” he transmitted. “It’s to save a life, so don’t use it for cultivating. I’m taking the rest with me.”

Liu Long inclined his head. “Are you going to the central region or other regions?” he transmitted.

“The central region! If circumstances permit, I might go to the east first.” Indeed, he might. That was where the Steadfast Duke was! There was another Windchaser Boot to obtain.

Of course, he knew the risks associated with that endeavor. That treasure was said to rest in the duke's storage ring. The duke was incredibly formidable and it would be nearly impossible to seize it from him. But what if... there was a chance to?

According to what Light Sword said, the Xus conducted a worship ceremony once a year and brought out the Windchaser Boot to worship their ancestors. It wasn't time for the ceremony yet, but the duke's eldest son was dead. According to custom, he would be interred in the ancestral grave on the seventh day of his death. He would be laid to rest, the Hall of Ancestors would be opened, the ancestors honored...

It'd been three days since Xu Zhen's death and it would take some time to travel to the duke's manor. There was roughly five thousand kilometers to cover from Silver Moon to the Steadfast Duke. Although Li Hao's speed was fast if he traveled at full speed, it would still take him three days to reach his destination. That might be the seventh day when he arrived, leaving him no chance to make a move because he wouldn't have enough time to gather information.

But he might as well go take a look because no one would expect that he would have designs on the boot at this very moment. How bold would he have to be to attempt such a thing? Supreme existences such as Earthturner Sword and Light Sword hadn't dared do so when he mentioned it before. In the public's eye, the young man should be turtling in White Moon City. He wouldn't dare venture out so easily.

However, the journey would be very tiring. The young man glanced at Panther ambling around next to him. The dog was much bigger and fatter than before. It... should be pretty fast and have good stamina. Monster spirits were more vigorous than humans. It might be faster to hitch a ride on the dog.

Thanks to the perception of a monster spirit, Panther seemed to sense something. It raised a head to look at Li Hao, confusion in its eyes. Li Hao patted it on the head with a laugh.

The group quickly entered the base lobby. Li Hao looked at everyone. "Stay here and cultivate for a few days and reflect on your recent comprehensions. Let's go out after a few days, we're in no hurry!"

Liu Long nodded and rumbled, “We won’t be going out for the next couple of days and won’t let anyone inside either!”

Plainly, Li Hao had some ideas in mind. The man didn’t ask. Sometimes knowing too much wasn’t a good thing.

“Very well!” Li Hao waited quietly for nightfall. He wanted those outside to leave. He was back at the base. Whether it was Huang Yu or Director General Zhao, would they continue keeping an eye on him?

They wouldn’t. It was still very safe inside the city.

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As Li Hao expected, Huang Yu waited only a short while after the young man returned with his people. He chose to leave upon seeing the ship continue to be parked in the plaza, conspicuous in its presence. He set other people as watchers, however. Not to keep the young man under surveillance—he just didn’t want Li Hao to run around with the Demon Hunters any further. It was very dangerous in the outside world right now!

At the provincial government.

This was Light Sword’s first instance of openly walking into the government building. She looked around curiously. Although she was a Silver Moon martial master, this group of people had always been at odds with the provincial government. Today, she was just sauntering in.

“This way, Miss Hu...” Deputy Zhou met her at the door.

An uncomfortable expression crossed her face as she looked at the deputy. He knew her thoughts and was equally awkward.

“It’s difficult to identify the right honorific, so this is what we settled on. If... Grandmaster Hu doesn’t like it... how about I change it?” They normally called her Light Sword, but needed to address her by her proper name here.

“Just call me Swordmaster Hu!” Light Sword responded. Grandmaster... It would be fine to call her a walking god based on prior custom. But grandmaster? That was a warrior of the ancient civilization who would lay down their lives for justice, people, country, and race.

She was not someone like that, so she did not accept that title.

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Deputy Zhou said nothing further and led Light Sword inside. They took the stairs to where doors were flung wide open to the hall within. Kong Jie and Director General Zhao were both present. Huang Yu walked in as soon as the deputy entered with their visitor. The director general glanced at him.

“He’s back and at the base,” Huang Yu transmitted. “He shouldn’t be going back out in the short term since he’s just come back. Therefore, I decided to come for a look. I should say hi since Light Sword is here.”

The director general inclined his head and stood up, looking at Light Sword with a smile. “Light Sword of the Seven Swords of Silver Moon. I’ve met all of the others, but not you. To know a person by reputation is not as good as seeing them face to face. I finally meet you in the flesh today!”

Light Sword grumbled inwardly. If it wasn’t for the fact that she was barely passable now, she wouldn’t present these guys with her real face! When her thoughts traveled here, she thought back to what Li Hao had said about the provincial government paying him to save her. Thus, she didn’t stand on ceremony.

“I thank the group for your aid! I am humbly gratified, yet there is little common ground between us as we hold different principles. I will certainly help if the Silver Moon authorities require support in the future, but we can bypass everything else!”

“Light Sword, how do we have little common ground and differing principles?” Kong Jie smiled.

“Kong Jie, you have martial master blood on your hands after your years of being the inspector general,” Light Sword answered aloofly. “We naturally have little common ground!”

“What, was I wrong to maintain order in the province?” Kong Jie frowned. “I have a clear conscience as none of the martial masters I killed were the good sort. I would somewhat agree with you if you said the others weren’t anything good, but you criticize me? This means you are nothing else apart from a martial master—you don’t have the ability to determine right from wrong.”

Light Sword didn’t defend herself, so Kong Jie fell silent. There was no point in continuing this conversation.

“We’re all of Silver Moon, we’re all on the same side,” smiled Director General Zhao. “We’ve been hot-blooded since the ancient times. It’s fine if we fight behind closed doors. But Master Hu is direct, so we’ll be equally forthright. Your word is enough! If trouble stirs in the province in the days to come, we hope for you to lend a hand or two. We can cover each other!”

“I will certainly try my best!” was all that Light Sword replied with.

She wasn’t as enthusiastic or tearily grateful as they might’ve expected. Nor was she moved at the sight of seeing old countrymen or inclined to wax nostalgic about the past. She might be able to have a conversation if it was Yuan Shuo and the others present. But these guys? Forget it.

One of them was an official and strictly speaking, the other was a bandit. All martial masters of yesteryear were bandits. The group engaged in awkward chatter before Huang Yu asked bluntly, “How strong is the Steadfast Duke?”

“Stronger than me!” Light Sword speculated after a while. “The supernatural locks of his four limbs are definitely saturated and at least three more of his organs are.”

The others furrowed their brows. That strong?

“And you?” Kong Jie stroked his chin and looked at her.

“Two of mine are saturated.”

“Not bad!” Kong Jie smiled. “I thought all of you guys wouldn’t have improved much over the years. Southern Fist has probably just completed saturation of one lock and can barely break the ones of his organs. However, he’s so much cockier than you.”

“And you?” Light Sword asked equally bluntly.

“Me?” Kong Jie laughed. “Just two, I’m not quite there with my third.” He hesitated, then still asked, “Have you discovered the ones in your head, body, or bones? There are only nine altogether in the limbs and organs, but there should be many more than that in the body...”

The human body should be sealed on all fronts. There was one of the head that was publicly acknowledged, even though it was impossible to find. But whether there were locks in the body or bones remained a mystery.

“I don’t know, I haven’t sensed any.”

Kong Jie inclined his head and continued asking, “What aspect do you focus on?”

“The aura!”

“Those are the aspects available to us.” Kong Jie nodded again. “The aura, body, and blood qi. It’s mostly the same. Only Yuan Shuo is studying the path of the organs, but that happens to be the hardest to walk. I wonder if that guy has made any progress at all.”

He sighed and wanted to speak on when Huang Yu interrupted, “How many do you think Earthturner Sword’s saturated?”

“I don’t know.” Light Sword shook her head.

The others frowned, how could she not know? But they caught her drift. It wasn’t that she didn’t know or didn’t have her speculations, she just didn’t want to say. He must be stronger than her, so he was at either three or four locks.

“Are we able to break through to the next level if all five locks are fully saturated to their maximum capacity?” Light Sword asked in return.

“I don’t know, we’ve never tried.” Kong Jie shook his head. “At our current stage, there may not be any who can saturate all nine locks. We’ve enjoyed some of the advantages of the supernatural as we were in that domain first, then converted back to being martial masters...”

“So a return conversion is possible?” Light Sword raised her eyebrows.

“Of course!” Kong Jie nodded emphatically. “Your light energy is so strong that it can overcome many difficulties. We lacked that kind of energy at first, so we chose to walk the edge of the blade... but that left some disadvantages. Of course, with those drawbacks comes certain advantages.”

“Then can I return to martial dao if I become a supernatural now?”

“There’s hope to, but it’s also too dangerous and too hard!” Kong Jie shook his head. “Trying at this stage would be a very dangerous undertaking. Sky Sword is still a supernatural—I wonder what’s going through his mind. If he still doesn’t convert back and crosses beyond Nova... Trying to recover from two broken locks of the organs is too hard. There are still ways when only one is broken.”

“Perhaps he’s trying to find a better way out,” Huang Yu responded calmly. “He has his plans, he won’t be willing to be a supernatural forever.”

Light Sword listened quietly to the discussion around her. After a while, the director general asked, “Can Li Hao’s sword really suppress the five organs?”

“I don’t know.” Light Sword shook her head.

The group didn’t know what to say! They already knew that, and to hear it from someone who’d personally experienced the effects of the sword... It was saddening. Their money was wasted! That was three origin weapons and thirty thousand mysterious power stones!

“What are your plans next?”

“I’m going to stay with Li Hao for a few days and visit the Sword Sect if I have time.”

Very well then! A resigned atmosphere settled down over the rest. Light Sword didn’t seem to want much to do with them.

“That is just as well,” Director General Zhao concluded after a while. “Take a transmission pendant with you. We’ll reach out to you if we have need of you. If not, you can do as you wish!”

Light Sword said nothing as she accepted a pendant and placed it within her storage ring. “Then I take my leave!” She rose and left.

“She’s the same as ever!” Kong Jie laughed ruefully as soon as she was gone. “She’s always uncomfortable when she comes in contact with us and can’t wait to be gone. I’d thought it might be different after we spent so much and with her being away for twenty years...”

“Just get used to it!” The director general was unperturbed. “Have you given the transmission pendant to Li Hao?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Have him stay inside for the next couple of days. The outside world is chaotic and while those guys might be slightly wary of us, their greed might rage out of control if Li Hao shows himself again.” Director General Zhao sighed, finding the situation difficult.

Silver Moon was now besieged on all sides with surveillance. Li Hao would probably be unable to temper himself with cultivation trips anymore, but he improved quickly and could train for a while at home.

The thoughts of the director general and others were simple—it wouldn’t be too much time if Li Hao spent a few months or even a year or two at the base. Thus, they weren’t in a great hurry.

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Li Hao had already left the Silver Moon Guards’ complex. Thanks to his eyes, he evaded all supernaturals and all of the watchers. Clad in silver armor, he entered the sea before long. Panther followed him.

The dog had a sharp nose and sniffed out anything it wished. Its presence shored up some of the weaknesses in Li Hao’s eyes. He chose to leave when everyone thought that he wouldn’t leave. Catching everyone off guard was his aim!

He left Kong Jie’s transmission pendant in the base. It didn’t matter if he lacked intelligence reports, he’d just take a pendant from someone else.

I'll kill White Shark if I can... or ignore him if I can't. I need to get the Windchaser Boot first... Li Hao weighed up his options. He needed to pick up speed and travel to the Steadfast Duke's manor. It'd been three and a half days since Xu Zhen's death; he wanted to respectfully light a stick of incense for the man!

The Steadfast Duke was domineering, but Li Hao didn't mean to assassinate him. He just wanted to seize treasure. However, escaping the ensuing chase was the true difficulty if he was successful. It was said that the remaining three generals were all of the metamorphosis level.

Patting the dog's head, Li Hao sank into the sea and swiftly advanced. "Work well with me. If we succeed, I'll hold a feast for you with mysterious power stones!"

"Arfwooo arfwoo!" Panther barked, spitting out the seawater that it swallowed. It wasn't too comfortable on the seabed. Swimming was fine, diving was awful.

"Stop barking. We'll walk on land as soon as we leave Silver Moon and take a look at the world. I've never been to any place other than Silver Moon. I only looked around the waters when we were in the North Sea..."

Traveling through water without the Divine Kun Ship made for slow progress. It might be much faster when Panther was his steed on land. The dog wagged its tail happily, unaware of Li Hao's intentions. Land was the best!

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At the same time, the eastern reaches, the province of Calm Borders.

This was where the Steadfast Duke's manor was located. The royal family had bestowed a new name to the province when the duke calmed the eastern border for the dynasty.

A cloud of gloom hung over the magnificent manor these days. Five generals, the eldest direct son, the eldest direct grandson, a peak Nova resident expert, and a late Nova esteemed guest had died...

This was an inauspicious year for the Steadfast Duke—he'd lost nine Nova experts in a short amount of time! This level of strength was sufficient to suppress a province or two, but they'd died one after another and he'd even lost one of the Windchaser Boots!

etvolare's Thoughts

Hey guys, just wanted to mention that SG has been without a proofreader since 2024. Bel used to fill in the role admirably and I've been unable to get in touch with him since the end of 2023. Best wishes and I hope all is well with him. I've never had an editor, so unfortunately this means that some of the advance chapters have had to be posted without my final readthrough. I've been getting back on top of my workload though, so typos/errors should be decreasing quite a bit.

You're welcome to drop typos/errors in the Discord! (channel name Scintillating Giraffes) I am a one woman show and will get to them in my infinite spare time, but I eventually do heh. Names are a pesky issue because I've coded keyboard shortcuts for them. SG repeats quite a few similar initials, so my fingers often slip between LH, LY, LL, and the other LH. I generally catch those on my final readthrough.

Additionally, I'd like to mention that I've enjoyed translating SG because of its modern setting. That lends itself to modern slang/terms that aren't found in typical xianxia. I do stick to the raws however, and would love to discuss any diction choices in the comments!

Chapter 573: Walking Out of Silver Moon (IV)

The Steadfast Duke wore a calm expression on his face. There wasn't much sorrow to be seen, but killing intent overflowed in the depths of his eyes. He maintained calm on the surface and looked down at the heavyweights below.

"The manor will hold a grand worship ceremony in three days. Xing'er will oversee the rites! I am the deceased's father and grandfather. Custom does not indicate that I should host the rites..."

His second son stood with a tragic expression below. He hastily rose to his feet. “Don’t worry, father. I will make the proper arrangements for big brother and Little Feng.”

Xu Qing didn’t say anything as he looked at his son. Perhaps his son was the happiest of all. With Xu Zhen dead, he would be the next duke. Although Xu Qing had other children, all of them were born to concubines. They did not have the right to inherit the duchy. But was just being a duke enough for Xu Qing?

“According to the family rules, our sacred object needs to be offered to the ancestors for three days during the grand ceremony. But we’ve lost one of the Windchaser Boots... ai! Even so, we cannot break with custom. The Windchaser Boot is exceedingly important, making the one we have left vital. You have to guard it well during the ceremony...”

“Father, in that case, why don’t we use a replacement?” Xu Xing asked hastily.

“Do you want to deceive our ancestors?!” Xu Qing looked remotely at his second son. “If the Xus don’t even dare take out their sacred inheritance and worry about it being taken from their Ancestral Hall, then is there a need for the Steadfast Duke’s manor to stand?”

You’re the one who said to be careful, I’m just going with your words. And now you turn on what you said? You’re impossible to talk to! Xu Xing grumbled internally.

Xu Qing ignored his second son and looked down below. “All of you are the mainstays of my household. I will have to trouble you during the ceremony! I will head to the army after the rites are over to request that the five generals be entered in the Pantheon of Heroes! The descendants of our two resident experts will be provided for until the Steadfast Duke no longer exists...”

The assembly broke out in grateful tears as they listened to his bracing words of comfort. As for whether or not it was true emotion, that was difficult to determine.

“Your Grace,” a middle-aged man asked in a muffled voice. “What should we do about Light Sword and the child Li Hao?”

Would there be a place for the Steadfast Duke's manor in the eastern expanses if they did not avenge these deaths? The invincible king of the east had suffered such grave losses at the hands of borderland savages. It was impossible to accept!

"They're all in Silver Moon..." Xu Qing's voice trailed off. "But Silver Moon is not an impassable place! We'll seal off the province first. If they refuse to emerge, we'll wait a while longer before sending our army to trample them into the ground!"

His declaration invigorated the crowd.

"We'll rip Light Sword and Li Hao to pieces when we catch them!" Someone gnashed their teeth.

"The duke should summon all powerhouses in the east and demand justice from Silver Moon. The royal family and nine ministries are turning a blind eye and deaf ear to the situation! Is there no reaction from them after the young master duke was killed?! The Steadfast Duke pacified the eastern reaches for the dynasty, but these are the dismal straits that befall him! It's plain to see from this that the dynasty is rotten, decayed, corrupt, and incompetent!"

Righteous indignation rose from the crowd as they criticized the ministries and royal family. Some expressions among the assembly shifted with apprehension, but they didn't dare say anything. They glanced at Xu Qing standing above them, guessing at the truth.

The royal family and nine ministries were idly sitting by after the Steadfast Duke's son had been killed. If word of this got out, it would further highlight their incompetence and undermine some people's confidence in the dynasty on a fundamental level. Plainly, the duke had his own ideas in mind.

The crowd quickly dispersed, leaving behind the duke and his second son Xu Xing. The duke watched the people leave and then turned to his apprehensive second son.

"Your big brother is gone. Although the two of you plotted unceasingly against each other in ordinary times, no scandals shall be permitted to occur at his ceremony! You are the next duke in his

absence, so you should display the breadth of mind as appropriate for the Steadfast Duke. Look after the proceedings well. If you truly wish to become the next duke, you need to exact vengeance for the deaths of your brother and nephew!”

“Don’t worry father, Xing’er knows what to do!” Xu Xing raised cupped fists in assurance. Xu Qing, however, was tired and threw out a ring without another word.

“This is the Windchaser Boot. You will offer it to the ancestors during the rites. Do not be remiss in your duties!”

“Your child understands!” Xu Xing was overjoyed. He didn’t have the right to be in charge of the sacred object before—his brother had been tasked for its safekeeping for a while. It looked like father didn’t have any other choices in the wake of his brother’s death. That was nice! His brother had died well!

Xu Qing waved him off, dismissing the nuisance from his line of sight. He sighed after his son had proceeded far into the distance. The Xus hadn’t produced anyone particularly outstanding in the next generation. His two legitimate sons were mediocre when it came to martial dao talent. His eldest son became a supernatural, but his second son was very run-of-the-mill. He’d crossed the threshold of grasping the aura after being fed countless resources and dao comprehension weapons. He now had three of the supernatural locks of his four limbs saturated.

If his last lock of the limbs was also saturated, that would catapult him into special territory. This was the road taken by most premier modern day martial masters.

The duke looked at the north, a cold light glittering in his eyes. Revenge was necessary after the death of his son, but Light Sword had been so bold as to actually take the Windchaser Boot... They would be feuding to the death over this.

“Silver Moon...” Xu Qing snorted. Let’s see how long you can strut around for! That Li Hao was probably cowering with terror at the moment and wouldn’t dare leave the province in the short term. Ying Hongyue had made a good move, but the news had spread too far and wide that it gave Silver Moon time to shrink back in on themselves.

In this regard, it would be even harder to recover the boot for the foreseeable future.

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On land.

Li Hao was utilizing Panther as a steed. The dog wriggled around, wagged its tail, shook its head, then looked back to lick the young man...

“What do you want?” Li Hao smacked his hand down. “Out with it if you’re unhappy. You’re happy if you don’t say so otherwise. What’s with all the licking??”

“Arf arf arf!”

“Speak human speech! Not talking means you agree to this! Hurry up, don’t take the wrong path. We’re in a rush here!”

“Arf!” Tears brimmed in Panther’s eyes. I can’t manage human speech, but I don’t want to be your horse. This sucks!

“C’mon, faster.” Li Hao forced its head back around. “The faster you get there, the less you’ll be carrying me. The longer you drag this out for, the longer I’ll be riding. Doesn’t that make sense to you?”

“I don’t want to ride a dog either, it’s embarrassing for me. But you’re so fat that you need to lose some weight. Otherwise, you won’t be able to run around next time we fight. I’m doing this for your own good because you’re too fat. What if the powerhouse that activated your bloodline wants to torture you again next time I bring you to Battle Heaven? Wouldn’t that be horrible?”

That makes sense! But... forget it!

The dog drooped its tail out of resignation and ran swiftly in the direction that Li Hao pointed it in. One had to say, it was a monster spirit dog at the end of the day. It was very fast and crossed the beach in the blink of an eye like the wind.

Li Hao smiled and wanted to lean against something when the wind howled against his ears. There was nothing to lean on, so he called out to Panther, "Lift your tail so I can rest against it. This position isn't very comfortable."

"Arf arf arf!" protested Panther.

"I'm cultivating. Sword energy will leak out when I cultivate and I won't cultivate if I'm not in a comfortable position."

Smack! Panther raised a tail ramrod straight.

Li Hao pursed his lips. Panther was definitely a greedy dog!

They were now on the edge of the North Sea. If they followed the coastline east, they would pass through the northern and southern continents. Apart from the seas separating the land, there was also a mountain range between them. The four continents were mostly divided in a similar manner, with the central continent in the middle.

If one looked down with a bird's eye view, the four continents and the central continent were in a massive basin. They were bordered by mountains and the four continents were separated by the four seas. In the middle was the biggest central continent.

There were nineteen northern provinces, twenty-two central provinces, and twenty-one eastern provinces. The eastern continent was large and fertile, hardly as barren as Silver Moon. It was said that the east was so rich that they'd built an East Sea Bridge upon the water where the sun rose. It crossed the sea and connected directly to the central region. It was a remarkable feat of engineering that humanity was overawed by.

Granted, the same was feasible by supernaturals of this age if they were so willing. If those of the earth, metal, and water attributes allied together, they could also create a bridge spanning the sea. Even so, only the eastern continent had created one such an East Sea Bridge. It was proof of how rich the east was, how many powerhouses and supernaturals they had.

The Xus weren't the only tyrant of the twenty-one provinces, but they were the overlord in name. Apart from the title of the Steadfast Duke, the duke also had another duty of Admiral of the East Sea. He commanded the eastern navy!

Granted, the seas now were populated by pirates. The so-called navy existed in name only. But so long as the duke retained this title and possessed enough strength to execute on it, he could recruit a massive navy and dominate the East Sea. The nine ministries wouldn't be able to obstruct him.

.....

Various information ran through Li Hao's mind as he watched the scenery flash past him. Silver Moon was so far in the north that it was starting to freeze over in October. Wintry gusts howled through the land. The North Sea was also cold, but slightly better than Silver Moon. It wasn't as obviously arctic. Further east was still a cool domain, but it slowly warmed up.

The wind that scraped past them like knives slowly became a warm, gentle breeze. Not only that, but Li Hao also discovered a strange phenomenon. Even the time zones were different after traveling for so long. It was day before, and it was still day after prolonged running!

The world was so vast that all manner of curiosities could be found! The area behind him was caught in a big storm, but he quickly set foot into another locale with the sun shining bright. On one side was pouring rain and on the other strong rays of light. Li Hao straddled the border for a second,

surprise in his eyes. He might have never seen such a superb sight in his entire life if he didn't leave Silver Moon!

Chapter 574: What One Sees and Hears (I)

Dusk had fallen in Silver Moon, but it was very bright where he stood. Silver Moon's roads were pitted and marked with potholes, but the roads here were broad and straight...

On the other hand, it wasn't all good! Li Hao saw tattered structures along his way—a village by the sea had burned down. Sounds of crying traveled into his ears and Li Hao steered Panther closer for a listen. The language was the same, but the accent was slightly different.

"That damned Black Mountain Brigand... has taken all of our food at this time of the year! Aren't they just forcing us to die?"

"Dad, let's ask the Sacred White Army for shelter!"

"What bullshit Sacred White Army! They're also rebels and bandits..."

"Dad, Skystar Dynasty is done! War is upon us! Don't you see that it's chaos everywhere in the world? Whether it's the Black Mountain Brigand, Whirlwind Bandits, Starlight Pirates... Life is impossible these days! Those supernaturals and martial masters bully everyone, there's no way to survive!

"So we rebel! The Sacred White Army will feed us at least. We can't plant again in this season and our rations have been taken. The government is the same as the bandits... What are we waiting for if we don't rebel? Death?"

A noisy din echoed in Li Hao's ears as he heard someone say, "The Black Mountain Brigand is cruel and vicious. Since when did they just take things, burn the village, and leave without killing anyone? I say that it's the blasted Sacred White Army pretending to be the mountain robbers to force us to join them!"

“Who cares, we need a way to survive! Out of all those bandits, at least the Sacred White Army treats humans like people. So we’ll join them! We’ve all got some skill to our name. We can work for them if they want us, at least we’ll be able to eat and feed our kids!”

“That’s true! C’mon, let’s go to them...”

“Ole Zhang’s second son is part of the Sacred White Army...”

“Damn it, the little bastard probably led disguised Sacred White members to attack us... Ah, forget it!”

“.....”

The look in Li Hao’s eyes shifted when the voices traveled into his ears. Was there chaos in the world? This was a province in the north that was closer to the eastern continent. It was called Dual Continents as a nod to it spanning two continents.

Judging from the conversation, the Black Mountain Brigand, Sacred White Army, and Starlight Pirates were very active here. However, the government either seemed to be unable to exterminate these pests or unwilling to! Instead, they were forcing people to take to the hills and become outlaws!

A sudden thought struck Li Hao and he swiftly steered Panther past the burning village. There were some supernaturals dressed in white in a nearby grove. They were keeping an eye on the village.

“It’s all burned to the ground...”

“Good!”

“Ole Zhang is there, right? They’ll all join us with a bit of persuasion. The men of this village are very comfortable in the water, they’ll be an elite marine force with some training. I’m estimating

that ninety percent of them will successfully become supernatural if we induct them and they'll be water supernaturals..."

"Well done!"

"....." Those in white were celebrating their success, drawing a frown to Li Hao's face. Indignation flared in his heart. Burning down a village, seizing their rations, forcing them to become bandits... They should die!

Just when he was about to put all of them to the sword, someone else spoke up. "Hurry up and lead those people away from here! The Black Mountain Brigand will be here before long and nothing will be left alive of that village when they get here!"

"Yeah, those guys are too brutal..."

Li Hao's sword froze mid swing. After a long moment, he sighed softly to himself and steered Panther away. Right or wrong? There was no right or wrong!

The government was incompetent and bandits ran the show. None of the parties were anything good, not even the Sacred White Army. But when it came down to the lesser of two evils, at least Sacred White didn't kill people. Judging from their tone, all of the villagers would die once the Black Mountain Brigand showed up!

If he took a stand for justice now and killed the supernaturals, Sacred White would probably take revenge on the villagers, to say nothing of the Brigand swooping in opportunistically. It wasn't like he could send all these people to Hong Yitang from so far away.

"Right and wrong... is hard to determine! What I see may not be the truth!" Li Hao understood more of the world now. Why did cultivators have to travel the land? For precisely what he'd just witnessed.

A situation was first perceived as a sin at times, but intervening might be an even bigger sin. The young man remained firmly focused on the foundational reason.

“The underlying reason is that the government is incompetent! They are unable to eradicate these bandits, didn’t raise the proper defenses, and couldn’t protect the people’s livelihood. I can’t deem this Sacred White Army as the good guys just because they don’t kill people. I can only say that they’re kinder among the bandits...”

Li Hao smiled and took out a jug of alcohol for a swig. The world was about to go to pieces; regular life was already falling apart. Who knew how much longer the status quo could be maintained? All of those local tyrants and hotly ambitious were probably waiting for this day to arrive.

“Panth!”

“Arf arf!”

“They all say that being a dog in a peaceful era is better than being a human in troubled times. Tell me, do you think it’d be more carefree to be a dog?”

“Arf arf!”

“Man!” Li Hao sighed. This was a dog that couldn’t speak. “The tree spirit, snake, and birds can speak. But you? You can’t at all. You should at least be able to transmit your thoughts, but you... you can’t do even that. You’re so dumb!”

The dog lowered its head with suffering. That wasn’t being dumb, it was just a different species. Who knew what the truth was?

“How about I teach you how to read and write?” Li Hao suddenly grinned. “If you knew how to read and write, you’d be able to write out your thoughts. Those transmission pendants are two-way

communication devices since we can input and send words through them. If you and I create something similar, we'll be able to communicate! We won't have to guess then!"

"Arf arf!" Panther was terrified. No way! Its bloodline seemed to be terrified of reading and writing.

"You've agreed? That's perfect. You're the best, Panth! I'll teach you when we have a moment!"

"Arf arf arf!" Panther barked its head off. You've misunderstood! I didn't agree!

Li Hao threw his head back with laughter and ignored the dog. You agree if I say you agreed! Tell me your real thoughts if you have the ability to!

He chugged another mouthful of alcohol and stopped teasing the dog. He closed his eyes in meditation and began saturating his supernatural locks instead of honing the five auras. Would he be able to unseal himself if he saturated the lock of his heart and not of his limbs?

He Yong and the others started with their limbs; their battle strength rose greatly when those locks were saturated. Take He Yong, for example. He was the equivalent of mid Nova under normal conditions. He'd filled five locks total—the four limbs and one of his organs.

Would one be late Nova or even peak Nova if they saturated six locks? Light Sword seemed to have mentioned that she'd completed two locks of the organs. Under normal circumstances, she was the equivalent of peak Nova without unsealing herself.

A sealed Hong Yitang could face off with experts in metamorphosis, of that Li Hao was well aware of. He'd been so in Ash Mountain, which meant Earthturner Sword had saturated at least three locks of his organs, maybe even four!

"It'll take at least another day before I reach Calm Borders province... Maybe I can fill my heart lock during this time..."

That supernatural lock had already absorbed a lot of energy—so much energy that it seemed a bottomless pit. The key thing was that the cultivator was hard pressed to know how much energy his locks had devoured. Li Hao could only measure it in terms of mysterious power stones depleted, which was several thousand pieces.

He wanted to try a different path. What would happen if he focused on the locks of the organs first? He had the Water of Life and sword energy in hand, so he wasn't afraid of problems developing. The locks would just start breaking at the worst. He should be able to suppress those effects. This path might even enhance his battle strength.

At the moment, his five auras were temporarily stitched together. Properly fusing them was too hard. Li Hao felt that he didn't have the potential to complete that in a day or two. That wasn't achievable by a human. In that case... he could saturate his supernatural locks first.

A vast quantity of sword energy, mysterious power, and elemental energy surged into the lock. The confined tiger in his heart stirred restlessly. The lock shook without pause and seemed to be physically manifesting.

Li Hao ignored the changes and continued absorbing energy, prompting supernatural locks to materialize throughout his body. The four limbs, five organs, his forehead, belly button, and spine. Twelve locks shimmered in and out of sight—indeed, twelve.

According to modern general knowledge, there should only be nine locks. At the same time, everyone knew that there was one in the head. It was commonly believed that supernaturals with special talents were a result of shattering the lock of the head. As for why there were different attributes of supernaturals... perhaps it was a function of mutations.

Therefore, everyone knew that there were ten locks in the human body. And yet, twelve appeared over Li Hao's body.

The spine as the bone, the shenque as body. [1]

The young man didn't pay attention to this. Humans might have more than twelve locks in their bodies. When he advanced to subsequent cultivation stages, he had a hunch or insight into more. There should be more than twelve supernatural locks. It might be that his potential was too weak or he himself too weak to summon the others.

If the supernatural domain continued to develop as it did, it would be terrifying. Shattering one lock meant one cultivation level. Twelve locks meant twelve cultivation levels. The strongest supernatural of the modern world seemed to have only broken five.

Li Hao wasn't aware of whether there were supernaturals stronger than Nova. But since Hong Yitang and the others kept such a cautious, low profile, there might be. The young man didn't mind. As he continued to absorb power, various thoughts ran through his mind. If he could break a lock after filling it to capacity, should he try unsealing himself?

It'd be nice to enhance himself by a minor cultivation level, if not a major one. He could kill late Novas now. It would be great to kill peak Novas!

Chapter 575: What One Sees and Hears (II)

Li Hao didn't mean to completely snap his supernatural locks, just a portion. With sword energy at the ready, he wasn't afraid of such an experiment.

Of the thirty thousand mysterious power stones that Silver Moon had given him, he'd given ten thousand to the little tree and consumed ten thousand in cultivation, which left ten thousand on him. In actuality, he had far more mysterious power stones than that.

Li Hao had collected quite a few from killing a lot of people in recent times. The stones that he'd consumed over two days of rest and recovery were from Hong Yitang and Light Sword. He hadn't had to dip into his stores for the two, just added his fee to his reserves.

A large mountain range came into view as he cultivated. It was like a line dividing the eastern and northern continents. This range was known as the Kui Mountains. [1] Li Hao didn't know why it was called that. It was what the books told him, he didn't pay it much heed.

There were major monster spirits in the Ash Mountain of Silver Moon. Given the dense concentration of mysterious power in the east, there might be the same in the Kui Mountains. Li Hao kept a sharp eye out and paid more attention to his surroundings.

“Be careful,” he cautioned. “Avoid any major monster spirits you run into. Your nose is keen, so you should be able to sniff them out!”

“Arf arf!” Panther nodded with some anticipation. It’d yet to see any major monster spirits. What were they like? Were there any dog spirits like him?

While Li Hao had met major monster spirits before, he only knew of one dog spirit.

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The Kui Mountains sprawled like a long snake crawling through the underbrush. Twisting and turning, they wound through thousands of kilometers. It wasn’t majestic when viewed on a map, but facing the mountains in person made one peer into the distant sky for their peaks. They were imposing when compared to humans.

Panther jumped into the air, eschewing the usual paths. Mountain paths or not, everything was a road for a monster spirit of the dog’s level! It would cross right over the mountain!

There were people at the foot of the mountain, possibly nearby residents. A voice rang in Li Hao’s ear, “Daddy, there’s gods overhead!”

“What bullshit are you talking about...” A shrill cry rang out. “Run! It’s a monster spirit!”

“.....” Li Hao was soul weary. If he really was a monster spirit, the scream would’ve drawn his attention and he would’ve eaten the humans.

He couldn't be bothered with the reaction; in his current state, he wasn't afraid of being seen by others. Of course, that was limited to only mundanes. Ordinary people would likely remain in one continent for the rest of their lives, never to travel to another.

.....

At the same time.

A massive snake in the Kui Mountains opened its eyes. There were horns on its head as it was evolving toward a scaled-dragon. A ruthless glint shown out of its emotionless eyes. Its massive body threaded through the mountain and swiftly coiled in a certain direction. It proceeded at a very fast pace!

After it passed through a steep peak, it paused to wait. The giant snake eventually saw a dog running at top speed.

Panther!

Li Hao hadn't noticed the monster spirit yet, he only did when he opened his eyes again later and looked into the distance. A keen light glittered out of them as he cursed under his breath. Panther you idiot! Is your nose malfunctioning??

There was a gigantic snake not too far from them, one bigger than the one in Ash Mountain. It was coiled off to the side like a small mountain itself. The young man had thought it was a small mountain peak at first and only noticed a piercing hue around it when he took a close look.

It was the same as the major monster spirits of Ash Mountain, one in metamorphosis!

Li Hao felt a headache setting in. How had they just barged straight into someone's territory?

Panther seemed to see it as well and flicked a confused glance in the snake's direction. So this was a monster spirit? This was its first time seeing one, how fascinating. It was so big! Panther found itself so much smaller in comparison. What Li Hao said about losing weight was all bullshit!

The dog was only curious and not afraid. Not only did it not retreat, but it ran in the snake's direction.

“Arf arf arf!”

Li Hao was about to cuss at the dog when the giant snake suddenly shrank in on itself and looked at the two intruders. “The Kui Mountains are my territory. Which descendant of ancient monster spirits have barged into my domain?”

The young man jerked with shock! Da hell? What the heck is this, a monster spirit that says hello? The four in Ash Mountain didn't even emit a fart, much less greet us, until Hong Yitang beat their faces in.

This major monster spirit had voluntarily addressed them!

“I'm just passing by! I'm headed to the eastern continent and do not mean to disturb!” Li Hao answered with a mental ripple that carried an ancient flair. He didn't mean to do so, cross his heart, it was just that he was used to communicating with the little tree, Golden Armors, and Silver Armors with his mind. Hence, he'd developed a habit of mentally speaking with an ancient tone.

Shock colored the snake's giant eyes. The dog really was a descendant of an ancient monster spirit! Then was the human from an ancient clan as well?

The snake looked at Li Hao, then at Panther. “What ancient clan might the esteemed visitor hail from? This minor spirit resides in Kui Mountain and possesses an incomplete heritage. I am now to shed my skin to become a dragon, but have no indication as to the proper method. Might the esteemed one advise a pointer or two?”

Li Hao blinked with complete surprise. A snake... had blocked his way... to ask... if he could help it become a dragon...

Wat.

You're turning into a dragon? I've never seen dragons, how am I supposed to advise you? And, is it proper to ask me this as soon as you see me?

Li Hao looked strangely at the snake, which seemed to guess at some of the young man's thoughts.

"Has this minor spirit given offense to the esteemed one? I do not mean to be impolite. Another esteemed one once bequeathed instructions to me and said that he did not know the method for draconic transformation. Only those with ancient monster spirit heritage or human clan inheritance would know it. He was not familiar with monster spirits and I see that you travel with the descendent of an ancient monster spirit..."

"How... many years ago did you meet that one?" Li Hao blinked.

"Many years ago!"

No shit, of course it's many years ago. I'm just wondering how long ago that was since it's only been twenty years after the appearance of the supernatural. It turns out that there were people who knew about ancient monster spirit heritage a long time ago.

The other part of being from an ancient clan was nonsense. It was true for Li Hao, but he was the only one left of the ancient Li clan. He himself was no clan and he had no inheritance, just a sword.

"I don't know the draconic transformation method either!" The young man had to respond upon realizing that the snake didn't possess more useful information. "My steed received pointers from a supreme expert in Battle Heaven that also helped activate its bloodline."

“Battle Heaven?”

“One of the eight cities of the New Martial era, do you know of it?”

The snake simply found their conversation marvelous and uncommonly deep. It was a bit lost before responding, “I think I have heard of it. The esteemed one of yesteryear mentioned that eight cities stand in Silver Moon. Can it be...”

“You know of the eight cities?” Li Hao jerked to a standstill. “Who was that person?”

“This minor spirit does not know his name. Is Battle Heaven one of the eight cities?”

“That is correct!”

The big snake grew ever more respectful and looked enviously at Panther. “Bloodline activation for a descendant of ancient monster spirits... The strength of this bloodline is not something that those of my kind can measure up to. What a pity and how sad that my bloodline is so weak it probably cannot be activated...”

“Esteemed one... can this minor spirit... visit... Battle Heaven?”

Li Hao was still reeling from the latest developments. He didn’t know why a snake had appeared out of nowhere, why it wanted to be taught as soon as it appeared, and how it was actually excited when he had no choice but to mention Battle Heaven.

What in the heavens was going on, and who had instructed the snake back in the day?

“You can... but not right now, it’s closed its gates!” Li Hao spoke rapidly. “I am a troop leader of Battle Heaven and I am on a mission. I’m afraid I am unable to assist Brother Monster Spirit as well. But I might be able to take you there once I have completed my mission.

“Of course, I can’t guarantee that you’ll receive help. The ancient city has sealed itself away and there is such a lack of energy that the powerhouses are barely managing to revive...”

“This minor spirit understands and is already very content with the esteemed one’s kind intentions. I will not delay your mission further. Is there any place in which this minor spirit can assist?”

Li Hao felt like he was living in a delusion! Why was this happening and how was this monster spirit wanting to help him?

“It’s fine, I’m carrying out a critical mission for the military. Those who are not of the city cannot participate!” The young man thought rapidly. “Of course, if Brother Monster Spirit is of a mind to, I might ask for your help after I complete my mission. Strong enemies may chase me back here, but you seem to be of the metamorphosis level. If you encounter strong enemies...”

“I will help with all that I can if you have the need!” The giant snake quickly responded with utmost politeness. “This is the Kui Mountains and I am not alone. There are several powerhouses among the viper spirits. Although we cannot compare to an ancient bloodline, we can still stop some people.”

“Then I must continue my mission.” Li Hao was starting to feel guilty, so he didn’t continue the conversation. “I thank you for your help and will discuss your matter further when I have finished my mission!”

“My deepest thanks to the esteemed one!” The snake even lowered its head to send off Li Hao and Panther. It looked in their direction with appreciation after the duo was out of sight. What a strong ancient monster spirit bloodline! The ancient civilization has awakened again! It’s just like the esteemed one before said, this world will be overturned sooner or later. But I am still a viper at the moment and have not completed my transformation. I need help from a strong ancient monster spirit if I’m to leap over the dragon gate.

To think that I'd gain so much after a quick nap! I ran into an ancient monster spirit and someone from an ancient clan who looks like they're very young!

Battle Heaven... one of the eight cities... Is he from Silver Moon of the north?

It was said that powerhouses were as plentiful as the clouds in Silver Moon and heavily ostracized outsiders. The snake knew of Silver Moon, but had never dared to visit. What a surprise it was to meet an ancient heir from the province and such a friendly one at that...

The snake was overjoyed! Did it have hope of becoming a dragon?

Chapter 576: What One Sees and Hears (III)

Li Hao was equally confused and transmitted to Panther, "Are monster spirits this dumb? Or is this snake a fool and offered to help before understanding anything about the situation?"

The young man was confounded himself and didn't dare let the snake follow him. The monster spirit was huge! Although it was a metamorphosis expert, that didn't make it invincible. It would be quickly discovered by others.

There was one point that Li Hao was puzzled by—who'd taught the big snake before?

No matter what, he had the snake's promise to help. If he was exposed and hunted down for his deeds, he could direct his escape in this direction. He'd already mentioned that metamorphosis level heavyweights wouldn't be enough, but the snake had promptly agreed all the same. Perhaps there were even stronger monster spirits residing at the Kui Mountains.

Panther didn't respond—it didn't have the ability to respond. It'd actually grasped an inkling of the truth. Perhaps the snake's reaction was because of itself! Mmhmm, the great dog was the reason for all this!

The old turtle had said last time that it possessed a noble bloodline and was the descendant of something called the Monster Spirit Envoy. That entity oversaw all of the monster spirits in the world!

If they ran into any major monster spirits, anyone with the slightest drop of an ancient bloodline would realize Panther's true existence. The more of an ancient bloodline that was present, the more respectful they would be. Perhaps they might even come to pay their respects!

The big snake had plainly sensed some, but did not understand why, so it was extremely polite and refrained from offending the trespassers.

You're mooching off of this mighty dog!

What a pity Panther couldn't voice its thoughts or write them down. Otherwise, it'd scratch out the truth and tell Li Hao it had nothing to do with the human, it was all due to his great canine companion!

The young man and dog crossed through the mountains with their respective thoughts in mind and entered the eastern continent.

.....

Oowerhouses from the central region arrived on the borders of Silver Moon at this time. Large sums of them were gathered in the neighboring Near River province.

The Director General Office.

Various heavyweights raised their glasses to Director General Fan Chang.

"Director General Fan, you've fought both Earthturner Sword and Light Sword. What are your estimates of their strength?"

“Very strong!” Fan Chang responded solemnly. “Qian Feng and I fought two against one with Hong Yitang, but we still retreated in defeat. Qian Feng died in battle and I paid the price of one arm to barely escape!”

The group reeled back with shock. That was very strong alright!

“Then Li Hao will be difficult to handle since he’s gone into hiding at White Moon City and there are multiple powerhouses in residence at Silver Moon. You are their neighbor, director general. Do you have any good ideas?” They were all here because Near River knew more about Silver Moon due to its geographical location. Perhaps Fan Chang had some proposals in mind. He shared their common hatred for Silver Moon after losing one of his arms. Allying with his neighbor would be the last possibility that he would consider.

Fan Chang took a sip of wine and thought for a moment. “It’s hard to take down Silver Moon, but not that hard to lure out Li Hao.”

Everyone looked at him. Are you sure? The boy isn’t stupid and certainly knows that the situation in the world is dangerous for him now. How are you going to lure him out?

“The White Shark Raiders!” Fan Chang took another sip of wine. “They’ve been searching for a chance to take revenge after Li Hao killed two of their commanders. The kid also made the threat of exterminating them! Why don’t we let the pirates into the Moon Sea and feint an attack at Southern Ford?”

“As many powerhouses as Silver Moon has, White Moon City and Flare City are their core cities. Heavyweights are needed to remain in residence there and Li Hao is behind this trouble. Given the nature of Silver Moon martial masters... Li Hao will certainly take action. Of course, I’m not certain if Earthturner Sword and the others will come. I can only say that this will decrease the number of other martial masters around him to the greatest degree possible!

“If we can also tempt the Starlight Pirates in the West Sea to enter the other side of the Moon Sea and posture menacingly at White Moon City... then White Moon will have to shore up their defenses as well.”

Fan Chang was planning to conduct his villainy from the shadows. He wasn't going to invest any of his own forces and wanted to borrow these people to intimidate the pirates. He would use this opportunity to also pull one over the Starlight Pirates and White Shark Raiders. Perhaps the Sea Monster Raiders that he supported could gain something from this.

“This will limit Huang Yu and the others to the greatest degree possible,” Fan Chang explained. “Despite being fully aware of the dangers, Silver Moon martial masters like to self-style themselves as perpetrators of justice. They will readily admit to ownership of their deeds, so Li Hao must take to the field for creating trouble with the White Shark Raiders. Otherwise, all Silver Moon martial masters will think less of him. They will not stop him even though they know it is a grave risk. That's how pig-headed this group of people is!”

The crowd mulled over his words. It wasn't an unfeasible course of action, the caveat was that the pirates would have to agree to it. But would they dare not agree? They wouldn't have to actually do anything, just hover in an ominous fashion. They wouldn't attack, but Silver Moon could not bet on that. If they did and the pirates really did invade, then their people would be mired in misery.

Everyone looked at Fan Chang, he smiled at them. “If all of you are still not reassured, I can mobilize my army and send them near Silver Moon to conduct a military drill!” The man gnashed his teeth with fury.

Earthturner Sword had severed one of his arms! Although he'd recovered it with a drop of Water of Life, the newly grown arm was noticeably weaker than his old one. It was infuriating!

Faces brightened upon hearing his words. Near River would be threatening Silver Moon from land, whereas pirates would be posturing from sea. If this was the plan, then that would indeed curtail most of the heavyweights. If Li Hao dared show himself then, he would be dead without a doubt. The only thing that remained to be seen was if the young man would dare take the risk.

If he didn't, however, and the White Shark Raiders really took Southern Ford... then he was ruined in Silver Moon! Even the old guard of martial masters would be ashamed to call him one of their own!

Huang Yu and the others might keep the bigger picture in mind, but the rest of the old guard were very pure-hearted. They nursed the mindset that one should rather die in battle than lose the spirit of the Silver Moon martial masters. They would find Li Hao untrustworthy.

Even if this group failed to eliminate Li Hao, he might be abandoned by the Silver Moon martial world!

"It's Director General Fan who has vision and foresight!" Everyone raised their cups with a smile. As expected of someone who suppressed all of the government institutions in Near River! Fan Chang was a callous and ruthless man. It would also benefit him if Southern Ford fell as that city had taken much of Near River's luster. A great deal of profit was involved; the director general wasn't doing this purely for revenge. It was said that he owned one of the eight pirate factions.

Smiles wreathed faces when their thoughts traveled here. It was obvious what Fan Chang wanted.

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Li Hao wasn't currently in the mood to consider any of this. Fan Chang's machinations would've brought him to Southern Ford if he was still in Silver Moon, no matter how dangerous it might be. It was a foregone conclusion. As a martial master—or rather, as a denizen of Silver Moon—he wouldn't idly sit by at a time like that.

But since he wasn't there at the moment, it had nothing to do with him. He'd even temporarily set aside the matter of the White Shark Raiders in order to seize the Windchaser Boot first.

The young man was already inside Calm Borders. He stopped traveling via dog in order to cover his tracks. He found a leash from somewhere and bought a small car with star coins he'd randomly seized a while back. With those preparations, he drove toward the provincial capital.

East Heart City was Calm Borders' capital. That was where the Xu manor was located and, in fact, the city was named by the Xus. It meant that the city was the heart of the east.

Li Hao drove extremely quickly as tomorrow would be the seventh day of Xu Zhen's death. He barged around on the way there, completely ignoring whatever was in his way. All obstacles were pulverized with sword energy before imminent collision, creating a wide avenue for him no matter where he went.

Who would laugh at his driving skills now? He was so good at driving that there wasn't any road he couldn't maneuver around!

He drove from morning to night and finally reached East Heart City at the end of the day. Windchaser Boot, I'm coming for you!

The city appeared particularly prosperous—the east did indeed flourish much more than the north. It was well into the night, but it presented a sight similar to Southern Ford. It was all lights and music and action. A magnificent manor stood in the center of the city, equally as resplendent as the metropolis around it.

Since his car bore foreign plates, Li Hao had to pay three hundred star coins to enter the city. It was highway robbery! No wonder the city was so rich!

He found a hotel, parked, and checked into a room. He wasn't too far from the Steadfast Duke's manor. No one would think that he'd spent two days traveling from Silver Moon to Calm Borders, would they?

Society was thankfully disorderly these days and information exchange difficult between various regions. The dynasty's systems were hard to unify, so there was no need to prove his identity. Li Hao smoothly took up residence in the hotel; he pretended Panther was a pet and led it into the room.

As he walked through the lobby, Li Hao sighed with appreciation that girls in the east were more free-spirited than the north. Since it was much hotter here, many of them were showing off nice long legs.

A pretty girl patted Panther on the head when they were in the elevator. For one horror-stricken second, Li Hao thought the dog might erupt with fury and bite her hand off. But he quickly discovered that Panth was drooling at her legs...

Even a dog liked women these days! No wonder his teacher had run off with Jadelight Sword and completely vanished from sight. There wasn't any news of them to be had recently. Li Hao was the poor soul who had to travel with a dog!

.....

Li Hao quickly put his affairs in order upon entering the room. He changed into a new set of clothing and added a scholarly air to his bearing with a pair of glasses. After eating dinner, he led Panther out for a walk.

It was said that there was a street in front of the Steadfast Duke's manor that used to be part of the complex. The duke opened it to the public to endear himself to the people, and also because royal authority had been curtailed after the royal family withdrew. Light Sword had killed the five generals on that street, it was very close to the manor.

Li Hao didn't have time to collect information, so the best idea at this time was to draw closer for a look. Martial masters were difficult to determine, but any supernaturals that may be powerhouses wouldn't escape his notice!

Chapter 577: Audacious in the Extreme (I)

On this night.

Li Hao walked a dog through the bustling streets around the Steadfast Duke's manor. He sauntered casually, taking in the sights through his glasses. He even followed a street to its end, pausing roughly two thousand meters away from the complex. A large plaza was located at the end of the

street, many couples were out for evening strolls or dancing. White streamers for mourning fluttered by the duke's estate.

Li Hao saw many powerhouses entering and leaving the manor. They were different from those outside—much more quiet and all of them deeply pained. Various sounds traveled into the young man's ears and he could soon pick out strains of conversation from around the plaza.

"Important people from all of the eastern provinces have apparently come for the memorial ceremony tomorrow. The duke seems to have suffered a huge loss and the eastern provinces are growing unstable. I wonder if something big might happen tomorrow, maybe to keep the situation under control."

"The hell does it have to do with us? That's for those highfalutin' people up there. What's us in the dirt care about that for?"

"That's true!"

"....."

So there were important visitors from various eastern provinces, were there? Li Hao would need to watch out for that to ensure he didn't accidentally fail at an easy step. More importantly, how was he supposed to get inside the manor? If he couldn't, should he just outright take the treasure?

The young man sank into deep contemplation of the question. Someone else soon gave him an idea.

"The duke's manor will be so exciting tomorrow, does Brother Zhang have a way to sneak us inside for a look? I hear that it's all going to be important people..."

"It's a memorial service, not a festival! You'll be slipping in with a death wish! But it's easy enough to get a glimpse of the action if you want. Pay a newspaper some money and get a reporter badge from them. The Steadfast Duke will be meeting with various provincial executives tomorrow and might be announcing his heir. He needs to build some momentum for the new guy, so a lot of agencies have received invitations..."

“Are the badges expensive?”

“Of course! They’re at least eight thousand coins, if not ten thousand. Who else would dare take you in with them?”

“Forget it, that’s too expensive!”

“.....”

Li Hao stoked his chin. Reporters? What was that? They didn’t exist in Silver Moon. Was it really that easy to get inside?

He glanced at the stately manor not too far away and then at the clamorous crowd. The young man laughed. The duke had opened a street by his doors because he wanted to appeal to the people. I wonder what he thinks after that’s created constant crowds on his doorstep?

“Let’s go!” Li Hao shook the leash. While annoyed, Panther followed the young man. It took another look at the aunties dancing in the plaza before it left.

Damn, you really need better eyes, Panth! You’re interested in anything that’s female!

.....

Reporter, news agency...

It was the first time that Li Hao had heard of these terms. But after some digging around, he mostly knew what they were—products of a civilization’s evolution.

The Steadfast Duke popularized newspapers in the eastern region because he painted himself in a just and fair light. It was just another mouthpiece for public opinion and a tool to brainwash the people with.

News agencies existed in the ancient times, but the ones then seemed to be different from the ones now. Li Hao saw a few newspapers when he returned to the hotel. He carefully read through the articles in its pages.

“Steadfast Duke announces open doors in all twenty-one eastern provinces. Refugees from central region unrest are welcome to emigrate to the eastern continent to begin a new life.

“Unrest and public unease from war has created a disaster zone in Tai’an province. Steadfast Duke decrees immediate dispersal of five hundred thousand kilograms of white rice in aid...”

“Steadfast Duke calls for new army recruits! Wanted: any eastern continent male older than sixteen and younger than thirty. Taxes will be exempt for families of those accepted...”

“Steadfast Duke’s Left Marshal Xu Zhen expels East Sea pirates during patrol. Special order given for three year tax exemption to ease citizen suffering along the coast...”

“.....”

There were many newspapers in the hotel; all of them were published by a news agency called the Eastern People’s Voice. This made for relatively free flow of information for the people in this day and age, but they were still uninformed when it came to specific personages.

Neither was Li Hao that much better off, and he counted among the intellectuals of this age, one of the few who’d read books. He knew of the nine ministries when he was at the Veteris Institute, but he didn’t know which nine they were.

The common folks would have even fewer sources of information, a limitation that these newspapers overcame. It was a pity that not many knew how to read; if only one person knew how to, the news would be swiftly shared.

“Nice methods!” A light danced in Li Hao’s eyes. Every single word on these pages demonstrated the Steadfast Duke’s benevolence and charitable nature toward his people.

In the young man’s eyes, however, it was all bullshit. Xu Zhen patrolling the East Sea and driving back bandits, was that true? If so, where did all of the pirates in the East Sea come from? And five hundred thousand kilograms sounded like a lot, but it was just five hundred tons. Was five hundred tones a lot?

If an entire province was suffering, that would be more than one million people in need of help. If everyone only ate until they were no longer hungry, then five hundred thousand kilograms could feed one million for a day or two. However, it wasn’t like a disaster could be fully resolved in the same time frame.

Not to mention that the Steadfast Duke was still the overlord of the east in name. This was what he should be doing in the first place. But now it was immortalized in newspapers and disseminated throughout the eastern region, eliciting gratitude from the people.

“Newspapers... are really nice!”

This was a potent weapon to influence public discourse. In this era, powerhouses had to rely on transmission pendants once they left a city. Contact with a city was otherwise impossible. The invention of newspapers and their mass production made it easy to hoodwink the people and obtain their loyalty.

The Steadfast Duke must have excavated some ruins and collected information... Li Hao came to an initial conclusion. He didn’t know much about newspapers. What the ancient civilization spoke most of were televisions. These items could broadcast their images in all directions throughout the world—now that

was a potent weapon!

And granted, his age was rather abnormal. They'd created planes and missiles, but inventions such as televisions had not been replicated. Perhaps those in charge didn't care, or perhaps they purposefully didn't recreate the item. Information would flow too quickly if televisions were common; that was a detriment to control general sentiment.

The more one knew, the more one thought. The more one thought, the more one wanted. If one lived in a poor backwater for all their life, they would not have any soaring ambitions. But if one was inundated faced with lights and action, debauchery and sensual pleasures of the outside world, one might have the urge to try their luck outside and see if they could live this kind of life as well.

"Steadfast Duke..." Li Hao looked out his window into the distance. The lights blazed at the Steadfast Duke's manor. The duke that held sway over the east had some ability to his name. At the very least, he was skilled when it came to buying the people's heart.

Strictly speaking, life in the east was good and much richer than in the north.

"Ambitious..." Li Hao concluded for the duke. There were many people with great ambitions in this age. Although the duke had lost many Novas, he still looked to command a lot. It was plain to see from that how strong he was, but he still didn't unify the east in the end.

Otherwise, there wouldn't be a need to have the movers and shakers of other provinces be involved in his son's seventh-day memorial. He probably wanted to make use of the opportunity to intimidate and threaten, lest the local tyrants of various eastern provinces make use of this opportunity to escape from his grasp.

Shall I pretend to be a reporter and slip in among them?

It sounded easy enough, but would it really be that easy? Just spending eight thousand or ten thousand star coins would do? There weren't that many who wanted to spend so much at this stage. Those who did probably didn't come with good intentions.

This news agency is plainly controlled by the Steadfast Duke. Would their own business bring strangers into the manor for just a few coins?

Li Hao thought a bit further and looked at the manor in the distance again. He suddenly laughed!

“Panth, the golden dog that you transform into is very big and can eat people...”

Panther shook its head! This dog doesn't eat people, don't accuse me of stuff I didn't do.

“As opposed to sneaking in, let's find a way to walk right in! The more we sneak around, the more attention we'll raise. These guys won't mind those who openly present themselves. If we slip in, however, we'll probably be noticed at the first chance.

“How about having the monster spirits attend the duke's memorial?”

Panther didn't understand.

“Aren't you a major monster spirit? Eat me. You can't talk, but I can. My mental ripples won't exude presence and if I shove some mysterious power stones into your stomach, the energy they give off will disguise you as a major monster spirit that's a supernatural! No one can tell that you're a martial master dog, so why don't I give you the presence of a Solar? We'll pretend to be... part of the Kui Mountain snakes! Although we're not snakes, no one said that only snakes can be found in those mountains.

“We'll walk straight up, but being a black dog will draw a lot of attention. You killed people last time, after all. They saw you. Can you still turn into a golden dog?”

Panther stared at the young man. Was there a need for that? How dangerous was that!

“It’s fine, I’m sure that this eastern overlord knows about the Kui Mountain monster spirits. His ambitions are great and he won’t easily provoke them. He might be wary, but he won’t be too worried about a major monster spirit directly visiting them. The more open we are, the less attention we’ll raise. I’m thinking that complex security is lax on the outside and tight on the inside...”

Chapter 578: Audacious in the Extreme (II)

A martial master’s intuition and the observations he’d made told him that there were plenty of powerhouses in the Steadfast Duke’s manor, but that they weren’t all gathered together. Certain places in the complex may be their hiding spots, but it was the same to Li Hao’s eyes. He could pluck them all out so long as they were supernaturals.

The only thing he didn’t know was the arrangement of martial masters in the manor. Impersonating a monster spirit of the Kui Mountains also brought an advantage with it—the other eastern provinces wouldn’t dare offend him before fully grasping the situation.

Panther blinked, not understanding the reason for the young man’s actions. Was it safer to appear so openly? Humans were so complicated!

“Trust me!” Li Hao laughed. “This is the only way that we can draw close to the Hall of Ancestors. The duke’s household must grant access to the monster spirit envoy and might even ask us to participate in the rites.”

He stroked his chin. “There’s always the possibility that there’s a feud between the Steadfast Duke and the monster spirits... but that’s not likely to be the case. If there was, he would’ve marched on the mountains a long time ago. Even if there is, these hotly ambitious people will set it aside if they see hope of a partnership.”

There was a metamorphosis level monster spirit at the Kui Mountains and possibly many more Novas. The Steadfast Duke would not easily offend such a faction.

Panther scratched its head—another gesture it’d learned from Li Hao. It was perplexed, but didn’t make a sound. Let’s do whatever Li Hao proposed.

“C’mon, let’s go outside the city. The memorial ceremony is starting tomorrow, so we’ll directly fly in...”

Panther didn’t understand what Li Hao had in mind; it could only do what it was told. One human and one dog quickly departed the hotel in a battered car.

.....

At the same time, the Steadfast Duke’s manor.

People jostled for space within a densely packed crowd. It was a lively affair at the Hall of Ancestors. A group of servants were swiftly setting up decorations as it wasn’t just a grand ceremony tomorrow, but also an event in which many important names from various eastern provinces would participate in.

It was both a memorial and a chance to showcase their strength to exert power over the land again. The east was growing unsettled after the deaths of so many Novas and some parties weren’t willing to take orders from the Steadfast Duke anymore.

Xu Xing conscientiously inspected all of the arrangements being made.

“Second master.” A messenger ran up to him. “All representatives from the various provinces have arrived and been arranged for accordingly! It is unknown whether the local leaders of the three great organizations have come, but they have sent word that they will not disturb the ceremony.

“Some representatives of the nine ministries and the royal family have come, but there are also those who have not come.

“There are those who have slipped into the news agencies to infiltrate the ceremony. We’re not sure if they’re here to watch the show or have ulterior motives in mind...”

Xu Xing inclined his head and breathed out gently. “Keep a close eye on them and don’t let up. Thoroughly investigate them as fast as possible. We might have to borrow their heads tomorrow to strike fear into the rest!”

“Understood!”

“Also, make sure we know the backgrounds of the various provincial representatives,” Xu Xing added after some thought. “Be careful of assassins and be sure to know their backgrounds inside and out. We will have supernatural probes in place at the front doors tomorrow, but be on guard against martial masters slipping in.”

“This subordinate will arrange for it immediately.”

Xu Xing took a deep breath when the man walked away. This was his first time overseeing something so major in the capacity of the next duke. He didn’t wish for any mishaps to happen or give the various eastern continent powerhouses a reason to laugh at him.

More than anything, he hoped for everything to proceed smoothly and wished to exceed his father’s expectations. Perhaps he could broker an agreement with the leading figures of the eastern provinces or even have some of them swear fealty to him. That would be the best possible outcome!

The transmission pendant in his pocket vibrated as he ran through various plans. Xu Xing quickly fished it out. This wouldn’t be used unless something major occurred, what had happened now?

He started when he picked it up for a look.

“Urgent report: a golden monster spirit is flying through provincial borders. It has not harmed anyone. Three Solars have stepped forward and received strange ancient ripples. It claims to be from the Kui Mountains as an envoy of the dragon. It is here to seek an audience with the duke to discuss important matters!”

“.....”

Xu Xing froze with shock. A major monster spirit from the Kui Mountains! A monster spirit had come at this time?

“Have people clear the way for the monster spirit,” he quickly responded. “Avoid the crowds and all eyes and ears...”

His expression flickered rapidly as he quickly walked to the rear garden. He could not make the decision in this. It was a major monster spirit!

Regular people might not understand these major monster spirits at present, but those of the upper echelon understood that the monster spirits were also on the rise. They would eventually be a formidable faction.

Sky Roc Mountain and Phoenix Mountain of the seven divine mountains were monster spirit factions. There were monster spirits within the four seas and more rising from the mountains in the four cardinal directions.

The Kui Mountains were a range that separated the northern and eastern continents. Xu Xing knew of them and was aware that there was a large snake within them. Formidable and ponderous in size, their scouts said that it was at least a metamorphosis expert. It was apparently close to transforming into a dragon!

Once it became a mythical beast, its awful might would know no bounds. Even his father had said that once the snake succeeded, he might not be able to stand against the monster spirit even if he unsealed himself!

A dragon envoy!

Xu Xing understood that the monster spirit likely did come from the Kui Mountains when he heard the title. Regular people wouldn't be aware that the snake was about to become a dragon.

.....

Very soon, in the rear yard.

Xu Qing was aware of what'd happened when his son barged into his residence. He looked at his son, wanting to hear what would be said.

"Father, we've just received word from the frontlines that a golden monster spirit from the Kui Mountains has come," Xu Xing explained at a rapid clip. "It's approximately a Solar and calls itself a dragon envoy from the mountains! It says it's come to East Heart to request an audience with father and discuss important matters. Father, what do you..."

"How do you plan to address this?" Xu Qing asked in an even tone with a glance at his son.

"Father," Xu Xing hesitated before quickly continuing. "Monster spirits are an alien race and many human factions are wary of their rise. There are no official monster spirit factions aside from Sky Roc Mountain and Phoenix Mountain. The race is seeking to break through and obtain more profits. However, neither the nine ministries nor the royal family dare say they wish to partner with the monster spirits. It will easily become a stain on their record..."

Indeed, a scandalous stain.

"So I think... we should not offend or court them," Xu Xing concluded hesitantly. "We'll secretly lead them into the manor, go through the motions, then send them on their way..."

"Is that it?" Xu Qing inclined his head with a smile.

Xu Xing didn't know his father's thoughts or preferences. He could only doggedly respond, "Your child is foolish and therefore requires instruction..."

"It's rather interesting that the monster spirits have sent representatives at a time like this, and from the Kui Mountains," Xu Qing said slowly with a chuckle. "The Kui Mountains delineate the eastern and northern continents. There are many Novas among their kind, not just the one we know of. According to our information, they have at least five Novas!

"We've always stayed in our respective lanes. They are in the mountains, we are in the plains. There is not much interaction between the two sides..."

"But the Kui Mountains are a strategic point. We would not need to pay them any attention if we are content with being corralled in the eastern continent. But if we are of the mind to enter the north and conquer Silver Moon... Too many accidents can occur on water and there are many monster spirits there. Having our army travel through the East Sea, then to the North, and finally to the Moon Sea... may not be as safe as traveling through land."

Xu Xing looked at his father, understanding the duke's meaning. "But... if we are charged with the crime of colluding with monster spirits..." he said hesitantly.

"Fool!" Xu Qing frowned. "What is this talk of collusion? Have you not read those ancient records? Monster spirits served as commanders in human armies when the ancient civilization was strong! They guarded the seas and major rivers for humanity after the ancient Human King suppressed them. Partnering with them is the mark of an emperor!

"But the monster spirits of the Kui Mountains have not had many dealings with the Xus." His tone turned quizzical. "Why have they come to us now?"

As baffled as he was, he only considered it briefly. "We have lost too many powerhouses recently, resulting in an unstable situation on all sides. It would be a wonderful piece of news if we can reach an agreement with the Kui Mountains. It will also intimidate certain people. At the very least, the provinces that share a border with the mountains will no longer dare have second thoughts!"

This was a good development. If they could reach an accord, he would even be able to intimidate the eastern powerhouses! His only concern was that the monster spirits had other thoughts in mind as well.

“The Kui Mountains revere their snake spirits as the most noble of all. It is not a snake that has come. Do they not think highly of us, or is there another reason why?” Xu Qing was confused by the sudden appearance of the golden monster spirit. “Have people lead their envoy to the manor. I wish to speak with it... Forget it, you speak with it!”

The duke decided not to be the first to appear. He would listen from the sidelines, just in case talks broke down and the situation proved difficult to salvage.

“There’s instances of humans raising monster spirits...” Xu Qing suddenly thought of this possibility as he mused over the matter. “Have the Sky General pay a visit to the mountains...”

He hesitated again. Was he supposed to ask the snakes if they’d really sent an envoy? How embarrassing would it be if they had? The humans were being paranoid about a monster spirit envoy. That race happened to possess fiery tempers and were easily offended.

Xu Qing suddenly found himself in a difficult position, but he also was a calculating fellow. He was indeed worried that some people might be purposefully directing the monster spirit to do harm to his household.

“Have the Sky General go to the Kui Mountains and say that he was ordered to present a return gift,” the duke said in the end. “Their envoy has safely reached East Heart City and the Steadfast Duke wishes to live in harmony with the monster spirits...”

Xu Xing rapidly bobbed his head at his father’s instructions, but found that they were extraneous. His father was being too cautious! Xu Xing was only worried that partnering with monster spirits would raise enmity from certain people, but here his father was, concerned about whether there was an envoy in the first place.

Xu Xing decided to say nothing upon further thought. If there wasn't, this was a setup for massive humiliation. It looked like his father would meet this monster spirit ahead of time to make preparations for tomorrow.

Chapter 579: Audacious in the Extreme (III)

Li Hao really did burrow into Panther's stomach. As small as the dog looked, there was a lot of space in its stomach. The young man finally understood why the dog could eat so much.

Panther was no longer black at this point; it was golden in color. Li Hao had wanted to dye it, but the dog shook its head and turned its fur gold with a simple shake of its body. Not many had seen it turn into a massive golden dog and eat the white-haired old man. The metamorphosis level Qian Feng was dead, Fan Chang had run off, and those watching from the shadows had already fled for their lives.

Panth had turned into the golden dog only at the last possible second, so Li Hao wasn't worried that anyone would recognize it.

As for the Steadfast Duke sending his own envoy to the Kui Mountains... the thought didn't cross the young man's mind. He expected that the duke would either be delighted by his impressive visitor or send the monster spirit away. Regardless, the duke shouldn't be willing to easily give offense. Sending an envoy to verify Li Hao's presence... that seemed far too bold of a move. The duke should be more concerned with his man being eaten!

This train of thought showcased the inadequacies of Li Hao's considerations. He was too young and too inexperienced. It was his first time undertaking such an endeavor and his lack of experience left a gaping hole in his preparations. A veteran would not take the same risk as him. Although it was difficult to inquire about monster spirit internal affairs, it wasn't impossible to. He would be a lamb in a lion's den when his subterfuge was unmasked!

Meanwhile, the oblivious Li Hao was sitting smug in his brilliance and found his scheme quite the good idea.

There were people clearing the way ahead of him. Li Hao couldn't see them, but he could sense them. He pretended to be Panther in his aloof responses and didn't say much. Major monster spirits were prideful entities, even if they were only of the Solar level.

He returned to East Heart City, this time avoiding the need to pay an entry fee. A Nova quickly met him at the city gates.

“We present our warmest welcome to the dragon envoy of the Kui Mountains. I am the second steward of the Steadfast Duke’s manor...”

Li Hao swept a brazen gaze over the man’s face, seeing it clearly. This was a middle-aged man with a slightly feminine cast to his features. He was decently strong at mid Nova—Novas were all powerhouses and the duke had many of them under his banner.

“Where’s the duke?”

“.....” The steward frowned, but quickly smoothed his forehead. Monster spirits are crude alright! Did you think the duke himself would come out to welcome a mere Solar monster spirit? Do you think you’re the lord of the mountains?

“The duke is indisposed...”

“What?”

“The duke is sick...”

“He’s so weak that he can get sick? Is he about to die?” Li Hao blustered coarsely. This was how monster spirits acted in his memories, even Nova level ones. Should he be even more unrefined since he was just a Solar?

“You’re mistaken, envoy.” A strange expression hung on the second steward’s face. “It’s because the young master duke has fallen to evil sorts that has caused emotional upheaval in the duke. Please come with me to the manor, the second master is already waiting...”

“Is the second master strong?” Panther looked around as it followed the man, Li Hao stayed on communication duty.

“Ah, the second master is immensely astute and resourceful, as well as very strong...” The second steward smiled and walked forward, guiding their way down a small street instead of an avenue. This route evaded the more crowded locations. “The Steadfast Duke is holding a memorial tomorrow, sacrificing to the young master that was killed by evil villains. Is the envoy possibly here today for that matter...”

“Oh yeah, the ceremony. I know about that. The venerated dragon god mentioned it. It’s just someone dying, what’s the point of sacrificing to them? Dead is dead. We monster spirits eat our dead. Are you eating your young master tomorrow?”

A wave of nausea roiled in the second steward. Monster spirits are so base and crude! All they know is to eat!

Too bad he hadn’t gotten any useful information out of their primitive visitor, but there was no hurry. The manor loomed into view before long. They were at the back door instead of the front doors. The back doors were under heavy guard without a single extraneous person around. It was a far cry from the crowds thronging the front door.

The back door was flung open; Xu Xing waited in the rear yard. He brightened when he saw the golden dog. The monster spirit presented a dominating sight. It was apparent from its appearance that its bloodline was uncommon. It was slightly weak, however. The energy it exuded was mid Solar. However, given the strength of monster spirit bloodlines and bodies, regular Solars would likely be no match for it in a fight.

“We have been poor hosts to the dragon envoy!” A merry Xu Xing walked up in welcome. Panther swept a glance at the man; Li Hao also sent a wave of mental strength over him without asking permission to. Xu Xing seemed to sense it and furrowed his brows with discomfort. They quickly smoothed out.

Were monster spirits this rude?

Li Hao also frowned after momentary probing—this was a martial master! Not a supernatural!

It was hard to determine what level he was at, but one thing could be certain—he was likely a premier martial master. His blood qi and physical body made it so, yet it was difficult to identify how premier he was. The young man could only tell that the aura existed.

He feels less than He Yong... Maybe he's on par with Golden Spear?

Although this was Li Hao's preliminary judgment, confirmation would be hard to come by. Such was the annoying characteristic of martial masters. Their strength was only determined through revealing their strength in a fight.

It wasn't entirely impossible to plumb one's depths, the ancient civilization had been able to assess martial masters as well, but with the aid of certain treasures or those with particularly powerful mind intent. Li Hao was not yet at that level.

"You are a martial master?" he asked directly. "What level are you? Can you call the shots here? You're that second master... So do you represent the duke?"

Xu Xing was thrown into a daze by these incredibly direct questions, but he suppressed his annoyance.

"Of course I do." He smiled. "This way, please. It's not convenient to talk outside."

Li Hao punched Panther inside the dog's stomach. Stop looking, walk in with them.

The dog was just curious as it'd sniffed some delicious odors. It stopped looking around and followed Xu Xing inside.

.....

At this moment.

Xu Qing and a few other powerhouses sat inside the main hall of the rear yard, watching an image projected in its center. It depicted Panther, Xu Xing, and the others in crystal clear clarity!

Not only that, but a light appeared around the dog. The others were experienced enough with the image to know that it was the symbol for Solar. There were also points of light associated with Xu Xing, the second steward, and some of the other supernaturals following the group. Even the ground seemed a bit transparent, as if one could see what was below.

This was only one part of the manor being shown. As the group progressed to the visitors' reception ahead, the image changed with them. Any supernaturals that appeared in the scene were marked by special dots of light.

A bearded powerhouse sitting below Xu Qing's seat of honor couldn't help but exclaim with appreciation despite seeing the treasure numerous times, "Your Grace, this treasure is magical! No one can escape your keen eye with it present!"

"Indeed," tittered a coquettish woman. "They say that the Steadfast Duke's defenses are the most slack out of the three dukes, that anyone can come and go from the plaza outside. Little do they know that even a mosquito inside the complex will not escape the duke's eagle eye! If those cretins think that they can do as they will inside the Steadfast Duke's domain, they simply court death!"

"It is simply the wisdom of the ancients," Xu Qing responded calmly. "What a pity that this is the only set of equipment we've uncovered from the ruins in all these years. We are unable to replicate it. Otherwise, if this could be found throughout the eastern continent and the dynasty, there would be no place that the net of justice could not cover in this world!"

It was a wonderful treasure, the only pity that there was just one of it. It didn't envelope a large range—the complex was all it could barely cover. It was also an expensive item to operate as it consumed massive quantities of mysterious power stones every second. Xu Qing didn't care about this, however. He could eat and sleep better with this treasure present.

Any supernaturals that sought to steal into his home would be revealed in full! While martial masters did not expose themselves with energy, they were still revealed on the screen. Alarms sounded anytime outsiders slipped in, not just the presence of unknown energy.

He didn't go into detail as there was no need to divulge too many of his secrets, despite those present being his confidantes. It didn't matter if they knew more about this matter, it would even increase their respect of him. However, his personal principle of not revealing too much was the main reason why no one had grasped his household's secrets over the years.

Not even Light Sword had known about this, despite the many years she spent at the manor. He'd known early on that he would not win the loyalty of a Silver Moon martial master.

“Your Grace, the Kui Mountains have sent a minor Solar to us. They're putting on quite a front!”

“Monster spirits do not understand custom, so there's no need to be overly concerned. This major monster spirit seems to possess an uncommon bloodline. I wonder what species it is? It looks like a dog... and like a wolf. The Kui Mountains revere the snakes as their rulers, so what is a misfit doing here?”

“.....” The group conversed in low voices and continued their observation. Some sounds and ripples even started flowing from the screen, painting a clear picture of what was taking place.

The golden misfit in the image spoke at this time. “This king is here on behalf of the venerated dragon god. I do not play the tricky games you humans play. The venerated dragon god is about to ascend, but he lacks certain things. We hear that you have the Windchaser Boots of the eight families. The venerated one would like me to borrow it for a period of time. We will thank you with rich rewards when his transformation is complete!”

Xu Xing didn't have much of a reaction to his words, but the heavyweights in the rear yard did.

The front hall.

"Surely you jest..." Xu Xing eventually frowned.

"Who's jesting, who has time for that?" Li Hao immediately snapped. "You may not know how to use that thing and we hear you've lost one of them! The remaining one isn't very useful by itself. You might as well lend it to us! You are our friend if you do, and the venerated dragon god has said that you will be our enemy if you don't!"

Chapter 580: Audacious in the Extreme (IV)

Xu Xing felt a headache settling in. Was this the monster spirit style? This one demanded the Windchaser Boot as soon as it saw him! Damn this monster spirit, the conversation would be difficult now!

"And don't think we're borrowing it for free!" Li Hao added via a strong mental ripple as the man grappled with his response. "The venerated dragon god has said that the Kui Mountains will temporarily mobilize five Nova monster spirit kings to fight for you if you lend it to us. We will also pay five drops of Water of Life each year as the price for borrowing the origin weapon!"

He waved a paw, surprising Panther as he did so. So you're manipulating this dog's body now, huh!

A small flask appeared, revealing a verdant drop of Water of Life! Xu Xing's eyes widened as a light danced in them.

"This!" Li Hao proclaimed boldly. "Have humans seen this before? This is a treasure! The venerated dragon god received it when he paid his respects to the guardian spirit..."

"Guardian spirit?" Xu Xing's expression shifted slightly.

“You don’t know?” Li Hao lied at the drop of a hat. “There is an imperial palace in the depths of the Kui Mountains and the great guardian spirit within who has protected us for eons. He is undying, immortal, and his intent leads to the divine. His core origin opens the way and coalesces the Lake of Life. That has forged the glories of our mountains! If it wasn’t for the great guardian spirit needing to stand guard over the palace and finding it inconvenient to leave the mountains, your manor would be destroyed with the snap of a finger!”

Xu Xing listened blankly to what he was learning. In the rear yard, Xu Qing crushed the wooden armrests of his chair to pieces. He was shaken by these revelations. “Imperial palace, guardian plant spirit, Lake of Life, core origin...”

“Were the Kui Mountains... once the personal training grounds of an ancient emperor?” He couldn’t regain his calm!

Xu Xing’s subordinates looked curiously at him, but the man continued to be rocked by shock. “It’s said that there was an ultimate powerhouse in the ancient civilization called the Human King... as well as some supreme heavyweights hailed as emperors... They are existences that cannot be imagined. Domineering and valiant, they destroyed stars as a casual afterthought.

“Their palaces were specially labeled imperial palaces and usually guarded by plant spirits. Plant spirits were major tree spirits that could produce Water of Life. Core origin refers to the essential nature of martial dao. It’s difficult to estimate how strong it was, but any who touched upon this domain were premier powerhouses. At the very least, they are existences that we cannot rival even if we break our sixth supernatural lock...

“Not to mention, this is one that’s lived for thousands upon thousands of years! That’s incredible!”

“Your Grace... Are there really heavyweights still surviving from the ancient times?” His subordinates were finally adequately shocked. They looked at each other with disbelief. “What kind of terrifying existence can live for so long?”

“It’s hard to say...” Xu Qing shook his head, grave as could be. “I’d thought that the Kui Mountains possessed only the snakes as their strong race, but if what this monster spirit says is true, then these mountains are much more frightening than Sky Roc Mountain and Phoenix Mountain!

“It’s just... they want the Windchaser Boot...” The duke frowned ferociously. Did the treasure have something to do with the other’s transformation? He took out a transmission pendant and sent some words to his son.

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In the front hall.

“Envoy, if I may be so bold.” Xu Xing surreptitiously checked his pendant. “Why does Senior Dragon God need my family’s legacy treasure to complete the ascension?”

“You don’t even know this??” Li Hao flew into a rage. “We don’t want the treasure, but the wisp of core origin within! These ancient divine weapons were forged from the corpses of powerful plant and monster spirits! The stronger they are, the greater the body they were crafted from!

“This Windchaser boot is supposed to have a cold yin presence to it. It’s very suited to the venerated dragon god’s core origin. He doesn’t want the stupid weapon itself, but the core origin! The rest of the treasure is trash once he comprehends it. We wouldn’t want it if you gave it to us, we’ll naturally return it to you!”

“Then... will it have any sort of effect on the Windchaser Boot?”

“Of course not!” Li Hao waxed eloquent. “Core origin is different from modern martial dao and the supernatural domain. That is not your path and it is the core origin of monster spirits, making it even more unsuited for you. It will be of no loss to you if we withdraw that hint of core origin. You might not understand, so the venerated dragon god said that you can ask people who do. I can tell straight out that you guys don’t know much of anything!

“Also, apparently someone’s taken the other one? You guys are so trash! Lend this one to the dragon god first. He has promised that once his ascension is complete, he will kill that whatever Sword of yours. Once we obtain the core origin from the other boot, we’ll give that one to you too!”

Xu Xing was moved by these words.

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In the rear yard.

Xu Qing and the rest looked sharply at each other. If we lend the boot to the big snake, the big snake will seek out Light Sword as soon as it ascends?

In that case...

Xu Qing swiftly sent a message to his son, who promptly mentioned in the front hall, "But Light Sword is in Silver Moon..."

"Cut the bullshit, we are naturally aware of that. That is why the venerated dragon god will make the attempt only after ascension. Those Silver Moon martial masters are not frightening, the Kui Mountains are not afraid! What is terrifying are the existences buried beneath Silver Moon. The venerated dragon god will not brashly travel to that land before its ascension is complete.

"Silver Moon was the heart of the world in the New Martial era. The eight ancient cities revolved around Silver Moon and the plant spirits safeguarding the cities were powerful beyond imagine. Some of them might still be alive. It is said that the Forbidden Sea flows backward into Silver Moon and that ancient sea monster spirits are still alive. If the Kui Mountains are to conquer the four seas, we will need help as well..."

Li Hao bluffed for all he was worth! They could believe him or not, it was their choice. He reeled off a variety of ancient terminology. Those who understood, would. Those who didn't... well, there must be some under the Steadfast Duke's banner who understood. They couldn't be completely oblivious.

It'd be best if he could bluff his way into obtaining the boot! If not, they would at least believe that he really was an envoy and knew a lot of secret knowledge, that the Kui Mountains were not a force to be trifled with...

If it really came down to it, he would say they wanted to borrow it for a look or something like that. Li Hao was more concerned that the Xus would use a fake boot in their ceremony. If that was the case, there'd be no point to seizing it.

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Li Hao's words did indeed shock those in the rear yard. Even the cunning Xu Qing had a grave expression on his face. It looked like the big snake of Kui Mountains knew a lot; it knew so much that a minor monster spirit beneath its command knew everything too. So there might really be an imperial palace in the mountains!

And judging from their intentions, they wished to conquer the four seas?

That was quite some ambition!

Xu Qing frowned, a headache setting in. If this was true, then they could not afford to offend the Kui Mountains. But there was only one of the Windchaser Boots left. Though the monster spirits said they wanted to borrow it, would they actually return it afterward?

Yet if he didn't lend it out... then trouble would be upon them. He was of the mindset before that they could afford to offend the monster spirits of the Kui Mountains. But now that he understood the situation better, they absolutely could not afford to!

The transmission pendant in his hand vibrated with a few short lines of text. "Reporting to Your Grace, I have reached the Kui Mountains and met with their snake king after some setbacks. Upon mentioning the envoy, the snake king only said that the envoy is the descendant of an ancient monster spirit and possesses a lofty identity. He refused to say anything else before expelling me from the mountain..."

Xu Qing blinked. What did this mean? The descendant of an ancient monster spirit? Did saying nothing else mean a denial, a confirmation, or too much contempt to respond?

He was confused, but this also affirmed that the golden monster spirit was the descendant of an ancient monster spirit. Even the big snake said that it possessed a lofty identity. Could it be... that the golden monster spirit was descended from a monster spirit in the imperial palace? Were there more monster spirits alive in the imperial palace other than the plant spirits?

Xu Qing's heart jolted with shock when his thoughts traveled here. Just how many secrets were buried in the Kui Mountains?

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At the same time in the Kui Mountains.

The big snake watched the human powerhouse leave. It was confused, but being rather intelligent, it'd guessed at something. The snake quickly put the matter out of mind. This king didn't say anything and didn't admit to an envoy. If you come for this king after the fact, you will find quite the retribution on your hands!

The descendant of an ancient monster spirit and a lofty identity was true enough, that was not false. Responding with only the truth was already a great show of face. If these humans dared be dissatisfied and make trouble for the monster spirit king of the Kui Mountains, it would not show mercy!

I wonder what the young man from Battle Heaven wishes to do?

As curious as the snake was, it quickly moved on to other matters. Since the young man was conducting a military mission, there was none of its business here. He'd mentioned obstructing strong foes... was it the Steadfast Duke?

As worthy of the heritage of an ancient clan, the young man had quite the courage! The Steadfast Duke was not one to easily take on. However, the Kui Mountains were the snake's territory; it wasn't afraid of a human duke. If the young man could help it transform into a dragon... It would be fine with outright attacking the duke's manor.

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Xu Qing sank into deep thought. If the golden monster spirit was a descendent of an ancient monster spirit in the imperial palace, then this was not an entity to be provoked. He could afford to offend the big snake, but an ancient monster spirit...

Despite not knowing how strong the monster spirit was, one that was alive in present day was frightfully terrifying. He had to avoid irritating this monster spirit at all costs! The duke quickly sent another message to Xu Xing.

"Envoy, if I may be so bold again, the dragon god of the Kui Mountains says that you are from an ancient bloodline. May we be so honored as to meet your ancestor?"

Li Hao's heart quailed! Holy fuck? How long has it been since I've been here? You guys went to see the big snake?

His palms were clammy with sweat, but it sounded like the big snake hadn't said anything or exposed him. An ancient bloodline... so that was all that the big snake said? Damn that scared me!

The young man's heart raced with adrenaline. He'd been too careless! The only thing he thought of was how far away the mountains were—he hadn't thought that the duke would send someone there! He'd thought that no one would suspect him when disguised as a monster spirit, and yet, they had.

Thank goodness the snake hadn't denied his story, or the situation wouldn't be what it was now.

But in that case... the big snake might be in trouble after he concluded his business.