

Star Gate 631

Chapter 631: Nine Dragons Pagoda (II)

“Understood!” Li Hao nodded. “I know of a deputy director named Yellow Dragon who seems to be at odds with Director Hou. How strong is he?”

“He made it to metamorphosis a long time ago. I’m not sure if he’s ascended to Arcanus yet.” Hou Xiaochen was already downstairs. “Don’t think too highly of our sole right to administer the law. It’s easy to join the Night Watchers—anyone that the deputy directors wish to recruit may join! There is no need for any process or procedure, they can be directly appointed! That means that if someone moves against you, they’ll become a fellow colleague with a single word!

“Of course, their rank will be different, so it’ll be insubordination if they attack you. However, that means this becomes an internal affair and judgment can wait until later. In other words, keep as low a profile as you can within the city and don’t go overboard, considering you’ve just arrived. All the trouble that you make should have its purpose or goal. Don’t raise a fuss for no reason at all, that would be playing a fool!”

Li Hao nodded consecutively, then asked, “What about the Nine Dragons Pagoda...”

“I’m taking you there to familiarize yourself with certain people, so you’ll know who you can provoke and who you cannot. It’s also an introduction of you to everyone else. This way, you’ll be less likely to get up to no good.”

Li Hao was growing dejected. “I’d never do that!”

“How do you explain yourself at the Xus?”

“That was just making the first move! I killed Xu Zhen and Xu Feng, Light Sword killed so many of their generals. The duke wouldn’t have shown us any mercy and he’s very strong, so I had to strike the first blow!”

“If it wasn’t for someone coming to your rescue, you would’ve died with how brash you were!” Manager Yu couldn’t help herself.

“Not necessarily!” Li Hao shook his head.

The manager couldn’t be bothered with him, the kid was just refusing to admit to his weakness! However, Li Hao truly thought that way. Xu Qing was not the sort to harm himself—unless he was backed into an absolute corner. If it hadn’t been for his teacher and the rest, Li Hao felt that he could’ve made it out.

Those events were in the past, there was no point in speaking of them now. His teacher and the others had put their lives on the line to rescue him, so Li Hao didn’t mention anything further. He just quietly committed everything to memory.

“I won’t get myself into trouble here,” the young man continued. “Not to mention, aren’t the two of you here? I feel so safe and secure, so have some more faith in me. Unseal yourself whenever you wish to, have no fear!

“If they really make me desperate, I’ll just completely break one of my supernatural locks and become a full supernatural. When my potential is released, I’ll be stronger than I am now!”

Fully break his supernatural locks...

Li Hao pretended not to see Manager Yu’s look at him. What, could he not do that? I’m not afraid of the five organs bursting! I can break all of them, not just one! My body and organs are world class and I wouldn’t die even if I break them in the absence of sword energy. I wouldn’t say that I’d immediately cross over to the Arcanus level, but I wouldn’t immediately die to supernaturals of that level either.

Hou Xiaochen didn’t say anything further. Three humans and a dog headed to a parking lot. It looked like they would take a car to their destination.

Hou Xiaochen's car drove out to meet them as soon as the group reached the parking lot. The driver was the director's old driver—he never seemed to rest or sleep. Li Hao was rather curious what level of strength the driver was. He looked to be a pure martial master who was quite strong.

Little Ye hurriedly ran out to meet them before they had a chance to climb into the car. She panted heavily, "Director Hou... this is an order signed by the director himself. Are you guys headed out?"

"Out for dinner!"

"I see!" Little Ye was curious, but didn't inquire in further detail. She handed the note from earlier to Hou Xiaochen.

The man laughed and tossed the note to Li Hao. As the three climbed into the car, Li Hao took a closer look at the piece of paper. There were Hou Xiaochen and the director's signatures on it.

Yao Si!

Li Hao blinked. What... kind of name was this? "Our superior officer... is called Yao Si?"

"What?" Hou Xiaochen laughed. "These names were very common back in those times."

Alright then. But Yao Si... sounded exactly the same as the characters for "to die"! What an inauspicious name. Having claimed the passenger seat at the first opportunity, Li Hao beamed merrily at the order. Hehehe, he'd been promoted to Skystar vice commander!

Granted, he didn't think much of the position given his expanded worldview these days. Whether it was the Inspectorate or Ministry of Armed Forces, they were all quite rotten. But if someone was giving him money, who was he to refuse?

Li Hao thought of the nine ministries as imaginary enemies. Wasn't it lovely to accept wealth and riches that his enemies gave him?

The little car started driving out of the Night Watcher headquarters.

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The director's building.

The old man once more approached the window and looked out of it with an indescribable expression on his face. Skystar vice commander! Hou Xiaochen was an interesting one. Had he been convinced that Yao Si would agree to the arrangement?

Li Hao's rank was high enough—he could even step into the position of Skystar commander if he so wished. Of course, that would require a signature from the inspector general. A vice commander was something they could decide on internally.

Where were they going now? Hou Xiaochen had remained at headquarters nearly the entire time since arriving at Skystar City. He took Li Hao out as soon as the boy came. To dinner? Where to?

Surely not the Nine Dragons Pagoda!

“Things are getting ever more interesting!” The old man laughed and put the matter out of his mind.

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The little car drove out of the Night Watcher headquarters and headed to the end of the Avenue of the Nine Ministries. The nine ministries were spread out like the eight trigrams—except there were

nine of them—and the Nine Dragons Pagoda sat at the convergence of those nine dragons where the palace was. Indeed, the restaurant was close to the palace!

Hou Xiaochen looked ahead and said casually, “The Nine Dragons Pagoda is where a lot of major figures eat and make merry. That’s what is said on the surface, but it is actually where the nine ministries keep an eye on the royal family. Only important personages go there.

“It’s close to the royal palace and has a view to match the height. We can even see into the palace. There are nine floors to the Pagoda and only director level personnel can enter the ninth floor.”

Li Hao nodded, then thought of another question. “Who built the Nine Dragons Pagoda?”

“Hahaha, good question,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “The royal family built the Nine Dragons Pagoda!”

Li Hao blinked. They were crazy, weren’t they! Why create a place for people to monitor you with? But that was an interesting thought. They plainly knew that the nine ministries weren’t at ease when it came to the royal family, so they decided to establish the Nine Dragons Pagoda of their own accord.

There, you guys will feel relieved now, right? Monitor us then! Monitor us all you want!

“Is the royal family very strong?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Then why... eighty years ago...”

“I don’t know.”

Li Hao was rather surprised. So there were matters that Hou Xiaochen didn't know of?

"I wasn't born yet eighty years ago," Hou Xiaochen responded calmly. "How would I know about any of that? Who knows why the royal family declined and why the nine ministries arose? Perhaps only the nine ministers and royal family know."

"The major characters of the nine ministries don't go to the Nine Dragons Pagoda everyday, do they?" Li Hao nodded.

"They go at least five days out of every ten!"

"What a carefree life."

Hou Xiaochen couldn't be bothered to respond. How is that a carefree life? Well, if you think so.

The little car continued forward—the Avenues of the Nine Ministries were pretty long. A massive structure loomed into view at the end of it. Colossal and immense, it was the Skystar royal palace!

It was slightly dim and its lights seemed more like ghost fire. Buildings elsewhere in the capital were ablaze with illumination, but the palace seemed exceedingly dark.

The Nine Dragons Pagoda was situated outside of the palace, close to the eastern gate. It was a tiered structure with an ancient flair that stuck out where it stood. Only the palace once stood between the nine ministries. Now that there was a Nine Dragons Pagoda; it threw the picture composition off balance.

The pagoda was entirely lit up. Li Hao opened his unique eyes and scanned it, immediately narrowing them protectively. There were many powerful supernaturals ahead! Additionally, would the noble and lofty beings of the nine ministries be unaware of the domain's drawbacks? Perhaps

many of them were still martial masters, or were similar to Hou Xiaochen and the rest—first supernatural, then martial master. If Hou Xiaochen could do it, so could others.

He would have to approach closer to have a more accurate determination.

Li Hao abruptly frowned and manifested a small mirror in his hand. He had two—the bronze one from Qiao Feilong in Silver City. That one seemed sealed. The other one had come from the Steadfast Duke, it seemed to be a fragment. It was the latter that was trembling.

The young man's frown deepened and he looked around him. Someone was watching them! Or rather, they were watching the car. That didn't matter, what mattered was that the tool used to surveil them might be another fragment of this mirror.

Li Hao quickly put his fragment away, understanding that something similar must exist nearby. If that was the case... He looked toward the palace. That meant someone was keeping an eye on them from the palace.

How interesting!

Had the palace actually constructed the Nine Dragons Pavilion to monitor guests of the establishment instead? It provided more discreet cover for their purposes. It also seemed that the royal family's fragment was larger and even possibly stronger. That was why Li Hao didn't sense anything to begin with. He'd felt something in the duke's manor.

Do the nine ministries know about this? Li Hao had seen the images generated by the mirror when he stayed with the Xus. They were so clear and sound was audible through them. Didn't that mean that anything that happened on the premises was within the royal family's purview?

The nine ministries may not know about this. Otherwise, certain news would have leaked out at some point, given all the foot traffic that this establishment saw. It was also a possibility that they were of the mind to release fake news instead.

Li Hao could already sense the undercurrent of schemes and counterplotting before he even set foot into the Nine Dragons Pavilion. Behind him, Hou Xiaochen glanced quizzically at the young man.

Chapter 632: Nine Dragons Pagoda (III)

“Someone’s watching us,” Li Hao transmitted.

“That’s to be expected,” a calm Hou Xiaochen replied out loud. “Whether it is the nine ministries or the royal family, they can’t possibly turn a complete blind eye to the movements of powerhouses. My car driving out of Night Watcher headquarters will also attract attention.”

“You shouldn’t be so confident as to reply out loud, director. Someone might be eavesdropping on us.”

“The situation isn’t that exaggerated,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “I would sense it if that was the case.”

“What if it was a fragment of the ancient mirror treasure, the Sky Gander?”

Hou Xiaochen blinked and took a long moment to reply, “That… shouldn’t be the case… It’d be more likely for there to be an imitation fragment. The real Sky Gander was omnipotent according to what the ancient records say. It was so incredibly powerful that it could easily encompass the entire world in its purview. No modern person could hope to command even one of its fragments.”

Li Hao was surprised that the director actually knew about the ancient treasure.

“What you took out just now was one such fragment, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“Use it well,” Hou Xiaochen chuckled. “You can try refining it. Others may not be able to, but you might. If you can refine it... it will be useful in terms of eavesdropping and surveillance.”

Li Hao didn't continue the conversation. He'd already tried refining it, but this thing seemed to just be a fragment. There was no spirituality to it, so refining it was out of the question.

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The little car stopped in front of the Nine Dragons Pavilion as they chatted. Several female supernaturals enthusiastically rushed forward to open the car doors. Li Hao was astonished to see that the establishment's greeters were all supernaturals. This was a massive payroll expenditure, but it also made sense. This was the core of the entire world!

The royal family had built this place to entertain the most important personages of the nine ministries. As such, there were plenty of lowly Darkmoons and Sunflares to be seen.

“Greetings to Commander Hou, your visit brings us great honor...” A woman of roughly thirty years old walked out of the structure. As opposed to the seductive charms that one might expect, she appeared innocent, yet capable. Most people who projected an innocent air were also naive and inexperienced. This woman, however, gave one an exceedingly competent impression.

It was a very unique temperament!

The woman smiled faintly as the car door opened. She paused when she saw Li Hao. This outfit... where did this weirdo come from?

Hou Xiaochen and his two companions alighted without saying anything; the driver steered the car out of sight. Li Hao looked around with admiration—they were so rich here! Massive mysterious power stones adorned the entrance as lights. They exuded a hint of mysterious power and appeared particularly pure. Visitors were immediately graced with a comfortable sensation as soon as they arrived.

Some flowers and plants grew in front of the doors. Li Hao identified energy emanating from them when he took a closer look. These were probably heavenly and earthly treasures.

Hou Xiaochen was unperturbed by what he saw, despite it being his first time here. “We’re looking for a place to eat.”

“I understand. This way please, Director Hou!” The woman continued to smile. She led them past the front doors, whereupon the security and pageboys were all supernaturals. All of them bowed to the visitors and more staff swiftly opened the crystal front doors.

A massive great hall came into view. Some were waiting to be seen. Others were drivers, secretaries, or lower ranked officials of the nine ministries waiting in line for food. They jerked with surprise when the front doors opened and were further startled to see Hou Xiaochen. Numerous ministry officials slouching in their chairs hastily sat upright. Those of the Inspectorate or Night Watcher stood up to snap salutes. “Greetings to Director Hou!”

Hou Xiaochen inclined his head and looked straight ahead as he continued walking forward. Li Hao grasped his little staff; his top hat swiveled in various directions as he looked around with a smile.

His strange attire caught many eyes.

“Why are you dressed like this?” Manager Yu couldn’t help but transmit to the young man. It was so humiliating!

“Don’t you find it quite elegant?”

“I...” The manager was at a loss for words. Elegant? Dumb, more like! She couldn’t be bothered with anything else. Meanwhile, Li Hao was immersed in his own world. Didn’t he look utterly handsome?

It was fine if he didn't; this was just more convenient to draw his sword from. He couldn't just run around with a sword strapped to his back, could he? This mode of transport also made it easy for him to nurture the weapon.

He'd already thought things through—this was how he would go out in public from now on. Stellaris would be disguised as a staff to facilitate a quick draw and always having it nearby to attend to. Li Hao was yet to meet with much success in nurturing his sword. Perhaps it hadn't been long enough since he tried this method. He couldn't run out with it in his hand forever, so this was a nice idea!

The woman leading the way remained energetically introducing the premises. "Director Hou, there are two restaurants in the pagoda. The second floor is more crowded and there are fewer people on the seventh floor. There are also private rooms on the seventh floor, which is where Director Yellow and the others usually go..."

"What about the ninth floor?"

"Food is served on the ninth floor as well. "The woman's smile remained animated. "But there's not that many seats. There are only nine rooms and they are often booked year round."

Nine rooms! It went without saying that the nine ministers had reserved them.

"Are the nine ministers all present today?" Hou Xiaochen smiled.

"No, there are still five empty rooms. Does the director wish to use one of them?" The smiling woman didn't seek to stop them. "But we might have to ask the director to change rooms if those august guests arrive... That could make for a less than pleasant dining experience. The view is pretty much the same on the seventh floor."

"We go to the ninth floor!" Hou Xiaochen responded with a faint smile. "The ninth floor is better and the view is the best. We'll take the room usually occupied by the Ministry of Finance."

The woman's expression changed slightly.

“What, is that room occupied?”

“No...”

“Then it's settled!”

The woman considered briefly before recovering her smile. “Very well. Then come with me please, Director Hou.”

The Ministry of Finance! Li Hao thought of a certain person—the Nova teenager that Qi Gang and the others had jointly killed. He'd said that he was from the Lius of the Ministry of Finance.

The group filed into the elevator, leaving the crowd in the hall looking at each other. None of them were deaf, and being able to visit this establishment meant that all of them possessed certain strength. What did Hou Xiaochen want to do? How dare he trespass on a private room belonging to the nine ministers?

“He's so cocky!” Those working for the Ministry of Finance swiftly walked out of the great hall. This matter had to be reported upward. It wasn't a matter of using the private room, but that Hou Xiaochen might be purposefully antagonizing them.

He was crazy!

The nine ministries were inviolable after being created eighty years ago. But that arrogant upstart Hou Xiaochen had walked right into the Nine Dragons Pavilion and demanded the private room reserved by the Ministry of Finance! It was so shocking!

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Inside the elevator.

The contraption proceeded smoothly upward. Hou Xiaochen didn't seem to find anything untoward with his actions. It was just dinner in a private room. Could he not do that?

Off to the side, Li Hao didn't mind either. "Ah... beautiful lady, how much does one of our meals cost?" he asked curiously.

"....." The woman's smile stiffened. It was the first time in her line of work that someone had ever asked her how much a meal cost. As speechless as she was, she still replied, "It depends on what you order. The cheapest can be one mysterious power stone and the most expensive can be hundreds or even one thousand..."

"You're joking!" Li Hao sucked in a sharp breath. "One mysterious power stone is one thousand cubes of power, and I remember that the black market offers one million star coins for one cube. Thus, one mysterious power stone can be traded for one billion star coins!"

"Alright, no one will conduct such a transaction, but one piece really is priceless. So a meal at your place costs this much?!"

"....." The elevator fell silent for a moment. The woman just wanted to say, your math skills are really good... She was having trouble keeping the smile on her face.

"Honored guest, the Nine Dragons Pavilion isn't an ordinary place. You can see mysterious power filling the air. There's even life force emanating on the ninth floor..."

"Water of Life?"

“Yes. although it is just the barest of Water of Life that satisfies our guests...”

“Hiss!” Li Hao sucked in a sharp breath. “So it’s even more expensive to eat on the ninth floor, isn’t it?”

“Of course... Under regular circumstances, each meal starts at one hundred pieces of mysterious power stones.”

Li Hao clucked his tongue with amazement. That was just the starting price! That meant the nine private rooms contributed at least one thousand stones a day. Added to that the other eight floors... didn’t that mean the pavilion earned around three to five thousand stones a day? And that was their minimum intake! Wouldn’t it be up to ten thousand stones a day under normal circumstances?

My heavens!!

“How long has the Nine Dragons Pavilion been open?” Li Hao ran some quick calculations.

“Eighty years.”

“When did you start charging mysterious power stones as your fee?”

Are you taking a census count or what? The female manager’s face was almost splitting from the force of her very stilted smile. “Roughly... roughly ten years.”

“So you make around three million mysterious power stones in annual revenue?”

Chapter 633: A Meal (I)

The woman looked beseechingly at Hou Xiaochen. Who is this? Your subordinate? What is he trying to get at?

Hou Xiaochen looked away in another direction, as if he wasn't privy to the conversation.

"Can you not talk about it?" Li Hao asked in surprise.

"It's not that..."

"So do you clear three million stones a year in revenue?"

"N-no..." The manager was on the verge of a mental breakdown. She was very skilled at hosting guests—no one had ever given her a bad review and she had answers to all of their questions. But this one... was truly something! It was her first time meeting someone like this!

"Our revenues aren't that high, just one million pieces of stone or so," she had to say. "But... we don't actually make money. We need to purchase some treasures and also consume a great deal of mysterious power stones ourselves. There's also the various precious ingredients that we acquire..."

"So you've got around a ten percent profit margin, don't you?" Li Hao contemplated. "That means you retain at least one hundred thousand pieces a year. That's one million pieces after ten years. Do you guys turn that in to the royal family, or keep it in your own reserves?"

"....." The manager's expression changed. What did the young man mean by this? Did he want to rob them?? This was the heart of the nine ministries, the outskirts of the royal family! How was there someone asking her about their reserves...

Her composure collapsed and it took her a long moment to barely respond, "I cannot answer the honored guest's question... I am not in charge of this matter."

The elevator door opened and she darted out, on the verge of losing control. What a suffocating atmosphere it was inside!

Li Hao stroked the goatee on his chin. They definitely had at least one million pieces sitting in profits! The only question remained whether they'd sent it to the royal family or not. Even if they had...

Forget it, he was just thinking wildly about this. "We can open a tab, can't we?"

"...you can!" The manager seemed to be forcing out through grit teeth. "Director Hou can charge his expenditures to the Inspectorate tab. He'll just have some limitations when it comes to his limit."

"How much is our limit?"

"One thousand pieces a year!"

Li Hao was startled by the high amount. "And regular peacemaker commissioners?"

"Five hundred pieces."

"High rank chief commissioners?"

"One hundred pieces." The woman added, "This is limited to those of Skystar City's Inspectorate."

I see! Li Hao ran some more numbers in his mind and smiled at Hou Xiaochen. The three of us can run up sixteen hundred pieces on our tab...

Hou Xiaochen was feeling extremely soul weary. Let it all burn!

“Let’s eat first, we’ll talk about this later!” Hou Xiaochen hurriedly walked toward a certain room, Manager Yu was hot on his heels.

Other than a large welcoming hall on the ninth floor, there was nothing else apart from nine private rooms that were as if nine individual halls. Four of them seemed occupied, meaning that four ministers were here taking dinner.

Struck by a sudden thought, Li Hao tilted his head in the direction of the occupied rooms. A stabbing pain shot through his eyes and he swiftly closed them again. Hot damn! There were a lot of powerhouses here, and this might not be all of them. He wouldn’t be able to see those who were pure martial masters.

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At this time, in the other rooms.

Someone looked outside with a frown and another looked at the royal palace below. The latter intoned without looking back in the room, “Go and see who’s come upstairs. Have they brought a Heaven’s Eye with them? What do they want?”

“Understood!” A runner swiftly left to carry out orders.

The constantly victorious Li Hao would never fathom that his single glance would be so quickly detected. That had never happened before. Up ahead, Hou Xiaochen’s voice traveled into his ears.

“Don’t cast your eyes around randomly. I’m just bringing you here for a look and to familiarize yourself with new surroundings. We’re not here to cause trouble. If you want to cause trouble, just focus on one ministry. Do you think I’m undying to target several at once?”

Li Hao understood, it looked like they were going to move against the Ministry of Finance! Except... you can tell that I'm looking at someone? Ole Hou seemed to have gotten stronger! The man hadn't seemed to sense anything when he looked at the director before.

The group entered a great hall next—one of the private rooms. Li Hao took in a deep breath, then another deep breath. This was a private room?

It was more like a palace!

Faint vitality surged through the premises—Li Hao felt so comfortable that he wanted to moan. What a lovely place! This was money well spent! How was this a “private room”? It was at least thirty-five hundred square feet, and there were nine of these rooms in the center of the royal city!

Everything that one could want could be found here. There was even a massive screen in the room with images flickering across it. Li Hao's eyes widened when he caught sight of it.

Was that a television? It seemed so! This item was recorded in the ancient records, but the dynasty hadn't been able to produce it. The young man had thought that no one had excavated it yet, but it turned out that it'd been dug up, just not popularized!

Not only that, but there was something similar to a fighting ring set up in the middle of the room. Eight fine-looking attendants waited in the room. They were all either Darkmoons or Sunflares.

“Welcome, honored guests!” The attendants rushed forward after the group entered the room. Some wanted to help Li Hao take off his outer garments...

The young man quickly shook his arms. “Don't touch me!”

Hou Xiaochen flicked a glance at him and didn't say a word. He permitted the attendants to take off his jacket. Li Hao looked at the man's actions—is this how it's done? Sorry, I've never experienced this before.

The manager next to him was likewise speechless, but naturally wouldn't display it. "It's inconvenient for the honored guests to be wearing too much when they dine," she explained softly.

"There's nothing inconvenient about it." Li Hao would never allow someone else to undress him in this establishment, if for no other reason than him wearing silver armor beneath his trench coat. He was deathly afraid of being caught off guard in an ambush; he constantly wore the armor beneath his outer garments.

The manager was resigned by his response, as were the two female attendants who'd walked up to the young man. However, they didn't say anything. Anyone who could enter the Nine Dragons Pavilion was a personage that they couldn't afford to run afoul of. No matter how uncouth they were, they were still important characters. Even a driver was the driver of a very important existence.

Manager Yu didn't let the attendants handle her clothing either. She waved off the people who walked up to her.

The manager led Li Hao toward the dining table, making introductions as she walked. She'd determined that Li Hao was a massive country bumpkin despite his peculiar outfit. He wasn't any sort of fashion icon.

"This way please, honored guests!" She pointed at the big screen. "This is a real-time broadcast of the Colosseum."

"What is the Colosseum?"

"There are too many supernaturals and their associated grudges in Skystar City. But being the royal city, Skystar cannot infinitely suppress these supernaturals. That would only give rise to greater conflict. Thus, the city prepared a massive Colosseum for all supernaturals to settle their differences in. So long as both sides are willing, duels can be fought in the Colosseum! They can be fights to the death or simple sparring. Victors receive prize money from the hosts."

“What is this nonsense!” Li Hao frowned. “Grudges between supernaturals are naturally settled by the Night Watchers! Dueling in private is against the law! Does no one know of the rules or regulations? Did the Night Watchers build this place?”

The woman hesitated before shaking her head with resignation. “No.”

“Who runs the show behind the scenes?”

“.....” She looked at Hou Xiaochen, but the man had already sat down. “The Ministry of Finance.”

“No wonder!” Li Hao snorted. “This infringes on Night Watcher rights! No wonder the Ministry of Finance is so well off. With this Colosseum, there is certain to be gambling on the results. With gambling comes profits, with profits comes fighting... Tickets for a place that treats supernaturals like animals will go for high numbers and prices. The profits involved are easy to imagine. When is it ever the Ministry of Finance’s turn to be involved in this?”

The manager didn’t say a word and was beginning to wonder who this person was.

One had to say, Li Hao had touched upon the crux of the issue with a single response. The profits here were enormous, too enormous. Fights between supernaturals often took place, but usually in the wilderness. The nobles of the royal city were unwilling to traipse to the countryside to witness those fights.

Here, however, one could sit in ease and luxury to watch a fight. The money at hand likely involved astronomical figures. The Ministry of Finance held a monopoly over it.

Li Hao suddenly understood why Hou Xiaochen had this particular ministry in his sights. “Is the Inspectorate involved?” the young man suddenly laughed. “This plainly infringes upon our rights.”

“I think so, but I don’t think it was able to claim ownership over this domain,” Hou Xiaochen responded calmly.

“They’re useless!” Li Hao laughed.

The two brazenly spoke of such matters without any restraint. This was common knowledge, so what did it matter if they discussed it?

Hou Xiaochen lifted his tea cup and took a sip. Manager Yu had poured it for him—she’d dismissed the attendants who wanted to undertake the duty. Li Hao sat down as well. The manager who wanted to flee the room was growing curious and remained.

These two... how many could talk to Hou Xiaochen like this? She was very curious about the unknown young man now. It was definitely this person’s first visit to Skystar City. Was he from Silver Moon? But... who?

He’s young...

There were people like him in Silver Moon, but the most famous was Demon Sword Li Hao. Did Li Hao dare come to Skystar City?

Chapter 634: A Meal (II)

The manager carefully took a few more glances at Li Hao; the more she looked at him, the more the young man resembled Demon Sword. The Nine Dragons Pavilion had naturally circulated portraits of the young man. The one in front of her both appeared similar to the portraits and didn’t at the same time.

She personally poured a cup of tea when she saw Li Hao sit, waving the attendants off. “Honored guest, these are tea leaves that have been steeped with Water of Life...”

Li Hao took a sip from the cup and regarded it with some disdain. “How miserly! This has been diluted one thousand times, hasn’t it?”

“.....” There was no response. The manager knew that, despite appearances, the one in front of her had likely drank Water of Life before. Just as he said, this drop was diluted more than one thousand times.

She was quiet for a while before saying softly, “It’s not that we don’t have complete droplets, it’s just that they’re... rather expensive.”

“You sell Water of Life?”

“No.” The manager inclined her head. “But if an honored guest needs it, we can temporarily supply some.”

“How much do you sell them for?”

“One hundred thousand pieces of stone.”

“You’re joking,” Li Hao chuckled. “Then this cup of tea is one hundred pieces per cup!”

“This comes with the private room, it’s free.”

“Does the room cost money?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“The minimum charge for a private room on the ninth floor is five hundred pieces.”

Li Hao broke out in full-out laughter. Was that expensive? Very expensive! But if it came down to it, if one had one hundred thousand pieces of mysterious power stones and didn't have a way to exchange for Water of Life, would they be willing to conduct this exchange?

They would!

The little tree had charged him ten thousand pieces per droplet—that included a massive processing fee. But here, the price was ten times that!

The young man said nothing more and looked at the screen. Two supernaturals were conducting a fight to the death in an arena elsewhere. Both of them were Sunflare, making for an exciting contest between two evenly matched opponents.

Li Hao swept a glance at the screen, then looked at the fighting ring in the center of the room.
“What's this ring for?”

“If the honored guest so wishes, you can host fights here. Or if the honored guest has scores to settle with other guests, you can also utilize the premises,” explained the manager. “This is a very private location and it was built by premier supernatural powerhouses. Specialized supernaturals have reinforced the area around the ring so that mysterious power won't leak out.”

“No wonder it's so expensive!” Li Hao nodded and looked at the crystalline cutlery on the dining table. “All of that is forged out of the best mysterious power stones. Aren't you worried about people taking it with them?”

“They won't. Those who patronize the establishment are all honored guests!” laughed the manager. In other words, they wouldn't do something so demeaning.

“This seems to be made out of energy stones.” Li Hao randomly picked up a bowl. “If I throw this at someone, I’ll break their heads even if they’re a Solar! And this is only tableware for eating. The royal family and nine ministries are rich, alright!”

“Why else do you think that people fight over power?” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “Such are the privileges enjoyed by the upper echelon of society. See, aren’t you sitting here now too and enjoying all this? You watch supernaturals put on a show for you and eat a meal that costs hundreds or one thousand mysterious power stones...”

“I’m just broadening my knowledge of the world!” Li Hao grinned. “I can’t afford this myself.”

“Can you really not?”

“I can, actually,” Li Hao laughed. “I reaped a lot from raiding the Xu treasury—around one million mysterious power stones. But here, we spend several thousand pieces for a meal. Eating three meals a day means ten thousand stones per day. I’ll be bankrupt after three months!”

Next to them, the manager shook. She was now certain who this young man was.

“I thought I was rich and as wealthy as a nation after that gig!” Li Hao sighed. “If I didn’t visit Skystar City, I wouldn’t know that there are such expensive places in the world. Wouldn’t that make Xu Qing a bumpkin as well if he was here?”

“Not quite!” Hou Xiaochen laughed heartily. “The Xu family vaults were only part of the family fortune. Who would place all of their wealth in that tiny treasury? Do you think that his old man appeared out of thin air?”

“I know, he was hiding in the ruins. That’s right, it’s safer there!” Li Hao was suddenly mystified. “Did they seize an armory in the ruins?”

“That would be normal and expected,” Hou Xiaochen explained. “Take Battle Heaven, for instance. Does it have an armory?”

“Yes!” Li Hao nodded. “But it’s not easy to claim it! There are one million soldiers and a dozen Golden Armors in the ancient city. There’s even more important personnel on top of that. Well... I suppose that makes it really rich too!”

The manager and attendants’ scalps crawled at their conversation. It wasn’t that their honored guests wouldn’t discuss important matters in front of them, but that they wouldn’t do so so clearly and blatantly. They did so without a care in the world and were incredibly direct, without the reticence displayed by others.

The more the attendants listened, the more shocked they were. It wasn’t that they’d never bore witness to major occasions. In fact, the manager thought that she might be the most experienced out of everyone present when it came to important events. Hou Xiaochen didn’t count for much in the grand scheme of things. Each of the ministers and their deputies were more highly ranked than him. She also often saw princes and dukes. All of them were ranked more highly.

But as she listened to Li Hao and Hou Xiaochen converse, she suddenly had the urge to turn and run away. She didn’t really want to keep listening.

“So long as you understand!” Hou Xiaochen smiled. “Therefore, you’re richer than me, but you’d be dreaming if you think that you’re richer than the nine ministries or ministers after looting the Xus!

“The Xus are indeed one of the three great dukes, but you didn’t loot their core treasury. Secondly, the Xus are the lords of the east, but they aren’t the overlords of the land. Even the east must pay taxes to the nine ministries. The Xus can fully control only ten provinces at most, whereas the nine ministries hold sway over all of them.

“The ten that the Xus command must also answer to the nine ministries!”

Li Hao nodded, further understanding the position that the nine ministries were in. “Of the nine ministries, I understand if the Ministry of Armed Forces, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Administration, Ministry of Examinations, and Ministry of Commerce have money. But where do the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Relations earn their income from?” Li Hao asked quizzically. “I don’t even know what the Ministry of Internal Affairs actually does.”

“How are you a peacemaker commissioner?” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “You’re an embarrassment to us all! Isn’t the Nine Pavilions Pagoda part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs? This ministry pertains to the business that the royal family conducts with the outside world. In the nine ministries, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is a spokesperson for the royal family.”

“I see!” Li Hao realized.

The manager wished nothing more than to stopper her ears. She wanted to offer up the menu and leave, but she didn’t dare interrupt the two in their conversation.

“What about the Ministry of Foreign Relations?” Li Hao continued to ask.

“That ministry used to face the nations that bordered the dynasty, such as Great Li that neighbors us. But these days, those nations have either vanished or are separated by perilous terrain,” Hou Xiaochen once more educated Li Hao. “Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Relations primarily focuses not on the outside of the dynasty these days, but the monster spirits, three great organizations, and seven divine mountains. If they have envoys that come, it’s that ministry that receives them.

“Then how do they earn money?” Li Hao was still curious.

“That’s easy,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “The monster spirits produce special items and treasures according to their territory, but they also need certain items from the human race. What should they do? Declare war for resources? The monster spirits are no idiots at their current stage of development. Therefore, they take up these matters with the human race through the Ministry of Foreign Relations. The ministry can also buy low and sell high! Don’t underestimate this point. The profits involved are far more than you can imagine!”

“If the three great organizations wish to transact with the dynasty, does that also fall to the Ministry of Foreign Relations?” Li Hao interjected.

“Yes!”

“But isn’t that supplying the enemy?”

“The three great organizations of your perspective are villains who stoop to every possible low!” Hou Xiaochen looked at him. “However, to the nine ministries, the three great organizations have many powerful spokespeople. Are you willing to cut off communications with them before you decide to fully exterminate them? Li Hao, you must understand that the enemy of your eyes may not be the enemy of the senior executives’ eyes.

“To some, such as the nine ministries, their struggles with each other may not be any less than their hostilities with the three great organizations. An institution such as the Inspectorate hates the three great organizations, but that doesn’t mean all of them are such, do you understand?”

“The Night Watchers and three great organizations fight each other, they have conflicts and they have feuds. But do you think institutions such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Relations have any grudge with the three great organizations that cannot be resolved?”

Li Hao continued to nod. He was learning a great deal today. He’d come to Skystar City to witness this. Hou Xiaochen might know of his thoughts, so he was explaining and analyzing all of this in great detail.

“Therefore...” Li Hao paused in thought. “When you kill those of the three great organizations, that’s sometimes obstructing another’s path of wealth, is it?”

“You can say that, but that’s not the only thing obstructed. Don’t just look at money from day to night, there’s a lot of other things out there,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “Take the Nine Dragons Pavilion, for example. Do you think this is just a restaurant?”

Li Hao didn't make a sound.

"This is an important venue of communication between the nine ministries and the royal family," Hou Xiaochen said. "If the officials cannot resolve it themselves, then the issues are resolved here and profit and loss normalized." He pointed at the manager next to them. "Do you view her as an attendant?"

"No... she's so beautiful." Li Hao smiled radiantly.

"Let's put it this way," Hou Xiaochen said with a smile. "This one is not only one of the leaders of the royal family's intelligence agency, but an important bridge between the nine ministries and the royal family."

"You jest, Director Hou." The manager's expression changed slightly.

"I'm not talking to you, don't interrupt!" Hou Xiaochen responded calmly, but the manager's heart spasmed and she didn't make a further sound.

Chapter 635: A Meal (III)

"Intelligence reports are one thing and of less importance," said Hou Xiaochen. "This manager also holds a few more titles, such as being a broker. Do you understand?"

"An intermediary?" Li Hao frowned.

"Pretty much," Hou Xiaochen laughed. "No matter what you want to do, find, or ask, you can do so through the Nine Dragons Pavilion! For example, if you want to buy a position—perhaps being inspector general of the Silver Moon Inspectorate—you can ask her how much it will cost or what kind of price you'll have to pay."

"That would be a costly transaction!" Li Hao laughed.

“Not at all!” Hou Xiaochen shook his head. “Your concern should be that you won’t be able to report to work, or that you’d die shortly after starting in your position. The position of Silver Moon Night Watcher director was once on sale here—it was available for one thousand pieces. During that time, I kept refusing the central Night Watcher command for me to redeploy to Skystar City, so the person who bought it couldn’t fill the position.

“Later on, there was someone fearless who wanted the position. They died before even reaching Silver Moon. The North Sea pirates killed them!”

“It must have been the Starlight Pirates and White Shark Raiders who did it,” Li Hao broke out laughing.

“Pretty much.”

Sweat beaded the manager’s forehead. She looked at Hou Xiaochen with a vague look of horror. This one knew everything in full detail! How did he obtain his information? Did he have a lot of secret agents in Skystar City?

Li Hao was also finding that he was learning a lot today. All the talking had made him hungry, so he smiled at the manager. “Where’s the menu?”

The manager forcefully calmed herself and set a menu in front of Li Hao. Other attendants supplied menus to Hou Xiaochen and Manager Yu as well. The young man flipped it open for a look...

Damn! So expensive!

“You sell monster spirit soup?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you afraid of the monster spirits coming for you?”

“They’re the ones who deliver some of our ingredients.”

“I see.” Li Hao nodded. “Nova-level monster spirit meat is so expensive! One plate costs five hundred stones?”

“There aren’t many monster spirits of that level and they’re difficult opponents...”

Li Hao looked at Panther below his feet and chuckled. The dog shook. “I have a dog here that’s the descendant of an ancient monster spirit and possesses peak Nova battle strength. Its bloodline is pure—will a plate of its meat fetch more than one thousand stones?”

The manager didn’t answer, while Panther glared at Li Hao. How dare the young man wish to sell dog meat!

Li Hao continued to scan the menu and stroked his chin. “Seadragon Fish... a delicacy of the North Sea... Regular people can’t hope to net a creature like this. North Sea pirates caught this one, didn’t they?”

The manager continued to remain silent.

“It looks like your business spans a large territory,” Li Hao murmured. “You even transact with pirates. I recall that there’s four trading companies that operate at sea... but it looks like pirates are your major transaction targets, are they? Do you know that they eat people?”

“I am unaware of that,” whispered the manager as she lowered her head. “You might be mistaken, honored guest. These didn’t come from pirates, but from merchant vessels that caught these animals themselves.”

Li Hao inclined his head and continued scanning the menu. “Forget it, this is all trash! Get me a pot of tea with more Water of Life in it. Put sixteen hundred pieces worth in it! As for food, just get me regular, free snacks.” He suddenly thought of something and looked at Hou Xiaochen. “Director Hou, Senior Golden Spear is a high rank chief commissioner, right?”

“Correct.”

“Brother Second Mu?”

“The same.”

“Then add two hundred stones more!” Li Hao looked at the manager. “Put it on the tabs of Golden Spear of the Silver Moon Guards and Deputy Mu Lin.”

The manager was in incredibly awkward straits, but she didn’t refuse the instructions. “Understood, I’ll make the arrangements.”

Li Hao chuckled and watched her leave, as did Hou Xiaochen. The latter was seated in a chair and looking down below. Massive windows faced the palace and he sighed with emotion. “It used to be brighter here, now it’s almost completely pitch black.”

“There are a lot of powerhouses here.” Li Hao rubbed his eyes after looking outside for a while.

“Of course!” Hou Xiaochen laughed and continued to drink tea. Li Hao followed his motions.

“What does the director wish for me to do here?”

“You can decide that yourself.”

“Is there anything in it for me?” questioned the young man. “Not the benefits we normally speak of, but what is the long term gain after I do what I do? For me, for Silver Moon, for the director...”

“Intimidating one ministry and finding your footing in the Inspectorate is important enough. That will show the Inspectorate that while I am a thorn in their side, I focus my attention on seizing other people’s profits and authority. I strengthen the Inspectorate! You and I are both of the Inspectorate, so remember this well, Li Hao—you need to find a patron in a place like this, or someone to take the fall for you!

“Take that one in the Inspectorate, for example. He won’t pay attention to you if you only bring him trouble. But if you bring him massive benefits at the same time, he’ll help you then!

“He doesn’t care about trouble, only what he will gain after the trouble is over. If you use reasonable methods and stay within sensible bounds to fight for the Inspectorate, he’ll be willing to help you within that range.”

Li Hao nodded, then asked, “Will his help be significant?”

“Of course! He’s an Arcanus, at the very least,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “This means that other Arcanus won’t be able to stick their nose into our affairs, right?”

“Right! But won’t he be afraid of his subordinates being stronger than him? We’re of Silver Moon, after all.” Li Hao looked quizzically at the director.

“Keep in mind that in the eyes of the nine ministries and royal family, they are the best! Second best are the three great organizations, seven divine mountains, three dukes, and Silver Moon. Then comes the lower ranked provinces, monster spirit territory, pirates of the four seas...”

“The seven divine mountains?” Li Hao raised a brow. “Sky Sword Mountain only has Senior Sky Sword, doesn’t it? How is he number two?”

And to be on par with Silver Moon and the dukes? Granted, Sky Sword was very strong.

“Who says that there’s only Sky Sword at Sky Sword Mountain?” Hou Xiaochen was startled into a wide grin. “How would it be one of the seven divine mountains if there’s only Sky Sword? What difference would there be between him and Tyrant Blade or Northern Fist? Ninety percent of the world’s sword cultivators are at Sky Sword Mountain! Not just Silver Moon martial masters, but also ones from the central region and four continents...

“They’re all gathered at Sky Sword Mountain! You didn’t think that Sky Sword was the only resident, did you?”

Li Hao laughed dryly, he really had thought so. So the truth was otherwise! The man had almost unified all of the sword cultivators in the world. This ran counter to the young man’s imagination. He’d thought that Sky Sword was a lone wolf and didn’t bother himself with matters like these.

Footsteps sounded outside the door as they chatted—they didn’t belong to the female manager. Instead, the doors were pushed open as she watched with resignation and a slightly chubby man walked in with a few officials.

The chubby middle-aged man smiled at Hou Xiaochen. “Little Hou’s here, let’s eat together! I happen to have something to discuss with you, so we don’t need to move. Let’s enjoy dinner together.”

Li Hao looked at Chubby, then did a double take. He breathed out after a long moment—there were so many powerhouses present! Other than the manager, there were six newcomers. Apart from Chubby, there were old and young members of his group and all of them were at least of the Nova level. Two of them even seemed to be metamorphosis and the remaining three weren’t just initial Novas.

He couldn’t read anything from Chubby, but the man ought to be a martial master. As such, he wouldn’t be too weak.

“Minister Lu!” Hou Xiaochen rose with a smile. “I didn’t know that the minister was coming tonight. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have taken the room.” He looked at the manager. “Why didn’t you say that Minister Liu was here? If you had, I wouldn’t have requested this room. Now I’m giving the impression that I’m occupying the minister’s space...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!” chuckled Chubby. “This is just a place to eat! Let’s eat together, it will be more fun that way!” He looked at Li Hao with a smile. “You are the famous Demon Sword, aren’t you? You are quite the talent!”

Li Hao rose in an exceedingly “graceful” manner to accept the compliment. He inclined his body and took off his top hat. “Night Watcher Li Hao greets Minister Liu!”

“Don’t stand on ceremony, don’t stand on ceremony. Sit. We’re all part of the same family here, there’s no need to be so polite!” Chubby chuckled and walked over with his people. Some of them looked in an unfriendly manner at Li Hao and Hou Xiaochen.

Hou Xiaochen was sitting in the head seat, Li Hao and Manager Yu sat in the seats right below him. Why were they not getting up?

Minister Liu didn’t mind and randomly sat down in a seat. He indicated for the others to sit as well and then looked at the female manager. “Bring on an order of everything good. You have to put on an impressive show for Director Hou and the others!”

“Understood!” The manager swiftly left without further word; sweat had drenched the back of her shirt.

“Then we shall enjoy ourselves thanks to the minister!” Hou Xiaochen laughed softly.

“Just listen to yourself!” Minister Liu laughed. “If Little Hou is willing to come to the Ministry of Finance, you can come to this place and eat as much as you want. Take it all to go, you can put it on my bill!”

“How can I ever do that!” Hou Xiaochen laughed.

“It’s but a small matter!” The minister looked at Li Hao next. “Demon Sword Li Hao... Not bad, very good! Xu Qing was always full of himself, so it’s good that he died! Are you interested in coming to the Ministry of Finance? I can’t make you a vice minister, but we have plenty of positions. If you come, I promise that you’ll be second to only the ministers. You’ll be on par with Little Hou here!”

Chapter 636: A Meal (IV)

“Really?” Li Hao beamed widely. “I hear that the Four Seas Company is under the Ministry of Finance. Can I lead that trading company?”

“The Four Seas Company...” Minister Liu laughed and looked at a tanned middle-aged man next to him. “Little Wu, are you interested in giving up your position?”

“The head of the Four Seas Company is here?” Li Hao remarked with astonishment. “My apologies for the disrespect!”

The tanned man looked frostily at Li Hao, but soon recovered to a normal expression. “This humble one is Wu Yong. It is my honor to see the true countenance of the Demon Sword! If Demon Sword is interested in this position, I will naturally withdraw and be one of your subordinates,” he laughed. “You don’t need to consider my preferences, minister. If we can recruit such a talent like Demon Sword to the ministry, then it would be my greatest delight!”

“Really?” Li Hao beamed.

“.....” The premises quieted down!

“Then I really can join the Ministry of Finance!” Li Hao crowed. “I hear that the Four Seas Company is as rich as nations. Not only that, but pirates don’t even dare run afoul of the golden coin flag. I’ve offended many pirates in the North Sea and the East Sea pirates also want to kill me. If I command the Four Seas Company, none of that will be an issue!”

The young man grew more worked up the more he spoke. “If Minister Liu doesn’t mind, you can send out the order tonight and I’ll report to my station tomorrow morning!”

“.....” Minister Liu was still smiling, just that his smile had turned a bit odd. This was simply a pleasantry, one that they’d voiced thousands of times. It was his first time seeing someone treating a polite remark as gospel and strain at the bit so much, to be so... exuberant!

Li Hao really did want the position! If Minister Liu sent out the appointment letter, then the boy would ninety-nine percent show up at the Four Seas Company tomorrow to be their new ranking officer.

The minister suddenly felt that he was a shrewd schemer who’d come across an impulsive brute. There was no way for him to communicate with the other. Instead, he quickly smiled, “I would like to, but I’m concerned that the Inspectorate won’t let you go! Your inspector general has quite the temper...”

“That’s fine!” Li Hao chirped. “So long as Minister Liu gives the command, I can lose the post of peacemaker commissioner if that means I can immediately start at the Ministry of Finance! As for whether or not the Inspectorate will agree to it... Blocking someone’s path of promotion is more vicious than killing one’s parents!”

“Now that’s much too serious,” Minister Liu laughed heartily. “I would love to have you, but it would not be right to clash with that stubborn mule over this matter. How about this, I’ll chat with your inspector general when the right opportunity presents itself. You can come to me anytime if he agrees!”

This provided a way out for both of them.

“Then forget it.” Li Hao drooped. “I’ve never even seen our inspector general, nor am I familiar with him. He probably won’t agree to it. I really am interested in the Four Seas Company! I could even be in a deputy position, but it looks like it’s not in the cards for me!”

Those from the Ministry of Finance suddenly felt quite some discomfort with the young man's display. Enough was enough! Li Hao was as the rumors stated, a bit thick-skulled and quite bold.

Hou Xiaochen laughed before the minister had a chance to respond. "What Four Seas Company? That's too far. You just got here, so you should settle down here. And you've just become the Skystar vice commander, so it won't be that easy for you to leave."

"Congratulations!" Minister Liu offered after the briefest of startled pauses. "So Ole Yao's promoted you as soon as you arrived! The responsibilities of the Skystar vice commander are great..."

"Indeed they are!" Hou Xiaochen nodded with a smile. "I'm prepared to let Li Hao oversee and create an official agency for the Skystar commander. We lack an ideal site and some more personnel..."

He pointed at the screen. "This place is good! Minister Liu, I'd like to send Li Hao to this locale and modify it to be my office. I'll also gather up all of the shadowy enterprises for the dynasty and make sure they pay their taxes and fees on time. That will also increase revenues for the Ministry of Finance. What do you say, minister?"

"That would be a good thing!" Minister Liu laughed heartily. "It would just be a tricky problem to tackle. Of course, this would be an Inspectorate and Night Watcher affair, so I'm not at liberty to say much. Do as you see fit, Little Hou! I understand your intentions. How about this, let's just enjoy dinner tonight and not talk about any of this. You can see how your Inspectorate decides tomorrow morning, I won't involve myself in this matter!"

"That's good!" Hou Xiaochen nodded. "The Inspectorate shouldn't have any opinions otherwise. Not to mention, this falls within the scope of responsibilities for the Skystar commander. The inspector general won't say anything and Director Yao will certainly not be opposed either."

"Commander Hou!" A slightly beguiling woman spoke up next to Minister Liu. She was also a metamorphosis expert, as was Wu Yong. She smiled winsomely at Hou Xiaochen. "Commander Hou, the Night Watchers are a formidable agency with quite the power. This place is just a location of entertainment for the noble and lofty. Skystar City might fall into disarray if it's modified to be

the Skystar commander's office! Supernaturals are full of vigor and will have no place to vent their energies... This may not be a good development."

"I understand, so I'm ready!" Hou Xiaochen nodded. "I will suppress anyone who dares cause a disturbance! I'd like to see if I suppress them faster, or if the disarray comes faster!"

"The boss of Skystar's Colosseum is said to be a female powerhouse. She might even be a metamorphosis expert. Who knows if she'll put in a showing?"

The woman's smile deepened; she didn't continue the conversation. Minister Liu seemed to recall something and abruptly said, "I suddenly remember that I have some matters to take care of back in the ministry... Little Hou, enjoy yourselves tonight!"

He turned to the female manager who'd just walked in. "Put all of tonight's expenditures on my tab!" He then rebuked, "This is the Nine Dragons Pavilion! Be careful next time to not place such items in the private rooms. They are an affront to refined taste!"

Minister Liu turned once more to Hou Xiaochen with a merry chuckle. "Then I'll be off, Little Hou. You can do as you see fit with the Skystar Colosseum, but the royal capital is an important locale. Don't incite a widespread disruption. It'll also be troublesome if too many rise up and you lose your position for it!"

"Understood, thank you for your reminder, Minister Liu!"

The minister smiled radiantly and left. The rest of his people quickly followed him out. Unpleasant expressions crossed the faces of the two metamorphosis experts. This was a declaration of war! Indeed, it was an intent of open hostilities!

What did that madman Hou Xiaochen want to do?

Everyone had known that something was inappropriate with his presence here tonight, but no one fathomed that he would be so unmoved after Minister Liu came in person to offer friendly words. Surely he didn't think he was invincible with a Li Hao in the city?

Minister Liu didn't intend to be embroiled in the situation. Since Hou Xiaochen had made up his mind, they could see how the situation developed!

Hou Xiaochen laughed and looked at Li Hao, the young man also grinned.

"Get me an order of everything on the menu as well as a drop of Water of Life! I would ask for more, but I don't think you guys have it!" the young man boomed.

Minister Liu was yet to depart from the room. He looked back at Li Hao with a nod. "Silver Moon martial masters... are indeed what they are reputed to be!"

He left after those words. These people from Silver Moon were much bolder than the average person!

Li Hao chuckled happily and looked at Hou Xiaochen. He couldn't help but transmit, "Director, you don't really mean for me to do this, do you? I can be your minion... but I don't really have the guts to do this. We face two metamorphosis experts, to say nothing of that fatty... I'm afraid of death!"

Hou Xiaochen sipped his tea and didn't respond. Of course it's you! What, can it be me?

"I can go back to Silver Moon tonight..." Li Hao's scalp crawled with numbness.

"Too late!"

Fuck! Li Hao wanted to cry. I just wanted to see how big the world was and if it was pretty here. I don't want to fight those metamorphosis experts! I'll die if anything goes wrong! Ole Hou thinks too highly of me!

Hou Xiaochen seemed to be in a lovely mood and ate heartily when the dishes were served. "What are you afraid of?" he asked without lifting his head. "I can give you a guarantee that there won't be anyone stronger than metamorphosis making an appearance. If there is, I'll make a move myself and see if I can kill one to boost your confidence!"

The attendants serving them shook as sweat drenched their bodies.

.....

The trio ate and drank as various dishes were served in the room. It wasn't in the spur of the moment that Hou Xiaochen decided to make trouble for the Ministry of Finance. He just lacked an opportunity—one that seemed to be at hand now. As for whether or not there was an even deeper level of plan in the works, Li Hao was currently unaware of any details.

He focused on calculating his gains and losses as he feasted. Hou Xiaochen wanted to use him as a blade. But why him? Golden Spear and Yu Luochoa were both good candidates—were they weak?

Golden Spear was undoubtedly strong, and so would Yu Luochoa be if she unsealed herself. In that case, why should he be this blade? Just because he happened to be on the scene?

That wasn't necessarily the case.

Li Hao's mouth was covered in grease as he ate and he also fed some to Panther. After a while of feasting and thinking, he came to some thoughts on whether or not being this blade was a worthwhile proposition.

Perhaps... it was time to be personally involved if he wished to see more of the world. In his current state, he might not be seeing everything clearly. However, he knew that Hou Xiaochen wouldn't rashly cause his death. People such as Yuan Shuo, Hong Yitang, and Light Sword were all of the young man's backers.

What kind of success or benefits would Hou Xiaochen gather if he caused the young man's death? It would only cause the complete collapse of Silver Moon as the fractures between the martial world and provincial government would widen.

Chapter 637: Be a Good Person (I)

With certain ideas in mind, Li Hao slurped down a bowl of soup and burped with satisfaction. "Is that it, director?" He lifted his head merrily. "I'll be done after I clean up the Colosseum for the Night Watchers?"

"Of course not." Having long finished his meal, Hou Xiaochen casually sipped at tea. "I have two purposes with tonight's visit. First, it's best if they play nice and relinquish their claim over that enterprise.

"If not, then it's the second purpose—we resist and strike back on all fronts! This will take place on all levels, whether on an official, clandestine, civilian, or noble aspect... You might even suffer assassination from the three great organizations! We'll seize various chances throughout this period of resistance to strike with swift fury!"

Hou Xiaochen suddenly laughed in a rather eerie fashion. "So long as we properly seize the opportunity and don't become a source of gossip, we'll be able to kick them down however we wish! There are plenty of people who'd love to dismantle a ministry!

"It's up to you what your concrete actions are—whether it's timely control of events, permitting them to develop as they would, embroiling others into your plans, or carelessly wrapping things up... All of these are options!

"Different measures will result in varying consequences. If you simply wish to create a foothold in Skystar City, then just commence with the simplest course of action—eliminate their biggest stronghold! That's much easier than the rest."

Li Hao understood. Hou Xiaochen was trying to determine what the young man could or was willing to do. Whatever actions Li Hao undertook would naturally meet with varying degrees of backlash. The man himself would only be in charge of those above metamorphosis. Plainly, he was trying to gauge the limits of Li Hao's abilities.

The young man ate a bit more before switching to drinking tea. "What about helpers?"

"You can do as you see fit. If you can utilize the Night Watchers, then do so. If you can't or you don't have the ability to keep them in line, then you know just as well that only Golden Spear is able to help you on the Silver Moon Guards side. We don't have enough powerhouses!"

There weren't many heavyweights among the Silver Moon Guards. Golden Spear was the equivalent of a Nova; the others, such as Mu Lin, were slightly weaker. As for Manager Yu, she naturally served only Hou Xiaochen since she was the man's secretary.

"Understood!" Li Hao nodded with a grin. This meant that the rest of them would be of no help whatsoever. It was up to him alone!

Ole Hou really... thinks highly of me.

.....

At the same time, the news spread explosively. Demon Sword was in the royal city! Li Hao had come to Skystar City and most stunning of all was that Hou Xiaochen had declared war on the Ministry of Finance when he visited the Nine Dragons Pavilion!

Indeed, he'd declared war!

It was only a struggle over the Colosseum, but it became war in the eyes and ears of others. It was a blatant statement that the minister should recognize the times they were in and withdraw from the Colosseum of their own accord.

If not, I'll use violence against you!

As the only legitimately authorized supernatural law enforcement agency, that gave the Night Watchers the advantage. Yet sometimes, nominal power was required to be reinforced by actual strength. As part of the nine ministries, their indomitable strength did not need to be questioned!

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The Inspectorate.

A senior official with a slightly pale countenance swiftly walked into the main conference hall. The inspector general who appeared rather young had already arrived. He smiled at the newcomer. "So you've received word?"

"Y-yes..."

"It's fine, what are you in a panic for?" chuckled the inspector general. "This has nothing to do with us, it's a declaration from Hou Xiaochen. Not to mention, he may not succeed. Why are you the one frantic? Hou Xiaochen's reaction is interesting after Demon Sword Li Hao has come. He seems to think that Li Hao can suppress everything, or that he can keep the situation under control!"

"They can have their own fun!" the man snorted. "The guy didn't seem fit to notify me before he summoned Li Hao here. Does he want to use the fight with the Steadfast Duke to bring all sides under his heel? If that's the case, he's thinking too simply!"

"The Skystar Colosseum touches upon many other issues." The inspector general frowned. "It covers a very wide span of matters! Where do its supernaturals and monster spirits come from? Not to mention all of its priceless treasures and ingredients—the profits that are at stake are stunning beyond belief! It will be so much more profitable than raiding Xu Qing's old hideout. Apart from the Four Seas Company, the Skystar Colosseum is Liu's greatest source of profits. He even gave up some other benefits back in the day for it..."

The man sat back with a chuckle. “Forget it, we’ll sit back and watch tigers fight it out!”

“But... what if we’re dragged into this, inspector general?” asked a strong subordinate.

“How would we?” laughed the man. “If they fail, they’re on the hook for it! It’s just as good if they succeed. If they fully infuriate Liu, he’ll take to the field himself. We can act then—we may not be able to fully eliminate the Lius, but we’ll be able to weaken them significantly and take down half of the Ministry of Finance!

“So it’s a good thing! If considered from this perspective, we’re not responsible for any mishaps and we can share in the success. What is this, if not a good thing? I don’t mind it if Silver Moon martial masters are willing to volunteer to be the blade in my hand!”

The inspector general had seen through the heart of many things. Just as Hou Xiaochen had said, if the profits were big enough, even Silver Moon martial masters could come under his protection. The precursor was that they didn’t just bring trouble without profit. No partnership would survive for long if that was the case.

“The Night Watchers have made Li Hao the Skystar vice commander,” someone raised in a low voice. “Does that Director Yao of ours have ulterior motives in mind?”

“Hahaha, it’s hard to say!”

“What about Yellow Dragon?” laughed another. “Will Yellow Dragon involve himself? Even if he doesn’t, he won’t sit by to watch Hou Xiaochen succeed, will he? If Hou Xiaochen wins out, then it’s Yellow Dragon’s turn to be on uneven footing!”

All of these people had clearly analyzed the situation and saw to the heart of all issues.

“They can fight among themselves!” the inspector general said faintly. “If the Silver Moon martial masters can’t overcome even a single Yellow Dragon or take down the Colosseum, then they’re just a bunch of troublemakers who can do nothing but make life difficult for themselves. We won’t have to pay attention to them then.”

“Inspector General, what does Hou Xiaochen want for his ultimate goal?” Someone looked quizzically at their superior officer. Apart from solidifying his standing and making his name known throughout the city, did he have other aims in mind?

It was too great a risk to take just for the sake of cementing his position in the city. All out war with one of the ministries wasn’t worth the payoff.

“His ultimate goal?” the inspector general mused meaningfully. “What ultimate goal does he need? He just needs the nine ministries to start fighting each other—that will let everyone know that the Silver Moon savages are not people to provoke. Isn’t it enough to let a certain portion of people witness the might and fighting spirit of that province? Why must there always be a final result?”

The man rose with a laugh. “Alright, don’t bother me with these trifling details anymore. As for Li Hao, since he’s come to Skystar City given that he’s part of the Night Watchers... He can do as he wishes as he apparently isn’t scared of being assassinated!”

“Understood!” came a chorus of acknowledgement. No one said anything else as they quickly left on their own business.

.....

At the same time.

Many similar meetings were being held elsewhere.

The Ministry of Finance.

“People pick on the easiest targets.” The chubby Minister Liu still wore a smile on his face as he sipped tea. “It looks like Hou Xiaochen thinks that our ministry is the fattest lamb for the slaughter! Li Hao also thinks we can be a stepping stone to his success. He wants to use us to intimidate the four corners and stabilize his footing. He also wants to lure all sides to the feast...”

“Then... how should we respond, Minister Liu?”

“We will certainly not back down,” the merry minister laid out. “We cannot at a time like this! I already gave way to Hou Xiaochen today, but if I do so tomorrow, then my Four Seas Company will be gone. It will be the tax revenues from the various provinces the day after that, and myself entirely after that!”

He only had two options at a time like this—to advance or retreat. But he could not take another step back! Once he did, the rest would be like sharks that smelled blood and instantly rip him to pieces!

“Judging from Hou Xiaochen’s words, he intends to use this bloodthirsty Li Hao as his blade!” The beguiling woman gnashed her teeth. “Then we kill Li Hao! His reputation is sky high since he just killed the Xus. Once he dies, not only will two divine weapons fall into our hands, but also large sums of wealth and a tremendous reputation...”

It was easy to dismantle the straits they were caught in—just kill Li Hao or even Hou Xiaochen. That would put an end to everything. Or, they just needed to defeat those two to the point where their weaknesses were apparent to others. Countless people would turn to devour them instead. The results would be the same no matter which side it was. Whoever displayed fragility in this conflict would soon be torn to pieces by numerous ferocious tigers.

As for why Hou Xiaochen had the Ministry of Finance in his sights and wanted to use Minister Liu as his whetstone... the minister felt that it was probably because he was too easygoing.

“Are you confident in taking down Li Hao?” The minister smiled at the woman.

“Yes!” the woman said calmly. “I am a metamorphosis expert. As for him... he must be strong to be able to escape from a sealed Xu Qing. He should be at least late or peak Nova. Added to that the use of the Windchaser Boots means that he can reach metamorphosis.

“However, even in that case, I am still confident of bringing him down!”

“That’s not enough...” Minister Liu proclaimed after momentary thought.

“Not enough!”

It was a simple declaration, but it raised ripples of emotions in people’s hearts. The minister felt that one metamorphosis expert wasn’t enough against the young man! Granted, Li Hao was indeed very aggressive. He’d once escaped being hunted down by numerous metamorphosis experts in the east.

Chapter 638: Be a Good Person (II)

“I understand the minister’s meaning.” The beguiling woman nodded. “But if Li Hao wishes to run... Countless ruthless wolves prowl the wilderness outside the royal city! He’s worse off than us in one aspect—he cannot easily set foot outside the city. He’s dead if he does!”

Everyone had to put on a show of adhering to the rules when inside Skystar City confines. It was one thing to act from the shadows, but on the surface, no official personnel would attack Li Hao. If the young man left the royal city, however, then all bets were off! All sides would want a bite of such rich meat.

“Therefore, if he wants to just run like he did before, he’d be dead wrong! That’s one point. The second is that as the vice commander of the Night Watchers, if he damages buildings or kills innocent civilians during his clashes, I think we’d have the responsibility and obligation to demand an explanation from the Night Watchers. They would need to explain themselves to the dynasty!”

“Well said!” Minister Liu applauded loudly. “You hit straight at the pain points! That’s right, compared to the Colosseum, Li Hao’s greatest difficulty is not us, but that he leaves the city or harms civilians. That will limit him in what he can do!

“Hou Xiaochen wants to use Li Hao to intimidate us, but he’s made the wrong move. There’s more restraining factors on the boy than us!”

Li Hao was strong, but there was also too much trouble facing him. Being hobbled as he was, it was hard for him to bring the same level of battle strength to bear as he demonstrated in the east.

“But we still must remain alert!” He laughed and transmitted to the woman, “Send a kill order to Celestial—not just Celestial, but Red Moon or Yama will do as well. Additionally…”

“...alright, that’s enough for now. Dismissed!” He waved off everyone after giving a few mental orders. Minister Liu thought further after everyone was gone and headed to the rear of the ministry headquarters.

A few secret passages later, he came up to a secret room.

“Father.” He waited outside instead of entering the room.

“Do you think all of this is still not a guarantee of success in killing Li Hao?” A voice traveled out moments later.

“That’s right!” The minister wasn’t shy about his reservations. “Someone like Li Hao isn’t easy to kill! He wields two divine weapons and Hou Xiaochen will also make moves at critical moments. The latter is not weak as even I am not assured of triumphing over him.

“It won’t actually matter if we truly lose the Colosseum. If we must, we’ll just keep a lower profile and accumulate fewer riches. But in current circumstances, displaying such a stance will cause more than the loss of a single Colosseum. Father, you understand that as well.”

“Ai!” sighed an aged voice from the secret chamber. “We are imprisoned by fame and wealth in the end!”

Minister Liu didn't respond. Indeed, they were all imprisoned by fame and wealth because they were mortal! The first generation of ministers all had grand aspirations and vision, but what of them now?

They'd become evil dragons in other people's eyes. The passage of time and changes in their position, as well as other factors, had caused the nine ministries to lose their original purpose and no longer seek reforms. Reality was quite sobering at times.

"You've sought me out for a reason," sounded the aged voice again. "What do you wish for me to do?"

"When it comes to Li Hao, we have to kill him in a split second!" Minister Liu thought for a moment. "I'd like to borrow... an Arcanus talisman!"

An Arcanus talisman!

A faint pressure emitted from the secure chamber. "You know that my cultivation level is not fully stabilized. Stripping out some of my power to create this talisman is an enormous depletion with consequences that may be greater than you imagine!"

"If we kill Li Hao, father, we'll be able to seize two treasures of the eight families. Two of them! That will make up for father's losses! The high cost of the talisman is also why they won't believe that I would search out father at this point in time and ask you for such a sacrifice just for the sake of killing Li Hao!

"Hou Xiaochen, Yao Si, and even those guys at the Inspectorate will be watching me from the shadows. They might seize the opening as soon as I make a move. Therefore, I won't do anything to give them that opportunity. They'll never believe that it's father's abilities that will appear on the scene instead!"

“You make some sense,” laughed the old man in the secret chamber. “So a lion needs to bring full force to bear when hunting a rabbit! Indeed, someone like Li Hao cannot be underestimated. Even an Arcanus talisman may not kill him. According to what I know, he might’ve used a core origin talisman before. Who knows if he has more? If he does, that is sufficient to negate the blast from an Arcanus talisman.”

Minister Liu furrowed his brows. Were there more of those talismans? Surely not! The boy would’ve used them at the end of Xu Qing’s pursuit. But if he really did have more... they were in for a difficult time.

“Then father’s meaning is...?”

“Since you’ve made up your mind, then evil must be completely eradicated. You need to cut the weeds and dig up the roots. As opposed to a slow trickle of incremental cost, it’s better to pay a bigger price upfront to get something done once and for all!” rasped the old man as he taught his son. “The Xus slowly added fuel to the flames, but ended up with devastating losses. How can the Lius make the same mistake with that example staring at us in the face?”

“One Arcanus talisman may not kill Li Hao. Talismans are dead, people are alive!” lectured the old man as Minister Liu listened silently outside the door. “The die has been cast, so let us up the ante. We have twelve handheld energy bombs in our warehouses. Use them all.”

The minister was privately taken aback. Energy bombs were what Fan Chang had used in the fight over the sea. The detonation had forced a partially unsealed Hong Yitang to back away, and that had only been one such bomb!

The Lius were so magnificently wealthy that they had twelve bombs in storage. Each of them was a grave threat to metamorphosis experts, with death even possible if one was not careful. These items did not cover the same range as a city annihilation missile, but the force they erupted with outstripped that of those missiles.

City annihilation missiles covered a larger range and could more easily carpet bomb an area. Twelve energy bombs however... even those greater than metamorphosis might die! Not even Arcanus supernaturals dare say that they would live under such a barrage.

“One Arcanus talisman and twelve energy bombs... As well as metamorphosis experts Wu Yong and Liu Sha taking the field, and the three great organizations as well...” Minister Liu reeled off. “Father, this kind of encirclement will ensure that Li Hao dies, right?”

This was quite the arsenal they were bringing to bear! If they were lucky, they would even kill an Arcanus. But his father was right, since they’d decided on their course of action, then they should make an even greater gamble. If they won, they would naturally make up for their losses.

“I don’t know,” the old man answered wearily. “Everything is possible. But since we’ve taken action, then there is no room for regret. Regret will only make you hesitate and waffle with indecision. Whether right or wrong, success or failure, you’ve made your greatest effort. If you still fail... then it is Li Hao’s destiny to survive this time!”

They were posturing to kill an Arcanus with what they were leveling at Li Hao. What else could they do if even this failed?

“Understood, thank you for the lesson, father!”

“Think nothing of it. Come for the Arcanus talisman tomorrow!”

“Understood!” Minister Liu left.

Within the secret chamber, a slightly drooping old man shook his head with a sigh. Li Hao... may not be so easy to kill. An heir to the eight families was still hopping around after encountering so many dangers. He was far from an easy target.

But at this stage, this was all they could do.

.....

All sides were readying their preparations. Those within the Nine Dragons Pavilion were about to leave after eating and drinking their fill. The group bumped into guests from the other private rooms as they departed their room. Whether or not it was coincidence, that was difficult to say.

Hou Xiaochen nodded at the others coming their way and bent at the waist. "Greetings to the various ministers!"

Quite an assembly had left the other rooms. Some nodded smilingly back at him, others ignored him. The latter assessed the Night Watcher trio and quickly left.

"Good luck!" Yet others flashed radiant smiles brimming with meaning. "The security of Skystar depends on you. Do well!"

"....." The various ministers left as well. Li Hao quickly scanned their faces and committed them to memory. He then looked at Hou Xiaochen for clarification.

"Those were the ministers of Internal Affairs, Examinations, Judiciary, and Foreign Relations."

"Are they the weakest four ministries?" Li Hao asked lightly. The other three of Armed Forces, Inspectorate, and Administration had always struggled with each other over who was number one.

Finance and Commerce were renowned to be rich. Finance was wealthy due to provincial tax revenue and a trading company under their banner. Commerce's income didn't come from taxes, but from the various business conglomerates and small-to-medium enterprises. It was difficult to say which was wealthier. These days, money represented strength.

"Stop being so full of yourself," Hou Xiaochen laughed. "As weak as they may be, they'll beat you like you're a child!"

“I am a child,” Li Hao chuckled. “How old am I and how old are they?”

“Oh, you!” Hou Xiaochen shook his head. “Forget it, let’s go. It’s enough for now that people know your face.”

Li Hao nodded. It was time to go back. As for where he would live... who knew? He would follow Hou Xiaochen for now. He turned to the manager. “Is my droplet of Water of Life packed up and ready to go?”

The manager fidgeted uncomfortably. You’ve really got a thick face!

“That... ah... requires one hundred thousand stones in payment,” she had no choice but to say.

“Didn’t Minister Liu say he was treating?”

“Ah... when he left... he said... he said...”

“Chubby went back on his word??” Li Hao blinked and couldn’t help but curse. “He’s one of the nine ministers and reneges on his word to treat us to dinner??”

Heavens above! What kind of person was this? He said to put it on his tab, but regretted his generosity. The hell man!

Chapter 639: Be a Good Person (III)

“The meal can go on Minister Liu’s tab,” the manager said softly. “But... Water of Life... does not fall under the category of a meal.”

This was her only feasible explanation. In all her years of service, it was her first time seeing someone like Li Hao who dared be treated to Water of Life, and it was her first time seeing someone like Minister Liu who really did go back on his word!

“This minister... is an interesting fellow!” A glum Li Hao looked at Hou Xiaochen. He’s a minister! A big hotshot! Who would’ve thought that someone like him would renege on his word?!

Hou Xiaochen laughed, as did Manager Yu. She hadn’t said much all night, but now she laughed at Li Hao. “Is he that much of a fool to give you a drop of Water of Life to help you attack him with?”

“.....”

It was right that the minister was that shameless. He’d be an idiot otherwise.

“Fine!” Li Hao capitulated with great regret. “This is completely unexpected. I was so excited and thought I’d save him some money by only taking one droplet! It turns out he’s not even giving me one drop!” He turned to the manager. “How much did we spend tonight?”

“Eight thousand stones!”

“Does that make us a big spender?”

“...naturally!” The manager hesitated as she didn’t know what the young man wanted to do. What are you cooking up now?

“Then give me some souvenirs!”

“What?” the woman asked blankly. What souvenirs? We don’t have anything like that!

“Your forks and spoons and stuff are very pretty. I’ve just arrived in Skystar City and might need to move soon. Give me a set. Now, you need to know that I don’t just take anyone’s things. Prepare a set for me to take home!”

The manager paused, stunned. After some struggle, she nodded. “Very well, please wait a moment, Commander Li. I’ll... I’ll have people prepare that right now!”

She wanted to collapse! How did someone like this exist?!

Hou Xiaochen burst out laughing when she left and Manager Yu raised a hand to her temples. “Can you be less of an embarrassment?”

“An embarrassment?” Li Hao asked with surprise. “It’s a gift, I’m not stealing or looting it from them. I’m a big spender, so it’s normal to receive some presents. I’m not a fan of those words, Manager Yu. Consider how many rations those things can be traded for if they’re sold. How many people can they keep alive? You guys are used to a life of luxury and ease and have forgotten the pain of the people!”

Hou Xiaochen started, as did Manager Yu. The... cutlery... could be exchanged for food and drink? Was he being serious?

They gaped at the young man, who suddenly flashed a devious smile at them. “I’m just joking. It’s fun attacking you guys from the vantage of higher morals!”

Manager Yu burst out laughing. Hou Xiaochen looked meaningfully at Li Hao without making a sound. The young man also laughed. He laughed and laughed until he suddenly stopped laughing and fell silent.

A confused Manager Yu was surprised and couldn’t truly make sense of Li Hao’s thoughts. What... do you have in mind?

Li Hao quietly regained his calm. Indeed, the manager wouldn’t understand his thoughts. Although she’d entered the world for the purpose of revenge and killed many in that pursuit, she’d never been poor or been an ordinary person. She was a martial master as soon as she set foot into the martial

world. She'd been a powerhouse and continued in that position of strength until she ultimately joined the Night Watchers.

These people... were different from him. They might not even know that a shirt cost money! They wouldn't know how much money one breakfast would cost or how much the ingredients for a meal cost. They didn't come in contact with these concepts.

Li Hao knew that one thousand star coins provided a decent life. Two thousand coins would enable a family of three to live comfortably in Silver City—that still wasn't enough for Skystar City. Was face worth anything?

He didn't know any of this before he was eighteen, but did afterward, and knew it all very clearly. Heh, so you guys aren't omnipotent. I know more than you about some stuff.

The manager brought over a set of cutlery—Li Hao even made a show of inspecting it to ensure it was crafted the same way and fashioned from energy stones. Only then did he put it away in his storage ring with satisfaction.

The manager wanted nothing more than for these people to leave immediately! Li Hao, in particular, put her in such a painful position.

However, the young man was in no hurry to leave. "I have a question. Since you're a broker, how much does it cost to assassinate one of the ministers?"

"....." There was no response. Sweating profusely, the manager said after a long moment, "Commander Li loves to joke."

"I'm not joking!" Li Hao chuckled. "How about one million mysterious power stones? Help me kill someone..."

“Ah... we’re a restaurant, not Celestial!” The manager quickly shook her head. “You’ve really misunderstood us, Commander Li!”

“I’m being serious.”

“This is a misunderstanding!” insisted the manager, wanting nothing more than to kick Li Hao out of the Nine Dragons Pavilion!

“Ai, forget it!” Li Hao shook his head. It looked like this one didn’t dare accept this task, or felt that they couldn’t since they didn’t have enough trust in Li Hao and the others.

Three humans and one dog swiftly descended the steps. There was almost no one left in the main hall. They climbed into a car and slowly drove off; the manager sent them off with a fake smile plastered onto her face.

It wasn’t until they were out of sight that she heaved a sigh of relief. A middle-aged man walked over and transmitted, “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” the manager complained. “He’s very difficult to get rid of! This Demon Sword is not someone to provoke and he’s no kind soul. He’s capricious and mercurial. He’s very, very difficult to handle!”

“Even you find him difficult?” The middle-aged man was surprised.

“Of course!”

“Is he very strong?”

“Not in terms of strength. Forget it, you wouldn’t understand it if I explained it to you. I’ll write all of it down later and update his file.”

“Alright!” The man left.

The manager sagged with relief. She’d finally lived through this experience! She turned to head inside and immediately froze stiff. Li Hao... had been standing behind her at some point in time. Her face was incredibly rigid. When had the young man gotten off the car and taken up a position behind her?

“Commander Li, you...”

“Come in!” Li Hao stood at the entrance to a room on the first floor and waved at her with a smile.

The manager was highly alert, but still walked over despite there being no one else around. Li Hao wouldn’t dare do anything here, would he?

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Inside the room.

Li Hao sat down and smiled when the other walked in. “I want information on everyone in the Ministry of Finance—all of its powerhouses! And those of the Four Seas Company and Skystar Colosseum... Give me a lower price than you normally would. The royal family is at odds with the nine ministries, I’m helping you guys!”

“You’ve misunderstood, Commander Li. We’re just a restaurant...”

Li Hao looked silently at her and said after a long moment, “So you won’t sell it to me, is it?”

“I don’t mean that, Commander Li, just that the Night Watchers have their own intelligence network...”

“Does that have anything to do with me?” Li Hao laughed. “I want yours! And not just yours, I’ll be purchasing information through some other channels as well. Give me the real stuff! It doesn’t matter if it’s not complete, but I’ll dismantle you brick by brick if you give me anything fake!

“Is peak Nova supposed to be impressive? Or do you think that the metamorphosis expert on the sub-second floor is strong? Or is the one at the door right now supposed to be good enough? Do you not want to do business anymore?”

“Give it to him!” came a soft chuckle from outside the door. “One hundred thousand mysterious power stones!”

“That’s one drop of Water of Life, isn’t it?” Li Hao grinned. “But your information has to be worth this price! If not, I may not be able to do anything to you, but I happen to know a few lunatics—ones who can unseal themselves. They’re the equivalent of roughly three or four Arcanus, which probably still won’t have an effect on you, but it’ll be fun!”

“Don’t worry, Commander Li,” the man outside the door continued to laugh. “It will be worth the price!”

“That’s good!” Li Hao laughed and looked at the manager. “Your boss has spoken, so get on with it! You drag your heels in everything you do. I’d wanted to hire you as my manager because you’re pretty—being paid by the government is nice and stable. But now... forget it!”

The manager smiled awkwardly. What kind of joke was this? This fellow was crazy! She didn’t dare say anything else and quickly left.

Moments later, she returned and handed a jade slip to Li Hao. “This is an ancient civilization—”

“I know!” Li Hao said faintly. “I’m not an ignorant bumpkin. I know more about these things than you do. I’ve even seen plant spirits, monsters and beasts, and nearly dead generals of the ancient civilization. Have you? I’ve seen powerhouses that can kill Arcanus with a single breath, have you? And you want to brag to me... Get in line!”

“.....” The manager didn’t dare speak anymore; her heart pounded fiercely from what she’d heard. Was that true? It might be! After all, Li Hao had once used a core origin talisman.

The young man remained where he was and examined the contents of the slip that he’d been given. He hadn’t paid yet, and would not pay if he felt that the contents weren’t worth the price. If these people wanted to force payment from his hands... Heh, they could try.

The staff didn’t stop him from looking over the wares. Perhaps they were astonished by Li Hao’s brazen response, or perhaps they were very confident in their wares.

Chapter 640: Running Away In the Night (I)

“You guys are trying to pull the wool over my eyes.” Li Hao frowned after flipping through the material. “The Ministry of Finance is powerful beyond compare, but they only have two metamorphosis experts that they can call on? Bullshit! The Xus had scores of metamorphosis experts under their command—the Heaven, Earth, Black, and Yellow Generals, as well as Xu Qing himself and Red Beard. His old man’s also an Arcanus. You’re telling me that the Lius only have two metamorphosis experts?”

“The vice ministers of the Ministry of Finance are members of the state and cannot be called upon to fight,” explained the manager. “The Lius will certainly have bodyguards in the dark, but just like the Xus, they are all in the ruins and won’t come out now.

“The only ones they can mobilize are the two that are respectively in the Four Seas Company and Skystar Colosseum. They might also hire help from Celestial or utilize highly destructive weapons such as energy bombs.”

“Do you guys sell energy bombs?” Li Hao nodded after some thought. “How much are you selling them for?”

“Three hundred thousand stones...”

“Heh!” Li Hao snorted. Go rob a bank, why don’t you? What a joke! I wouldn’t be able to loot that much treasure even if I blew up a metamorphosis expert. Do you think everyone is Xu Qing?

He flicked out a drop of Water of Life. “This information is barely worth this price, it’s too expensive! I may not make this back even if I kill a metamorphosis expert!”

The manager smiled apologetically and didn’t say anything. She put away the droplet with some surprise. The young man really was willing to pay up! She recalled how Li Hao had previously behaved like a glutton and ravenously took in everything in front of him. He was a difficult fellow to define.

“Are you guys in the business of being bodyguards?” Li Hao stretched lazily.

“What?”

“Do you offer the services of metamorphosis experts as bodyguards?”

“Ah... we really don’t... but some of our initial Novas might be willing to do so. They will be expensive, however...”

“Forget it, that’s too weak!”

The manager was speechless. Were Novas weak? Wasn’t Li Hao a Nova himself? Her headache intensified upon seeing the young man linger after the conclusion of their transaction. “Commander Li, do you... have other business at hand?”

“I’m a big spender, don’t you understand?”

“.....” Fuck you!

The manager who'd hosted countless guests and almost never lost her temper fully vented her fury to herself. Show some self respect, will you?!

Each set of cutlery was very expensive! They were forged out of high grade mysterious power stones; each set was worth at least two thousand stones! How dare the kid demand set after set?!

As much as she cursed to herself, she fetched another set upon further thought. Forget it! A drop of Water of Life did indeed make him a VIP. As priceless as the cutlery was, a gift was a gift. It was more like an offering to get this plague off their grounds.

Another set of cutlery soon arrived, Li Hao received it with a wide beam. He could ask the little tree for more Water of Life at ten thousand stones a drop. He had obtained two sets of cutlery worth four thousand stones each and considering the massive meal he'd just enjoyed... It wasn't much of a loss.

Before he left, he pulled greatly on the mysterious power stones at the front door. He absorbed so much energy that they dimmed.

The manager nearly collapsed when the young man left. She was also a little paranoid, deathly afraid that Li Hao would appear behind her again. Thank goodness there was no one there this time!

It wasn't long before an attendant from upstairs told her that the private room Li Hao had just been in was fine, but everything made out of mysterious power stones in that room was now empty decoration!

They'd been drained of all of their energy!

“What an asshole!” she couldn’t help but curse out loud.

.....

Li Hao had no idea why he was being cursed—he would be quite aggrieved if he knew. It wasn’t him, it was all Panther! The dog was quite adept at absorbing energy and it’d entertained itself as the humans ate. Throughout the course of its play, it devoured all of the energy within the private room. Li Hao was certainly not going to take the fall for this.

The young man did not return to Night Watcher headquarters. He smiled in the dim light of the moon, still wearing his top hat and holding the staff.

“Troop Leader Southern First, come in when you hear this!”

.....

Within the palace.

“Fucking hell!” He Yong bounced up with loud cruises. “He’s here and in trouble, which is why he’s calling for me! He ran away from me faster than anyone when he was cultivating, that little bastard...”

He’d already received word of what’d happened. Was Li Hao calling on him to fight? I’m afraid of dying!

He didn’t really dare fight the Ministry of Finance, but neither could he withstand the temptation of sword energy. After brief struggle, he responded, “Where are you?”

“At the entrance of the Nine Dragons Pavilion. I’ll wait here for you. I miss you, martial uncle!”

“.....” He Yong was silent for a few brief moments before he let loose with every swear word in his vocabulary. Having gotten that out of his system, he walked outside. You should strive to be a better person, Li Hao!

.....

Li Hao quite missed He Yong as it'd been quite a while. He grinned from ear to ear when he saw Southern Fist again.

“Good evening, martial uncle!”

I'm your martial uncle when you need my help and “Soldier Southern Fist” when you don't, He Yong grumbled. His beard was scrunched up from the force of his expression.

“You've got some nerve!” he sneered. Of all times to visit the royal city, the kid chose this time. He was getting much cockier!

“It has nothing to do with nerve.” Li Hao smiled radiantly. “It's just that as a Silver Moon martial master, I should travel the land and wield my sword in the most remote corners of the world. I seek out the days of the veteran martial masters and will sweep through the supernaturals of our time, glorifying the name of Silver Moon martial masters again!”

“That's a big talk you're talking!” He Yong looked around. “The Nine Dragons Pavilion sits at the end of the Avenues of the Nine Ministries. Those who dare talk like this outside the palace usually don't meet with good ends.”

“That's what the royal family thought eighty years ago.” Li Hao was completely unconcerned. “But today, the nine ministries encircle them. Martial uncle, nothing is impossible for a determined mind.”

He Yong burst out laughing. He himself was arrogant, but there was shrewdness hidden within his arrogance. The first time he met Li Hao, he'd found the young man to be cautious and prudent. The circumstances were a very different sight now, possibly due to the young man's increase in strength. Whether it was that or other reasons, He Yong didn't care. This kind of tone quite suited the Silver Moon martial master style.

"Shall we grab a drink?"

"Let's do that!" Li Hao nodded. He'd drank tea with Hou Xiaochen; He Yong naturally meant alcohol. That was just as well.

"You should change your clothes," He Yong said as they walked. "They're so ugly and present too big of a target. Everyone will know that you dress weirdly. Do you want to be kept under watch everywhere you go?"

Li Hao smiled and waved away his conspicuous top hat. The staff in his hand turned into a bracelet that looped around his forearm.

"Have you fully mastered it?" He Yong was surprised. Had the lad refined his heritage weapon?

"No." Li Hao shook his head. The little sword had just turned easier to manipulate with the last weapon soul it absorbed.

"Where's Panther?"

"Arf!" a puppy barked from a corner. He Yong furrowed his brows at it.

"No one... will believe that this is the Golden Hair Hunting Dog of the Divine Masters Ranking."

“Divine Masters Ranking?”

“Have you not looked at it?”

“No.”

“You can take a look. Although it may not be accurate, it will familiarize you with the powerhouses of the central region that are below thirty years old.”

“Not interested.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve long surpassed that.” Li Hao pointed to the horizon with an aloof look. “My goal now is those people—the ministers of the nine ministries and their old ministers, antique old farts, and existences from the ancient civilization. Even if my strength is not up to par at the moment, my ambitions soar to the heavens! As for whether or not my destiny is sufficient for the task... that depends on my luck! I will not walk far if my ambitions are not great enough. I wish to walk further!”

He Yong looked at Li Hao again in an astonished light. It’d only been a month since they parted ways in Silver Moon, but the young man had undergone great changes since then. Perhaps it was because he’d led people against Xu Qing, or perhaps it was because he’d seen more of the world.

He Yong knew that Li Hao had achieved many mighty deeds after his departure. When he left, the young man could only fight mid Novas. And now, he’d even killed a metamorphosis expert. Even though there were various reasons and luck at play for this accomplishment, that was a metamorphosis expert nonetheless.

In one short month, Li Hao had experienced the battle of White Shark, North Sea, and Calm Borders... Those were three large-scale conflicts in which he’d killed multiple Novas. As a Silver

Moon martial master, those three battles had resulted in heaven-shattering changes for Li Hao. Thus, He Yong no longer had many advantages when it came to the young man.

He wasn't even a match for Li Hao if he didn't unseal himself. In fact, he only barely triumphed over the metamorphosis level if he didn't unseal himself. As for Arcanus... he was far from being able to fight that level.

In Ash Mountain, he'd only been able to suppress one major monster spirit when he unsealed himself. He hadn't been able to take on multiple like Hong Yitang had been able to.