

Star Gate 771

Chapter 771: Incredible (III)

“Very good, then we’ll have to trouble the Sky Roc King. Once this succeeds, we’ll all sell some Water of Life at a low price to the king!”

Amusement appeared in the bird’s eyes. Did they think it was that careless?

That wasn’t the truth; it was simply confident that its defenses wouldn’t be easily pierced through. It was also a bird with extreme speed—nothing would happen to it!

What it wanted was a promise like Qian Wanhao had just given. It barreled out of the defensive circle and vanished in the blink of an eye. It was enormous, but it was so fast that the group couldn’t see its shadow.

Too fast!

Li Hao was ready to take action when he blinked with astonishment. Fucking hell! Where did this fool come from to wreck his plans? It was just as his teacher said, plans were useless when the strong fought. Everything was a function of adjusting to the circumstances. Change easily rendered all arrangements null and void.

I had it all perfectly planned out...

His ideas were suddenly in shambles! Li Hao set his jaw with some fury. A red light flashed through his eyes, looking onto the Sky Roc King hurtling through the sky. It was so fast that its sharp claws were very close to the young man. Li Hao glared at it with irritation.

“Are all monster spirits this idiotic??”

A sword manifested in the air and three written characters hovered in the void in an unexpected fashion. Across the way, Qian Wanhao blinked. The ultimate art of Tranquil Star? It was... very strong, but only relatively speaking. It was useless against true powerhouses as modern times were different from when the method was conceived.

“Lifeless!” The characters vanished into the sword. Li Hao struck!

Fire, water, wind, and thunder erupted soundlessly. Four elements exploded in the blink of an eye, alongside a domineering aura!

The sword traveled so quickly that the Sky Roc King didn’t sense any energy ripples, but it did register the threat of death. The look in its eyes shifted and a white bone appeared in front of it. Indeed, a bone!

It was from the skeleton of the ancient monster spirit and durable beyond compare. This was one of the reasons why the bird king was so confident. Its speed was incredible, as were the bone’s defensive capabilities. It whisked out the bone even faster than it was traveling, but Li Hao vanished in the next instant. A prodigious threat emanated over his head.

Clang!

The sky roc screeched a metallic cry. Before the powerhouses of the four directions could react, Li Hao flashed by like a shadow and pierced through the massive golden head with his sword!

He vanished; when he reappeared, he was already slamming his sword down on the people in front of him.

“Kill!!” roared the young man. Hong Yitang and the others immediately appeared and made their moves as well. Light faded away from the Sky Roc King’s eyes as its ponderous body slammed to the ground. A dog opened its mouth and swallowed the enormous monster spirit king whole; because the latter was dead!

Panther had been preparing to go against its own kind. Who would've thought that something would be wrong with this bird's brain and it'd be the first to run out! Li Hao ran it through the head with one stroke. It was no use being strong if one's intelligence was zero!

The Sky Roc King was very strong—a three element Arcanus and the indomitable monster spirit body, plus the bone of a major monster spirit as a shield... Regular people truly wouldn't have been able to kill it. There weren't many in the world who could manage the deed.

However, their ranks did not include Li Hao with Stellaris.

A four element Arcanus was much stronger than a three element, not to mention that Stellaris was indestructible. It was only that Li Hao hadn't brought his weapon down on the ancient bone, or that would've split as well!

Panther morphed into a golden dog and swallowed the bird king with a single gulp. It ran to the rear instead of killing people. A massive gobble later saw countless mysterious power stones stream into its gut.

These items had to be stowed as well. If not, something unexpected might happen. Panther's intuition told it that the stones could not remain here. Its senses showed that something seemed to have sucked out some of the energy out of the stones.

There were so many stones here that the others didn't sense anything, but Panther was exceedingly sensitive to energy. It had a hunch that something may truly awaken in this place if the situation continued—now that would be terrifying!

Therefore, Panther did not choose to kill people in this moment. Its strength was decent, but those in the battlefield were enough. It wanted to take all of the mysterious power stones with it. However much it was, every little bit counted. Being too late to arrive might mean that nothing was left.

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Across the way.

Qian Wanhao and the rest simply saw the scene flash before their eyes before the Sky Roc King disappeared, Li Hao struck, disappeared, and then reappeared again. The Sky Roc King, one of the overlords of the seven divine mountains, was dead when the dust settled!

Qian Wanhao was highly experienced and ready in his age. “Throw your items!” he shouted.

Those who reacted fast enough threw out their supernatural and core origin talismans, even large sums of supernatural bombs. At least two dozen potent sources of strength exploded in the blink of an eye.

Li Hao, however, disappeared as thunder and lightning! Fire, water, wind, and thunder circulated over his sword. He struck and shattered the defensive dome created by the four mirror fragments. As Qian Wanhao and the rest gaped with shock, a man appeared in front of them—Hong Yitang, not Li Hao!

“Sky turns!”

A ‘sword’ character appeared with the light of thunder, fire, earth, and metal sparkling around it. Heaven and earth overturned as the world shifted beneath everyone’s feet. Their footing grew unstable as Hong Yitang disappeared from view.

Within the crowd, the Stable Mountain Prince stared dumbly at the hole in his chest and raised his head to look at Earthturner Sword. This was just like what his younger brother had experienced! Hong Yitang had done the same that day, running through the Steppe Prince’s chest with a single stroke. That marked the end of the glorious prince who’d dominated the age, and he repeated his actions today!

Qian Wanhao had said that everyone would be safer together—the prince very much agreed with the notion. He wasn’t even standing at the very front, but once that stroke overturned heaven and

earth, he'd been flipped upside down and suddenly appeared in the very front of the group. It's like he'd run to his death!

The Stable Mountain Prince didn't have time to deploy his mighty strength before being run straight through. He stared dumbly ahead, life fading away from his eyes. Was this what his younger brother had felt before his death? Perhaps I really shouldn't have come today...

"Impossible..." Qian Wanhao couldn't believe his eyes. Roaring, he let loose with four elements. A weapon that looked like a gold coin appeared in his hand and blocked Li Hao's swing with a loud crash.

BOOM!

Qian Wanhao took a step back, Li Hao stumbled a small step back. Rumble echoed behind them as explosions detonated continuously! Hou Xiaochen and Sky Sword shouted, erupting with force and rushing out. When the dust cleared, they saw that Li Hao had forced back Qian Wanhao with one blow and Earthturner Sword killed the Stable Mountain Prince with one stroke!

The two pulled up short, what was going on here? Had two premier powerhouses died, just like that? They were yet to finish collecting their senses when Qian Wanhao roared, "Please aid us, plant spirits!"

He flung out a storage ring that exploded—an action followed by many others. Everything was happening too quickly! Two on their side were dead before they even knew what happened!

As storage ring after storage ring exploded, mental strength flooded the premises. Shadowy forms filled the air. There was a rose, a massive willow tree, a sunflower, a bush of thistles or brambles, and something that looked like a coconut tree.

Five plant spirits were on the scene. Their transparent roots extended into the world, seeming to both be deploying abilities and simply absorbing energy from the surroundings.

The plant spirits weren't in a hurry to take action. "It's nice to get a breath of fresh air since we're here." Mental ripples traveled through the air. "Why hide away and be reluctant to expend this bit of core origin power..."

"That's true!" Laughter rang through the air as a redwood tree and another massive tree emerged. That made for seven plant spirits present, hailing from the nine ministries apart from the Inspectorate and Finance. Although Mu Hai wasn't present from Internal Affairs, he still sent someone with a replica of his ministry's plant spirit.

Seven terrifying beings filled the air with domineering presences, instantly surpassing the late Sky Roc King and even the four element Qian Wanhao. The man heaved a sigh of relief!

They'd truly invested a great deal to kill Li Hao—seven plant spirits! These plant spirits were just core origin replicas, with some not even worthy of being called replicas since they were so weak. Each one of them, however, possessed the strength of five elements. Any one of them was an invincible existence in this day and age. Seven had appeared all at once!

Even Qian Wanhao felt that they were using a butcher's knife for cows to kill chickens. But thankfully they'd overestimated Li Hao, resulting in such a thorough mobilization of their resources. They might truly have suffered some losses otherwise. The kid was terrifying! Both he and Hong Yitang were four element Arcanus and they could still use the auras of a martial master. That was unbelievable!

Qian Wanhao relaxed with the assurance of victory.

Within the crowd, Hu Mingfa from the Ministry of the Judiciary shouted, "Li Hao, do you think you're still in the outside world? You've hidden yourself well, but so what of it?"

A four element Arcanus!

No one had imagined that possibility; they thought he was a three element at most. But here he was, much stronger than he anticipated. This rate of improvement was horrifying!

Various expressions flickered rapidly through the faces of the powerhouses here to kill Li Hao. The lord of Buddha Mountain, in particular, looked on gravely. He was here for revenge, but who knew that this would be what awaits them? Thank goodness they were fully prepared, or they would've truly lost everything.

The expedition was so strong, but Li Hao's group had killed two of theirs right beneath their noses!

Chapter 772: Incredible (IV)

Li Hao and Hong Yitang swiftly retreated. In the air, seven plant spirits covered the earth and sky. The mental strength churned through the vicinity—just their presences alone were sufficient to force those beneath Arcanus to their knees.

The young man watched with a grave look. These were seven premier Arcanus, truly elite powerhouses. Each of them felt stronger than him, but he was no ordinary four element Arcanus. Were ancient plant spirits with only a little bit of core origin really this strong? Could the little tree truly take them all by itself?

Even Li Hao found his confidence faltering in this moment. He was just hesitant, not afraid. He wondered if he should try coalescing his fifth element. The young man wasn't ready to pin his hopes on the little tree.

"The heir of the Sword Sovereign?"

"He is... so weak. How is he worthy of being the heir?"

"Don't say that, it's been endless millennia since the Sword Sovereign disappeared. One hundred thousand years have elapsed since New Martial, haven't there?"

"Just about, almost..."

“Who knows how many generations it’s been? There is no bloodline to speak of. It’s amazing that any heritage has been passed on.” The plant spirits chattered leisurely to each other, as if there was nothing to worry about.

Indeed, there was nothing to worry about since they were invincible in this era. Even if their replicas only commanded one tenth of their strength—and perhaps not even that—it was sufficient to eliminate the human and his group.

The young man watched, unfazed. He was just about to test their strength when the little tree’s voice sounded in his ear. “Let me, but I have a favor to ask... Their core origin is very suited for my nourishment after they are dead. I don’t want the mysterious power stones, can you give me all of their core origin instead?”

That was seven plant replicas! The little tree was trembling from excitement. Its decision had proven to be correct! Sending half of its core origin with Li Hao had been the right choice to make. The human was such a troublemaker, but he created the perfect trouble. The little tree wouldn’t be a match for a single one of them if they were on plant spirit territory, to say nothing of all seven.

But here, there were only the core origin replicas of the seven plant spirits. There was very little core origin in these replicas, whereas the little tree had sunk half of its core origin in its replica. As they said, only when one went through the pain of investment was there a harvest.

“Alright!” Li Hao agreed without even thinking about it.

A little tree abruptly appeared in the air as soon as he agreed. It grew with the wind, resembling a willow tree, but also a poplar tree. It enlarged with the breeze, causing the seven conversing plant spirits to jerk with astonishment.

Thousands of branches stabbed into the void as a domineering presence rose!

BOOM!

“Who are you?!” shrieks rang out. The little tree didn’t answer and continued to send its branches through the air.

BAM!

Enormous explosions shook the world. Blood streamed out of the seven orifices of the weaklings that were present to round out the expedition numbers. They emitted ghastly screams before their heads exploded!

Li Hao’s quartet also stepped back with shock! Qian Wanhao couldn’t believe his eyes!

“How... is this possible...”

The plant spirits of Silver Moon couldn’t possibly awaken! Silver Moon’s plant spirits were very strong and weren’t the only ones that needed energy in the province. The ruins required significant quantities as well, which resulted in the plant spirits not absorbing enough in the first awakening. Therefore, the nine ministries had guessed that there was a ninety-nine percent chance that Li Hao didn’t possess a plant spirit replica.

It wouldn’t be too powerful even if he did. The plant spirits wouldn’t sever too much of their core origin since they’d just awoken. But... somehow... this moment showed a different reality. It was clear to see that the seven plant spirits in the air were somewhat intangible and illusory, but the little tree was more solid.

Another loud explosion sounded as Qian Wanhao grappled with his shock. The little tree’s branches had entwined around the rose. The latter shook with fury and unwillingness to accept its fate!

“You are not a plant of New Martial, how dare you kill my replica! When I fully reawaken...” Its mental ripples shifted violently. It could tell that the opponent wasn’t from New Martial, it was too inexperienced!

This was a plant spirit from a later age, one exceedingly bold as it might have severed a significant portion of its core origin for its replica! It would be either crippled or dead if it lost this replica. How did Li Hao have such an equally crazed plant spirit by its side? Could plant spirits be such lunatics as well?!

The little tree did respond, it crushed the rose shadow out of existence with a dull roar!

There was suddenly one less plant spirit.

The bush of bristles and thorns shook with shock. “What a bold latter day descendant. You just set foot into Apex, but you dare sever half of your core origin...”

“Your death is guaranteed once our main bodies sense that you’ve destroyed our replicas!” The other plant spirits erupted with formidable strength. Several great daos intertwined in the void with daunting momentum!

“What a bunch of weeds,” came the little tree’s mental ripples. “How dare the likes of you dismiss me?”

An image of a palace shaped like a cat manifested in the air! It was just a shadow, but it drew immediate, stark fear from the plant spirits.

“The imperial palace?!”

BOOM!

The image descended with finality, crushing the bush out of existence.

“An envoy of the imperial palace... No... that’s impossible! The imperial palace has vanished and there is none in Silver Moon...” A plant spirit gibbered with fear! How was there an imperial palace here?!

The master of the imperial palace wasn’t a regular emperor—it was one simply referred to as the Imperial Majesty, not so-and-so emperor or so-and-so highness. There was only one Imperial Majesty!

That one was one who could not be described because it was said that its powers of perception exceeded that of the ancient Human King’s. Anyone who mentioned its name would be sensed. It was so terrifying that it could snuff out your soul from countless spacetimes away!

No one dared mention its name, it was an existence more horrifying than the Eternal Sword Sovereign...

“The imperial palace always exists! My kind safeguards the palace!” the little tree declared brusquely. Who did these weeds think they were patronizing?! So what if their main bodies awoke? It couldn’t stand up to them, but they would first need to have a chance to tell their main bodies what had happened!

BOOM!

The imperial palace suppressed the area! Its presence was so immense that it was suffocating. The barest corner of the imperial palace that was on display was just a projection, a manifestation of core origin. All the same, it was unfathomably strong.

KABOOM!

Another plant spirit exploded. The survivors howled with indignity and countless branches shot through the void, aimed at the little tree. They would all die if this continued!

The little tree had portioned out so much core origin that its replica was second to only Apexes. It was further more horrifying since it was armed with a projection of the imperial palace! At the same time, the little tree wasn't strong, so it was a bit of a stretch for it to be manipulating this corner of the palace.

In that case, the attackers stood a chance!

“What are you standing around for, Qian Wanhao?? Attack! Kill them! Help us!!” roared a big tree shadow.

This finally jerked the rest out of their reverie. They stared at Li Hao's quartet—in fact, both sides had been stunned by the plant spirits and forgotten to attack each other. Now that they met each other's eyes, Qian Wanhao shouted, “Kill them! Use everything we've got or don't think of making it out alive!”

Orange Moon was likewise stunned in the crowd. So this was the case! This was why Li Hao was so confident! He had a replica of a plant spirit who'd severed a great portion of its core origin. It wielded the strength of a six, seven element Arcanus!

Five elements were the peak of Arcanus. When one reached six elements, that made one a core origin cultivator in the ancient civilization, one who set foot on the path of core origin dao. Seven elements absolutely rivaled an Apex.

I see! Orange Moon understood. She knew Li Hao's trump card now. A scarlet shadow slowly floated upward in her body and a certain presence strengthened inexorably. Orange Moon's face drained of color and she furiously swallowed Water of Life. A disquieting shadow appeared on her face—somewhat maniacal, somewhat calm.

Li Hao, it's your doom today!

Li Hao was about to attack anew when he suddenly stopped and looked at Orange Moon. His expression stilled, then slowly transformed to fury and rage!

Was that... Zhang Yuan?

Was it?

No... there was more than one face there! A black shadow was changing over Orange Moon's face as numerous faces flashed through the darkness. He even... saw his parents' faces!

Li Hao closed his eyes. There was only madness in them when he opened his eyes again!

Ying Hongyue! I'm going to kill you!

“DIE!!” A sword pierced through the firmament, vaporizing the Celestial powerhouse that was in front of him. “Martial Uncle Hong, help me hold off the others! I'm going to kill her!”

His presence raged out of control! A character spontaneously formed—‘metal’—and erupted with power!

RUMBLE!!

Li Hao swallowed a dozen drops of Water of Life. He took more when it proved not enough!

A large quantity of Water of Life surged into his body. It continued to break, but he could maintain it for now. The four characters of ‘water’, ‘fire’, ‘metal’, and ‘exterminate’ floated to the fore. The power of five elements flared as Li Hao stalked toward Orange Moon with sword in hand.

Her face gradually solidified into a person, a familiar face.

“Ah Hao, my best friend!”

Chapter 773: Great Terror (I)

The familiar voice and face momentarily jerked Li Hao out of his murderous rage. A tremendous explosion sounded like a clap of thunder, prompting a mouthful of blood from the young man! It was like his mind intent had detonated!

A large mallet had appeared in Orange Moon’s hands—the mallet of the Hongs!

A surge of mental killing intent flared from the weapon. It only needed to swing through the air to destroy Li Hao’s mental strength!

“Ah Hao,” ’Zhang Yuan’ smiled. “The eight families should be one. Only when we are one are we the true eight families. Come join me!”

Li Hao opened his eyes and looked straight ahead of him.

“You... are not Little Yuan!” He smiled and shook his head with some regret and pity. “But thank you for letting me see you again.”

It was a contradictory statement. A longsword smashed through the void and stabbed forward. Supernatural abilities blazed as characters vanished, then reappeared.

KABOOM!

An explosion rang through heaven and earth as Stellaris and the mallet of the Hongs collided. Strong aftershocks rippled in all directions and shook even the plant spirits battling in the air! Li Hao vanished like a gust of wind—the Windchaser Boots!

When he reappeared, he struck with his sword!

“Ying Hongyue, you used the lingering mental strength of my friend to create a scarlet shadow puppet! I’ll kill you, I will! Just you wait!” Li Hao howled at the skies. He could tell what this was—a scarlet shadow!

It was a scarlet shadow so strong that it possessed its own consciousness. Who knew how many people it’d devoured? Ying Hongyue must have retrieved all of the scarlet shadows that he’d deployed. He’d killed all of his people who carried a scarlet shadow on them!

The scarlet shadow that Li Hao faced was exceedingly strong and knew the secret arts of martial dao since it possessed Orange Moon. When Li Hao approached it with his sword, it brought down the mallet like it was separating the earth from the sky!

This was Ying Hongyue’s trump card for this expedition and why everyone thought that Orange Moon was dangerous. All of his scarlet shadows were concentrated on her and she wielded one of the weapons of the eight families. Her battle strength was almost a six element Arcanus!

Not even the little tree would be able to easily defeat a foe of this level. After all, it was just a replica and core origin was an exhaustible resource. So long as the scarlet shadow could sustain itself longer than the little tree, that would make it difficult for the little tree to triumph. Not to mention, that would create an opening for the remaining four plant spirits to strike back.

Hong Yitang and the rest chose this moment to strike!

BOOM!

Hong Yitang’s sword swept through the void, spinning the world in the eyes of Qian Wanhao and his people. When they shook their heads clear, they were surrounded by Li Hao’s three companions!

Hou Xiaochen flared his presence and even showed signs of briefly eclipsing Sky Sword. Supernatural energy undulated around him as he threatened to rip through the void with a spear jab!

It was like they'd returned to the battle of the North Sea. Earthturner Sword drew a circle with his sword and focused on defense.

"Earth aura!" Another stroke turned the ground into a wall that surrounded everyone. The Broken Will Spear and Sky Sword erupted against their foes!

KABOOM!

Heaven and earth split apart!

"Kill!!" Qian Wanhao howled with disbelief. A four element Arcanus such as he would be nearly invincible on the ground, but here, even plant spirits were stronger than him.

Li Hao was stronger than him, Orange Moon was stronger, and even Earthturner Sword was stronger. Hou Xiaochen seemed to have also thrown all caution to the wind as his Broken Will Spear contained massive traces of mysterious power. He seemed to be taking a page from the books of Li Hao and the rest and unsealing himself with careless abandon.

Qian Wanhao was a four element Arcanus! But he was completely hemmed in! Next to him, golden light sparkled over the lord of Buddha Mountain as he shouted angrily and blocked Sky Sword with a punch.

The Fortune King was as if an envoy from hell. He seemed to summon countless ghosts into the world with a wave of his hand. All of them charged the three, but Hong Yitang swept them aside with a single sword stroke and evaporated them all!

They were only three, but they fought as if an army of thousands!

Sky Sword's broadsword swung ponderously through the air, blazing with resplendent radiance and following each stroke with another stroke. But just as he found Li Hao lacking back in the day, it was Hong Yitang who dismissed him today.

“Brother Sky Sword, you... lack battle strength!”

Sky Sword's expression was remote as he remained expressionless. Hong Yitang leveraged his immense battle strength to imprison and be on guard against their opponents. Sky Sword and Hou Xiaochen were in charge of offense. Hou Xiaochen was engaged with Qian Wanhao, Sky Sword focused on the rest. But at the moment, just the lord of Buddha Mountain was sufficient to block his sword!

This was unacceptable to the proud Sky Sword. While Li Hao had said to stop the rest, his comrades intended to kill them! Not only were they going to eliminate the attackers, but they were going to help the little tree and Li Hao. That was why they fought, not merely to just impede strong foes. That did not fit who they were!

Sky Sword glowered darkly and flicked a glance at Hong Yitang. “Screw your defense!” He was so incensed that he departed from his usual composed, genteel demeanor. Since when did Silver Moon martial masters focus on defense??

Hong Yitang caught his drift and smiled, swinging his sword through the air. “Earth shakes!”

“Sky turns!” Sky Sword howled with rage.

BOOM!

The heavens and skies truly overturned in this moment. The Broken Will Spear ripped through the firmament, accompanied by coughs. This seemed to be Sickly's usual condition. He reaped a life every time he took action, but his moves always came with coughing. Hence, he was called Sickly.

The three had almost never fought together before, but the world shook itself upside down and mental strength ruptured on this rare occasion of coordination.

“AHHH!!” Ghastly shrieks resounded as the weaker ones among the attackers felt their minds ripped apart. They didn’t have time to react before two rays of sword intent pierced through everything!

The vice ministers on the expedition stared incredulously at the floor before falling apart as chunks of bloody flesh.

Dead! In the face of a strong combined offensive, all of the vice ministers were obliterated by the sky and earth turning swords!

Bloody marks streaked down Qian Wanhao’s face as he gaped with shock and incomprehension. He spat out a mouthful of blood, summoning a large character.

“Suppress!” A domineering aura manifested with his shout, as if it would suppress everything beneath the heavens. His actions were copied by the other three ministers, but they sent their blood into the massive character already on the scene instead of coalescing their own.

Suppress!

This was an ancient heritage, the strongest of Tranquil Star’s ultimate arts. It could suppress all enemies!

However, they were no longer the powerhouses of yesteryear, and this was no longer an age of core origin. Hong Yitang grunted dismissively when the character appeared and materialized his own ‘sword’ character. It erupted with scintillating radiance, bringing forth the thunder, fire, earth, and metal attributes.

Not only that, but countless drops of Water of Life exploded within Hong Yitang’s body. A new wood intent wafted out.

“Five elements...” Qian Wanhao’s eyes widened with dismay.

Boom!

The sword character ripped through the void, shredding the 'suppress' character! Its annihilation inflicted grave wounds on the four ministers. The Broken Will Spear tore through the void as a flaming phoenix emerged. It was so fast that it seemed to spontaneously pulverize something!

The Fortune King was in the middle of summoning and plotting his next moves when the look in his eyes dimmed. He raised his head with effort and looked at the quiet fellow who hadn't said a single word. His lips parted.

Why me? It's the four ministers stopping you guys right now and I'm hiding in the back. Why choose me?

Hou Xiaochen coughed, the sound like a peal of death. He smiled faintly and gripped his spear more tightly, the will of the Broken Will Spear burning fiercely on it. Fire and metal energy exploded from his body with an air of cool composure.

"You've killed too much and have an atmosphere of death around you. The Broken Will Spear naturally seeks out those who have blood on their hands!" he explained. It's not that I wanted to kill you, but my spear wanted to kill you!

"Hup!" Qian Wanhao grunted and punched back the 'sword' character. Though he was covered in blood, he led the three ministers, those from the City of Supernaturals, and the lord of Buddha Mountain in swift retreat. "Withdraw! We'll take shelter in the buildings first!"

He whirled around and ran!

Although their side held the overwhelming advantage in numbers, they couldn't even contend against the three in front of them, much less Li Hao and the little tree! He was a four element Arcanus reinforced by many three elements, but many of them were dead in the blink of an eye!

Too strong!

Sky Sword, Earthturner Sword, and Sickly alone were sufficient to rebuff them. This was unfathomable, yet also so real.

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At this moment.

A tremendous boom sounded from behind as sword intent billowed down from the skies, accompanied by a surge of killing intent. A muffled grunt sounded—Orange Moon steadily retreated, blood flowing from multiple injuries.

The mallet of the Hong in her hand glowed faintly, but it seemed to have been damaged. Cracks covered its surface; the scarlet shadow emanated a faint red hue to swiftly repair it. This was the bloodline of the Hong wielding the mallet of the Hong!

Li Hao advanced with Stellaris in hand.

“The sword of the Lis... restricts us?” ‘Zhang Yuan’ murmured incredulously. Indeed, the daunting scarlet shadow was repressed again and again when faced with the sword of the Lis. Even the mallet of the Hong seemed afraid of Stellaris. Its offensive was shattered repeatedly when brought up to attack.

Chapter 774: Great Terror (II)

Ying Hongyue had once employed the mighty mallet of the Hong and inflicted untold damage to ancient plant spirits. He was personally familiar with its immense capabilities, so he was confident in sending it with the scarlet shadow. This combination might not lose even when facing the little tree as the mallet served a similar function to the Broken Will Spear. Both could tear apart mental strength and core origin.

If the little tree's replica met the weapon in battle, it might come away very worse for the wear. Instead, the scarlet shadow had run into Li Hao. The young man glared coldly at his best friend. Did Ying Hongyue think this would make him hesitate?

No!

When the scarlet shadow took Zhang Yuan's form, all Li Hao could think about was how Little Yuan had wanted his best friend to flee when he was devoured by the scarlet shadow. He spent his last moments of life to warn Li Hao...

As his friend, Zhang Yuan would not kill him. He would only have Li Hao run so that the latter would be safe. Only Ying Hongyue would want to kill him!

"Kill!"

Lifeless sword intent destroyed everything. Supernatural abilities erupted with Li Hao's blow, fire and water exploded. Word characters circled the surroundings as if formations, raising explosive rumbles!

A series of sword techniques erupted as Li Hao moved swiftly like a ghost, bringing down blow after blow. Multiple Li Haos appeared amid a bewildering dazzle that disoriented onlookers. Fire sparked over one of the Li Haos, another overflowed with water, one appeared like thunder and lightning, a fourth rushed around like a storm, and a fifth emanated aureate light...

Numerous copies of the young man attacked as Stellaris swung again and again, never seeming to grow fatigued.

Clang clang clang!

Zhuang Huang continuously backed away, shock on his red face. Despite his incredible strength, he was being suppressed to the point where he could not return blow! The bloodline of the Hong in his body was fading away; the powerful family mallet could not bring about any safety for him.

“Don’t come near!” Li Hao shouted when he sensed that Sky Sword and the others wanted to help him. “Kill the plant spirits!”

The three vanished without further word. Boom! Fierce battle erupted in the sky again, more intense than before. Hong Yitang, Hou Xiaochen, and Sky Sword combined took on one plant spirit. That freed up the little tree to focus on the remaining three, which instantly helped it gain the advantage.

The corner of the imperial palace reappeared.

BOOM!

A plant spirit was instantly crushed to smithereens; the little tree dimmed slightly as well. The corner of the palace disappeared, but the battle was easier than before. The remaining three plant spirits despaired. Although they wouldn’t truly die in the ruins, the loss from this expedition was too great. They couldn’t even pass information back to their main bodies.

Crunch!

A clear snap came not from the sky, but on the ground. Something seemed to break when Li Hao stabbed his sword into the scarlet shadow! The little sword furiously absorbed the shadow’s power; the latter struggled violently.

“Ah Hao, it’s me... It’s me, Little Yuan!” The scarlet shadow trembled like a leaf as a powerful devouring force erupted from Stellaris. Li Hao looked silently at the scarlet shadow, at Little Yuan who swiftly transformed into his father’s face.

“Little Hao!” His father’s kind face was contorted with a grimace. “Are you attempting patricide?! You unfilial son!”

He morphed into Li Hao's mother next. "Ah Hao, why have you changed? You're so cruel... we're still alive, we're not dead! We're just trapped inside this monster... Ah Hao, are you going to kill us?"

A red light flashed through Li Hao's eyes! His eyes were bloodshot as they pierced through everything. All illusion, every bit of mental interference immediately broke apart! It was in this moment that he realized the functionality of his eyes. It penetrated all falsehood! It was a pair of eyes from the heavens, the true heavenly eye!

It wasn't until today that Li Hao fully understood what his eyes could be used for. Being able to determine a target's strength and assorted minutiae was just an added bonus. Its true purpose was to present the truth of all matters to him.

That might seem like a useless feature, but Li Hao knew that it might be what he needed the most. This moment was ample proof! Everything he saw was fake. The true situation was that Orange Moon was glaring resentfully at him. Li Hao suddenly understood why Ying Hongyue had sent her.

She was the Black Widow, the Black Spider! She was most able to see through a person's heart. The scarlet shadow was just a puppet used to confuse the mind. It was Orange Moon manipulating everything!

This character on the Record of Thirty-Six in Silver Moon may not be among the strongest, but the reason why she was part of the ranking was apparent to Li Hao today.

"Ah Hao..." Orange Moon was still wailing mournfully.

A pair of hands wrapped around her throat like a steel vice and squeezed with a deadly crunch!

"Are you done yet, Black Widow?" Li Hao had almost snapped her neck into two. He plunged his sword into her heart. The scarlet shadow flailed about wildly, but to no avail. The young man smiled. "Thank Ying Hongyue for me. The power of a scarlet shadow is sweet indeed. This is very good!"

Incredulity appeared on Orange Moon's face, as well as shock and despair. How was this possible?!

"You know what? I think you're the only one among the thirty-six who isn't worthy to be present on the ranking. You're such a bitch!" Li Hao rarely cursed at people in this manner, but he gave full vent to his emotions now. "So cheap!"

Crunch!

Sword intent flared as he flexed his hands with all of his strength. He outright snapped her neck, stabbed a hole through her heart, and pulverized her organs!

The scarlet shadow shrieked, vaporized as the little sword swallowed it whole. The mallet fell to the ground with a clang.

Li Hao picked it up and seized Orange Moon's storage ring before looking at the woman again. Without the previous illusions enshrouding her, she showed only a beguiling face to the world. Except, it was particularly contorted in its final moments.

There was bitterness and a refusal to accept this outcome. She'd come armed with a scarlet shadow and the mallet of the Hongs. In other words, she'd been invincible! She could pound the other to death even if she met a five element Arcanus.

Unfortunately for her, she encountered Li Hao.

Her methods to manipulate the human heart were immediately dismantled by his eyes. All of her capabilities were thoroughly suppressed by the young man. There was no room for her to bring her immense strength to bear.

BOOM!

The world shook from another massive explosion.

KABOOM!

The little tree had brought the imperial palace forward again in another usage of its greatest technique. Another plant spirit replica was obliterated, leaving two. Li Hao's longsword sailed through the air as five elements erupted with a screech!

WHAM!

Lightning danced out of clear skies as thunder boomed. The fading rose battling the three powerhouses abruptly shrieked as Stellaris stabbed into the void!

"AH!!" was the only sound before the void exploded with a dull roar!

The little tree ignored its low stamina when it saw the development. It seemed to wish to end its battle before Li Hao and the others arrived, so as to demonstrate its value. The imperial palace manifested again, causing a corresponding fading of the little tree. It ignored such consequences, bringing the palace down!

Li Hao watched with wide eyes. The little tree was indeed stronger than them in terms of absolute strength, but not to this degree. It was the image of the imperial palace that elevated it to unfathomable heights.

RUMBLE!

The final plant spirit replica flew part in pieces!

All seven plant spirit replicas were dead; a dense collection of core origin power wafted through the air. The little tree sent thousands of branches crisscrossing through the void. “Li Hao, I have great use for this power...”

“Please absorb all that you want, senior!” Li Hao nodded without a word. This was something they’d agreed on beforehand. One had to say, the little tree had been of such a great help in this battle. It’d suppressed seven plant spirits by itself! Li Hao wouldn’t have had such an easy time even if he’d been a six or seven element Arcanus, much less a five element one.

Hong Yitang and the others bore certain wounds on their bodies, particularly Hou Xiaochen. He didn’t mind the mysterious power emanating from his body. He swept a glance over Li Hao, then at Hong Yitang, coughing a few times to get the young man’s attention.

“Director Hou, I’ll explain when we get back!”

Hou Xiaochen nodded with satisfaction and dropped the subject. It was so nice dealing with smart people! He only needed to cough once before Li Hao understood.

Now was not the time to relax. Qian Wanhao had escaped with the rest. The campus was small with just four buildings to it, but Li Hao was on guard. This... was not an idyllic place. Panther suddenly ran in from the distance and closed its mouth on Li Hao’s arm, wanting to drag the young man away!

Li Hao blinked, then spun on his heel without another word. “Run!”

The others didn’t sense anything untoward, but subconsciously followed the young man’s instructions. Even the little tree halted halfway through its frenzied collection and attached itself to Li Hao.

Four humans, one dog, and one tree fled for the gates. Even if they couldn’t depart the ruins, they had to put some distance between themselves and this place. Something seemed to be awakening beneath the little lake that held the mysterious power stones in the back of school grounds.

Panther didn't know how to talk, or it would surely tell Li Hao that it'd only had time to collect half of the one hundred million stones. The remaining half had become empty shells in a short period of time!

Not only that, but ghastly shrieks traveled from the four buildings. A mental ripple swept the campus.

"All students are to assemble at the athletic field in one minute. Any who are late will be executed!"

Dismay crossed Li Hao's face and he turned to see that a terrifying existence had appeared on the field. He was about to make his getaway when the adorable puppet at the school gates, one that looked like a cat, slapped him back with a paw!

The powerful Li Hao bounced back and collapsed like a sack of potatoes. His injuries weren't severe, but the cat puppet said robotically, "The school has been sealed. Assemble at the field. No students are permitted to leave!"

Chapter 776: Examination (I)

"Report!" someone suddenly said from the City of Supernaturals contingent. "I have a fine of one hundred thousand. Does that mean I only need to face one puppet and defeat it to have my fine cleared? And I'll receive a reward instead?"

"Correct!"

One hundred thousand! Everyone looked at the speaker. That was a very low number. Of course, this likely had something to do with the level of destruction wreaked. Li Hao and his companions had damaged a lot of areas. On the other hand, Panther wasn't hit with a fine because it hadn't been part of the fighting at all. The little tree had destroyed the most and was levied with two million pieces of energy stones!

"Then I'll challenge the puppet!" the speaker was overjoyed. "Sir, can I choose to leave if my challenge is successful?"

“You may!” The Black Armor was suddenly amenable to everything. “The school is sealed, but if your challenge is successful, that means you have the strength to venture out from the grounds. You can naturally choose to leave them!”

The answer brought smiles to everyone’s faces! They’d conversed among themselves and knew that Li Hao’s quartet needed to face at least ten puppets. The speaker from the City of Supernaturals only needed to defeat one. If he succeeded, he could leave and spread the word!

Whether it was bringing more people in or taking up a position outside, the entire world would come to kill Li Hao once these happenings became public knowledge!

They would be safe then! Even if no one came, they could leave ahead of time.

“Then I choose the challenge!”

“Very well!”

The one from the City of Supernaturals put his guard up when a puppet manifested. He suddenly erupted with force and punched outward, as domineering as a god!

RUMBLE!

A massive collision sounded; the puppet’s movements moved slowly and it remained entirely unyielding after taking the blow head-on. It swung its fists in return!

Bam!

The man flew back, vomiting blood in his wake. Disbelief brimmed in his eyes—he was an Arcanus! The puppet was completely undamaged after that punch, and he was the one gravely injured after the puppet responded in kind!

“Your fine is doubled to two hundred thousand pieces!”

“Sir, I...” The man looked on in dismay. He was afraid too now and quickly looked at Qian Wanhao. Who traveled with several million pieces of mysterious power stones on them? The Black Armor really would kill them! What kind of hellish place was this? Wasn’t it a grade two ruin that Novas could survive in? Why was it so terrifying??

There were at least thirty puppets that they could see and an unknown amount more hidden in the shadows. Combined with the Black Armor... this ruin was absolutely horrifying! Could even legendary Apexes make it out, much less Novas?

Li Hao had been observing the situation, trying to draw whatever conclusions he could from it. These puppets didn’t seem to kill without reason or that punch would’ve killed the challenger. The puppets were unbelievable constructs!

Evenround Martial...

Perhaps the greatest threat wasn’t Qian Wanhao or their plant spirits, but the ruins themselves! No wonder the little tree had said that there was great terror here. Li Hao was quite resigned by their circumstances. Could he defeat the puppets or the Black Armor?

Fifty-five million stones... Regardless of whether or not he could afford it, wouldn’t it completely negate the purpose of this expedition if he did pay it off? And was their exit guaranteed if he paid?

Various thoughts floated through his mind.

“Does anyone else wish to attempt the challenge?” asked the Black Armor. The assembly paled at its sonorous voice.

Challenge? Who was it kidding?

One puppet had easily defeated an Arcanus and was wholly unscathed after it. That made it at least a five element Arcanus! That was one thing, the other was that the rest of them had fines of much more than one hundred thousand. Theirs exceeded one million!

Anyone who’d participated in the battle had such a fine on their heads. Only Hou Xiaochen’s fine was lower because his attacks primarily centered on mental strength. As such, his level of destruction had been much smaller.

Arcanus was a cultivation level that easily wreaked havoc. Qian Wanhao’s fine was one and a half million stones because he was a four element Arcanus! Since Li Hao and Hong Yitang utilized their abilities in the form of word characters, the destructive power they brought to bear wasn’t as great. It was all concentrated on their enemies, whereas Qian Wanhao’s abilities were scattered.

The little tree had fought in the air. Although its aftershocks were strong, the level of destruction was mediocre. Hence, its fine was two million. It was clear to see that the Black Armor was impartial. His penalties were based on personal responsibility.

Qian Wanhao despaired to think that his fine would double if he failed to defeat any one of fifteen puppets. That would be three million energy stones!

“Report...” he said with one final ray of hope.

“Speak!”

“If... if I do not have energy stones, can I trade in other items?”

“You can!” the Black Armor responded calmly. “Everything can be converted to energy stones at a martial university!”

Qian Wanhao fell silent, whereas Li Hao’s thoughts spun rapidly. “Report, we are not students...”

“Non-student trespassers in Evenround Martial will be executed with no exception!”

“We are students!” Li Hao immediately changed tack before the Black Armor finished speaking. Who is that walking suit of metal kidding? Execution with no exception? Here I was thinking if our treatment would be better if we weren’t students. I obviously was thinking too much.

“The puppets... are fashioned out of incomparable treasures. Why don’t I try challenging them and seeing if the Broken Will Spear can defeat them...” Hou Xiaochen transmitted. His fine was five hundred thousand stones. Doubling that was one million, which didn’t seem to be much of a difference.

Li Hao looked blankly at him. Are you serious? You’d be one against five! From defense alone, these puppets look to be part of the Apex cultivation level in the ancient civilization. They’re incredibly strong. I don’t think I’d be able to defeat them if I tried.

Could the little tree do so, armed with the imperial palace? It might! But it would have to fight twenty at once!

Don’t even think about it!

Its fine would double if even one puppet remained. It nearly broke Li Hao’s brain to think of a singular fine being four million.

There weren't many survivors standing in the field—Li Hao's quartet on one side, Qian Wanhao and three other ministers on the other. They were joined by the three from the City of Supernaturals and the lord of Buddha Mountain to make eight.

Twelve humans, one dog, one tree. The rest of the one hundred that'd entered were no more. The ruins would be sealed off for another five days—it'd only been half an hour thus far.

Indeed, half an hour.

The great battle had been over in the blink of an eye. How were they supposed to escape in the remaining time if nothing changed? They couldn't even play for time!

The twelve were very quiet. Should they pay the fine? How? Even the weakest among the City of Supernaturals needed to scrounge up two hundred thousand stones, which was two million modern stones. They were all Arcanus present and, as such, had consumed a great quantity of resources to reach their level.

"Report," Li Hao asked carefully when new inspiration struck. "How much can one drop of Water of Life be counted for?"

"Water of Life?"

"This!" Li Hao displayed one drop.

"Ah, that." The Black Armor took a look. "Five hundred pieces... It's difficult for plant spirits to cultivate, so we'll put a higher price on it."

The crowd paused. How much? Did we mishear? Five hundred pieces? That's five thousand mysterious power stones... and that's a generous price? Their fines reached the millions, but one drop of Water of Life was only good for five hundred drops?? This was a colossal joke!

Qian Wanhao's face was turning a putrid color. When he asked if other items could be traded in for the fine, he'd been thinking about the cache of Water of Life he had on him. Prior to the expedition, he sold everything he owned for fifty drops so that his chances of survival and stabilization of cultivation would be greater. This was to be his final ace, and it was worth three million stones!

Since he'd traded for more drops, his plant spirit had lowered its price to a more reasonable sixty thousand stones per drop. It was still high, but the value definitely hovered around three million. However, the Black Armor would buy it back for two hundred and fifty thousand modern stones? That was less than one tenth of the price!

Qian Wanhao slowly turned beet-red with indignation. Just... how much had the plant spirits saved for themselves??

The little tree played deaf and dumb, not daring to say a word. Five hundred pieces was a decent buyback price as it only needed three hundred stones for one drop. But now, its scheme had been uncovered by the Black Armor. The tree charged Li Hao ten thousand stones per drop!

The young man didn't mind the profit margin disparity—he was swiftly considering something and transmitted, “How many stones does Senior Tree need to coalesce one drop?”

“Um...”

“Don't worry, I'm just thinking maybe we can save a bit for the fine!”

Oh, that was true.

“Um... er... I would need four hundred pieces of energy stones!” The little tree didn't dare quote three hundred since there was a bit of energy it needed itself in the process. Inflating the price by a little might make Li Hao feel better, that he wasn't losing out on too much.

Li Hao pursed his lips in thought. Meanwhile, the Black Armor grew impatient.

“Hurry and make your choice! Delaying time is wasting life. Wasting life... There will be no options available after fifteen minutes! All fines will be doubled!”

Dismay stole over the crowd, whereas Li Hao quickly asked, “Report! If uh... I... have a special identity... can that reduce my fine?”

“No identity will reduce your fine!” The Black Armor looked faintly at him. “Even ultimate powerhouses must follow the school rules, unless you are the descendant of the Human King!”

Alright then, pretend I didn’t say anything.

Li Hao had been hoping that the heir of the Lis, descendant of the Sword Sovereign, and division leader of Battle Heaven might lead to certain advantages. At the very least, it might lead to a certain reduction. But reality was merciless and such favoritism was available only for the descendants of the Human King.

What a pity!

Chapter 777: Examination (II)

Fifty-five million mysterious power stones were the equivalent of eleven hundred drops of Water of Life. If the little tree was to produce it all, then it would be forty-four million stones. An easy reduction of ten million stones... made this a feasible alternative in Li Hao’s eyes.

As for the option of challenging the puppets, that was a nonstarter in his eyes. Could he fight ten puppets by himself? Of course not. However, the little tree needed some time to convert the appropriate amount of Water of Life. Would he be granted that time?

“Make your decision!” The Black Armor grew irritated. “All of you will be executed if you still do not choose!”

Being the honest person he was, Li Hao didn't choose to remain stubbornly against the natural course of action. "I choose to pay the fine..."

"Very good! A very wise decision!" The Black Armor nodded with satisfaction.

"Then... can I delay the payment somewhat?" asked the young man. "I'm going to convert Water of Life through a plant spirit, which will save me a little. Will that do?"

"That is acceptable. Payment within three days is fine!"

Li Hao breathed out with relief.

"Report, sir, then I..." Qian Wanhao's eyes darted around.

"You will not be granted a postponement. Do you have a plant spirit?" The Black Armor was as remote as could be. "Or will you be able to create one out of thin air in three days?"

It wasn't a fool. It supported Li Hao's idea because it was a wonderful detail that the young man had a plant spirit by his side. Did this other fellow take the Black Armor for a fool? Could he convert energy stones to Water of Life by himself?

Qian Wanhao flushed and fell silent. He looked at the puppets and ultimately said, "I... choose to pay the fine!"

He grit his teeth and took out a storage ring, emptying it of vast quantities of origin weapons, Water of Life, mysterious power stones, and a motley array of other treasures.

"Sir... how much... can this be traded for...?"

A red light appeared in the Black Armor's visor and it scanned the pile. "This is a bunch of trash, but it is present in sufficient quantity. According to the rules set by the Exchange Center, this is worth four hundred thousand pieces of energy stones!"

That was a lot! But Qian Wanhao wanted to collapse on the spot. Only four hundred thousand? His fine was one and a half million! This was everything he had on him apart from his most precious treasures! As the minister of Commerce, he was one of the richest men of the age. But now...

Qian Wanhao set his jaw. What could he do now? There were no other options available! After some thought, he asked slowly, "Then... can... I... owe some of my fine?"

"No!" The Black Armor seemed to be purposefully backing them into a corner. "Make haste, do not waste time!"

Qian Wanhao sighed and summoned a small sword without another word. It wasn't a large item, but the Black Armor inclined its head upon seeing it. "Not bad! This is the Hover Sword from the hands of Director Lu Zhen himself. To think that it'd be in your hands, not bad!"

Li Hao started. Lu Zhen?

"This is actual treasure. It was second to only items crafted by the Divine Forge Emperor in the New Martial age. I will value this at one million energy stones!"

Qian Wanhao knew the item was valuable, but hadn't thought it would be so valuable. Similar to the Streamflow Sword Method that Li Hao encountered last time, it was an ultimate ace for the nine ministries. Not even Qian Wanhao was able to deploy it to its full capabilities.

Who would've thought that he would be able to trade it for so much? The minister quickly understood that he might have been fleeced, but what could he do about it now?

He was only one hundred thousand short in the blink of an eye. Another weapon manifested in short order—it looked like a golden coin and emanated a soft radiance. This was a personal weapon he'd used for many years and was his personal trump card.

“This is good too.” The Black Armor inclined its head. “I'll count that as one hundred thousand to make it your full fine amount!”

Qian Wanhao spat out a mouthful of blood before he could say anything. All of the treasures and weapons vanished without a trace. Even his personal brand on his weapon was spontaneously erased. He suddenly looked more haggard than moments ago, but didn't make a sound.

The rest of the group sighed and capitulated. “We'll pay the fine!”

Everyone took out whatever treasures and lifesaving measures they had on them. The lord of Buddha Mountain brought out something that appeared to be the blood essence of a major monster spirit. He offered up his personal weapon and everything of value on him, but it still wasn't enough!

A light glinting in his eyes, he focused on the three from the City of Supernaturals. “Report, can... I borrow from others?”

He abruptly realized the inappropriateness of his question right after asking it. Li Hao's quartet suddenly regarded him with glittering eyes. His heart quailed!

He'd only thought of attacking the three from the City of Supernaturals in order to save his life, but he'd forgotten that if this was a feasible course of action, then Li Hao's group was much stronger than him!

The three from the City of Supernaturals looked around with stark fear. Thankfully, the Black Armor's response saved them.

“Students are not permitted to kill one another. You may spar, of course, but consider your actions carefully. If you know well what the offense of causing destruction is, yet still inflict it, your fine will double again!”

That extinguished the brewing agitation in everyone’s eyes. It would be an unmitigated disaster if they caused more destruction. The lord of Buddha Mountain frowned. He’d put up everything he had, but it still wasn’t enough. What should he do now? His fine was about the same as Sky Sword and the rest—one million stones. All he had on him only amounted to five hundred thousand stones.

He sighed and looked at the Black Armor. “I choose the challenge!”

It was the final struggle of the desperate! There was nothing else he could do otherwise.

“You may do so!”

Ten puppets appeared. The lord of Buddha Mountain armed himself with another word and went on the offensive.

Boom!

The ten puppets sent him flying with a loud impact. His chest was caved in, but he was only heavily injured as opposed to dead.

One move!

The puppets had only needed one move to defeat him. The mountain lord sat down dispiritedly on the ground, coughing up blood. A bleak expression hung on his face.

The others scrounged up sufficient treasures in the meantime. While the three ministers gathered sufficient funds, they had to offer up even their last golden booklet. It was plain to see that their pockets were empty after this.

Of the three from the City of Supernaturals, two were unable to locate enough for payment. The one with a fine of two hundred thousand eventually managed to pay it off. The other two looked at the mountain lord, then at Li Hao's quartet...

They knew that Li Hao had a lot of mysterious power stones. Ultimately, the young female from the City of Supernaturals looked pleadingly at Li Hao. "Commander Li, will you lend us some stones? We promise we won't say anything once we leave and will be at the commander's beck and call..."

There was no hope of mounting a successful challenge against the puppets. Borrowing money was the only way. Li Hao, however, remained coolly aloof. Wordless, he didn't even look at them.

"Commander... there is no great feud or hatred between us. If you are willing to help us, that would be helping the City of Supernaturals. We have a certain place and status in the city. There are many ancient aristocracies within it and more than one million supernaturals. If they are willing to help the commander, they will deliver the world to you!"

Li Hao continued to ignore them.

A vicious look flashed through their eyes before they suddenly charged the young man!

"We'll fight to the death if you don't help us! We'll destroy everything here! Let's see how you pay for the damages then!"

Their backs were against the wall. Perhaps this was the only way that they could force Li Hao to help them!

Qian Wanhao's group quickly backed away. They didn't want to be dragged into this.

Li Hao frowned at the two charging him and glanced at the Black Armor. “Can I retaliate if someone attacks me?”

“You can, but the caveat is that you cannot destroy school property...”

The characters of ‘water’, ‘fire’, ‘metal’, and ‘exterminate’ materialized as soon as the Black Armor said that Li Hao could. Sword intent pierced through heaven and earth. The two Arcanus lost focus in their eyes as soon as they drew near the young man. Their spirit was instantly snuffed out.

Li Hao reached a hand into the air and summoned the characters back to him. Stellaris vanished.

“Intent of the Lifeless Sword?” The Black Armor was rather surprised by what it’d just seen. “The heritage of the Sword Sovereign?”

But it seemed somewhat different. It partially resembled the ultimate art of Tranquil Star, yet was also altered.

Despite the Black Armor’s surprise, it didn’t say anything as it watched the two humans die. It didn’t intervene as these weren’t real students. It knew the situation very well, so it didn’t care that much about their life or death. Killing was strictly forbidden under these circumstances in a real martial university!

Li Hao pointed haughtily at their bodies. “Can I claim their belongings?”

“Of course!” the Black Armor responded calmly. “To the victor goes the spoils. Your sword is quite nice!” Some interest perked up its tones. “If you’re willing to hand over the sword, it will pay off all of your debts in full!”

Absolutely not! How would Li Hao ever agree to that?

“No way, this was passed down from my ancestors. It stays with me so long as I draw breath!” Li Hao shook his head.

“Nonsense!” rebuked the Black Armor. “The Sword Sovereign broke countless blades in his day, was he to die each time his weapon shattered? Swords are but external objects. It doesn’t matter if you have enough belongings to pay off the fine, I will reward you if you hand it over.”

“No!” Li Hao refused without thinking. Stellaris was his greatest resource in his development, how could he hand it over?

The Black Armor didn’t insist. It didn’t matter. Fair transactions were the norm. The matter was dropped if any party involved was unwilling. Such were the rules of Evenround Martial. It would not take by force.

“Can you pay the fine?” It looked at the lord of Buddha Mountain.

“I’m afraid... I cannot...” The mountain lord’s face was ashen.

“Then I regret to say that since the vanguard is no more and you are not an official student... I gave you a chance for redemption, but you were unable to grasp it...” The Black Armor waved its hand when the mountain lord wanted to run. He lowered his head to look at his chest... his organs had been pulverized!

He turned to look at Li Hao’s quartet and then at the Black Armor. His eyes dimmed as a downcast expression stole over his face. He hadn’t thought that he’d die here or that he’d die in such a manner! An existence in the ruins had killed him!

The corpse thudded heavily to the ground and his belongings disappeared. They belonged to the Black Armor now.

Chapter 778: Examination (III)

Li Hao and the others didn't say a single word. It didn't matter that the lord of Buddha Mountain was dead. The key was that he'd died in a manner that made them grieve for their own kind. Even though the two sides were opposed to each other, Li Hao was also shaken by the cold ruthlessness of the existences in the ruins.

Whatever occupied the ruins was not of the same era as modern day humans. He found Battle Heaven to be nice because they took care of him. Today, he saw how cruel those in the ruins could be.

Failure to pay off their fine meant death with no exception.

"Are the four of you going to use life essence to pay off your fine?" The Black Armor looked at Li Hao.

"Yes!"

"Very well, I expect to see payment in full after three days!" It looked at Li Hao again, hesitating. "Are you from the army?"

Li Hao summoned his gold armor with a nod. "I am from the Battle Heaven Army!"

"The Battle Heaven Army..." the Black Armor sighed with emotion. "The heritage of the Sword Sovereign and Battle Heaven count as auxiliary branches of an exalted emperor... You also have a descendant of another emperor with you and a guard of the imperial palace..."

Its eyes settled on Hou Xiaochen after scanning the group. "And you bear the heritage of the emperor from the foremost military school..."

This quartet came with quite the background—not that any of it made a difference. This place was not like the others. However, the four in front of him were connected to many people. There were

ties to the Green Emperor [1] and the Heavenly Emperor. They were connected to the Eternal Sword Sovereign, the Exalted Broken Will Emperor, and the Exalted Blood Emperor...

One had to say, even the Black Armor hesitated in its course of action. However, it decided to proceed forth after momentary thought. Those people had just collected a large sum of energy stones. They were able to pay the fine.

Li Hao and the others didn't say anything as another three who could not pay their fine died in the blink of an eye. There was no safety to be found in a place like this. Death was possible at any second—a situation that filled them with utmost resignation. It was difficult to say if any of them would be able to make it out alive.

“Alright, that concludes the matter of the fines for now!” announced the Black Armor. “It is both your fortune and disaster that you’ve set foot on Evenround grounds! It falls upon you to make it a stroke of fortune or doom...”

The group listened intently.

“There were many reasons why Evenround Martial was established here back in the day. The key was that energy is sufficient here. When the world changed, the Star Gate sealed shut, and Silver Moon Territory spontaneously declined in energy sources...

“The land entered a period of Late Martial in the blink of an eye!” The Black Armor looked at everyone. “And yet, Evenround was bestowed with an important duty of nurturing powerhouses for the frontlines. With the world being sealed away, you do not count as true students. If you wish to become real students, you must undergo an examination!”

“Report.” Li Hao frowned. “What if we fail the examination or choose not to participate in it?”

“Then that makes you a trespasser!” came the indifferent reply. “The fines earlier were but a small punishment meant to deliver a larger warning. You can leave only after becoming an official student. Otherwise, the school will continue to be closed. I will not punish you, but you will not be able to leave either!”

Eyes widened at its words. They wouldn't be able to leave!

"This is the requisite path that each new student must take after joining a martial university, I am not singling you out!" the Black Armor said calmly. "Evenround Martial has a higher threshold than most. Only half step Apexes were accepted. Although you lot are somewhat removed from that level, the gap is not great, so I will not make things difficult for you!"

"You may join the school if you pass three tests!"

Three tests!

"Then..." Li Hao's head ached.

"There's no need to haggle. Although you bear the heritage of the Sword Sovereign, keep in mind that many applicants were the descendants of emperors and exalted emperors back in the day. There were numerous applicants who were of a direct lineage, much less a latter-day descendant like you..."

It'd been countless years and the young man's bloodline was greatly diluted. Did he still expect preferential treatment for it? If this was still in times past, even the Imperial Majesty's son would have to take the test if they were here!

"Refusing the examinations will result in being treated as a trespasser. Trespassers will be exterminated!"

Fine! There was no way around it! Li Hao and the rest were highly apprehensive. What would be tested? Were they going to fight? Or work through obstacles?

As they pondered, they were suddenly moved away from the field and reappeared in a classroom. Everyone was assigned to a desk, as were Panther and the little tree. A scroll of paper appeared in front of them.

“This is the entrance exam of a martial university. The first subject: culture and civilization!”

“.....” Jaws dropped. Li Hao also gaped. Culture and civilization?

He took a closer look at the paper and nearly cursed out loud. This really did test culture and civilization! Li Hao could scarcely believe his eyes.

“Students of martial universities are expected to be versed in both civil and martial subjects. There is no future for pure martial blockheads! Even the Human King had to pass such an exam to enroll at the Demonic Martial University! The one at the Department of Education places an even higher importance on these subjects, so there will be a full gamut of civil subject tests to come!”

Li Hao’s head ached and Hong Yitang frowned at his test. “Report, the times are different now and we have no recourse for learning about some of the material being tested. Exams should not seek to lean on particular prejudices. As the heritage of education, they should be as universal as possible. They should not be narrowly targeted as a means to stump candidates. Purposefully making things difficult would mean that the examination is just going through the motions of testing applicants.”

Li Hao’s head spun when he picked his paper up for a look. The hell was all this? Firstly, all of the text was in the ancient language. He knew it, but the others would be disqualified on that alone. Secondly, he had no idea what most of the questions were asking.

Granted, with the number of ancient books he’d read, he more or less knew of the material they covered. However, how was one supposed to calculate exact sums of blood qi or answer anatomical questions about the three cavities? He could perhaps write a response to the question asking about core origin dao, but why was this being tested?

He hadn’t thought that he’d one day sit down for an examination again after leaving school.

The Black Armor looked at Hong Yitang and seemed to agree after some thought. “Your words are reasonable. Education should advance with the times. Since the times are different... then... let’s make things simpler. All of you shall describe your martial dao for me to score! What is martial dao? What is its core? What is its goal? You can give a brief description of these.

“As for civilian life... I am not familiar with this age and thus cannot judge those subjects. Therefore, they can indeed be set aside for these examinations.”

The group sagged with relief. Thank goodness! They’d be in such great trouble otherwise. Who the hell could fill out that exam? As for a description of martial dao, everyone’s thoughts on that would be different. There was no standard answer for it, so it was up to the Black Armor whether it would detract points on purpose.

“Report, what is a passing score?”

“There is only pass or fail!”

The group understood. Nine powerhouses, one tree, and one dog sat docilely in place, quite resigned that they could do nothing other than take a test. Brush and paper appeared in their hands...

Panther looked down blankly at its paws, then raised an innocent look at the Black Armor.

“Monster spirits have their martial dao as well,” it said coolly when Panther looked over. “If you don’t know how to write... You can converse through mental strength. But a descendant of the exalted monster spirit emperor not knowing how to write... Thank goodness this is no longer the New Martial era or there wouldn’t be a good end in store for you!”

Why not? Because the ancestor of this guy’s ancestor once tried being shut in a dark room for countless years. It was a bleak period of pure studying that it wanted to experience.

As for the little tree, the Black Armor also considered it. “As a plant spirit and the only core origin cultivator present, you likely only inherited the dao of your predecessor. You can also use mental strength to convey your thoughts!”

It sat down on the lectern like it was the teacher, watching the students below like it truly wanted to listen to their understanding of dao. It was an uncomfortable situation, but the group had no choice but to comply.

Panther barked, a regular dog bark that communicated it didn’t know how to use mental strength either.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know how to use mental strength either...” The Black Armor seemed disdainful now. “Forget it, use the monster spirit language. I can understand dog barks!”

This Black Armor was quite unusual. Li Hao and the rest didn’t know how to approach the question. Ultimately, they lowered their heads and began writing, boldly forging ahead in the absence of other options. They were plainly in an unspeakably dangerous place, but were wracking their brains and putting brush to paper like they were students. It was... an incredibly surreal scene to many.

The little tree’s mental strength rippled while Panther barked continuously. The Black Armor sometimes nodded and at times shook its head. Who knew if it was really listening?

“It’s good that He Yong isn’t here...” Hou Xiaochen suddenly laughed partway through his response.

“No whispering allowed!” snapped the Black Armor. “Silence!”

Hou Xiaochen awkwardly shut his mouth. It’d just been one emotional expression, but he’d been rebuked for it. On second thought, this was rather funny. How many years had it been since something like this had happened to him?

No one said a word in the time remaining. Heads were lowered and brushes moved rapidly over paper, until they rested roughly half an hour later.

The papers flew into the air and landed in the Black Armor's hands. It read them carefully before raising its head to look at the group. His gaze ultimately landed on Li Hao.

Chapter 779: Examination (IV)

"Why is your martial dao... different from the others?" asked the Black Armor.

"All daos lead to the same destination, it is only the journey that is different," Li Hao intoned. "There is nothing wrong with what I do. You've seen it too, senior. I am not weak. Since the times are different, there is no need to limit ourselves to the path of ancient martial dao..."

"That is true," agreed the Black Armor after some thought. "Then you pass!"

It turned to Hong Yitang. "You remind me of someone. Although the difference between you two is great, having the heart that you do is good. You pass as well!"

It then turned to Sky Sword. "You are very pure and more like an unapologetic martial blockhead in my view. You might be more suited for the military academy, but... you'll do. You pass as well!"

Sky Sword heaved a sigh of relief as the Black Armor turned to Hou Xiaochen. Here, it hesitated. "You have too many thoughts in mind. Your ideas are rather scattered and conservative. The Broken Will Spear is a very pure spear intent! There might be good results if you trade with the sword user, but it's fine. You count as passing!"

Hou Xiaochen felt a bit awkward after the assessment, but didn't say anything. Finally, the Black Armor turned to Qian Wanhao's group. A disapproving tone entered its voice as it pointed at Qian Wanhao. "Perhaps you purposefully wrote to my preferences as your scroll is different from what I sense on you... but a test is just a test. It matters not whether you resorted to trickery, so long as you didn't cheat. You count as having passed!"

Qian Wanhao breathed an immense sigh of relief. Yes, he had indeed employed trickery. He was aware of the personalities of some ancient powerhouses, so the martial dao he'd written of were the thoughts that he'd held eighty years ago. While those were indeed his thoughts, they stemmed from when he wished to overthrow the monarchy.

Clearly, the Black Armor found his ideas feasible. Just as he'd thought back in the day, they were good ideas!

"You..." The Black Armor irritably wagged its finger at Hu Mingfa from the Ministry of the Judiciary. "You say that you are part of law enforcement. With the laws being the foundation and precursor to dao, your words speak only of a hierarchy of power. There is an innate conflict between law and class. This makes no sense whatsoever, you do not pass!"

Hu Mingfa's expression shifted drastically! The Black Armor ignored him and dismissed the one from the City of Supernaturals.

"You have entirely inherited the dao of New Martial and have absolutely no innovation to speak of. There is no change in your methods, but core origin dissipated long ago. There is no future path ahead for you. You do not pass!"

The Arcanus from the City of Supernaturals widened his eyes and couldn't help but say, "But... this plant spirit... also focuses on the core origin..."

"You fool, it can continue down its path because it possesses core origin dao!" snorted the Black Armor. "You do not pass!"

Color drained from the supernatural's face. Failing to pass meant that he could not become a student. Didn't that mean he was stuck here forever? At least... he wasn't immediately sentenced to death just because he didn't pass.

The ministers of Examination and Foreign Affairs waited eagerly for the Black Armor to judge their entries.

“You two are middle-of-the-road without any particular outstanding points, but neither do you demonstrate any major flaws,” it pronounced after a while. “You are on the cusp of passing and I could let you pass, but... there are many who have passed already. Therefore, you do not pass!”

The ministers’ expectant expressions fell off their faces. What the heck was this??

“Sir, since we were on the cusp of passing... isn’t this decision... unjust?”

“On the contrary, it is very just!” the Black Armor responded calmly. “This is a premier institution of learning, not the ordinary establishments of trash out there. You two do not qualify to attend in the first place!”

It then turned to the little tree. “You are a core origin cultivator... and pass for your description of core origin!” Finally, it looked at Panther. “You are lazy and only keen to eat. Compared to your ancestor... Forget it, your ancestor was an exalted emperor as well and thus cannot be easily referenced. You do not pass!”

Panther grew frantic! I do not pass? Then I can’t leave either?

“Arf arf arf!”

“Shut up!”

The dog immediately fell silent, but still despaired. It looked at Li Hao. I failed, what do we do now? The little tree made it!

Five people and a tree had passed. The world spun around them again, shocking the group. How was the Black Armor doing this??

“Students of martial universities must have real skill to their name!” Six puppets appeared on the field. “I have adjusted their strength to be on par with yours. They possess the capabilities of regular cultivators in the New Martial era. Defeating a peer of the same level is a passing mark, defeating two is a good result. Defeating three is excellence!

“Those who qualify will enter the next round. Good marks will receive rewards, and excellent marks will receive special rewards!”

Li Hao’s quartet looked at each other. A peer? Who among those present weren’t standouts of their period? A peer from the ancient civilization should be fine, right?

“Then... can we face one puppet at first and increase the number if we find it feasible?” asked Li Hao.

“You can. The puppets do not tire and this kind of fighting does not consume too much of their energy. It can also be replenished at any time without affecting their battle strength!”

Li Hao breathed out in relief. Then they could each challenge one at first and add more if they found it possible.

“I’ll go!” Sky Sword stepped forward. He was always one to volunteer for something that he felt should be done. A puppet manifested and brought a sword down on Sky Sword. He grunted and waved his broadsword in response, colliding with his opponent via a loud impact!

Undaunted, he continued to strike again and again. His sword intent was stately and grand!

He beat back the puppet with ease.

“Another!”

A second puppet quickly appeared and the two coordinated their moves in a thunderous offensive. The Black Armor watched silently, not making any audible judgments.

Sky Sword sent one of them flying after a few moments, completely defeating it. He did the same with the second a while later. As easy as it'd seemed for him, he did not call for a third puppet. Only after he stopped could the group see his condition clearly. He was covered in sword marks and blood seeped out of all of his wounds. He breathed heavily with a frown, clearly finding it embarrassing that he'd only defeated two puppets.

These were just two puppets with ordinary battle strength in the ancient civilization, but he'd almost fallen in defeat!

"Be careful, they're very strong. It's best if you take them on one at a time!" he transmitted to the group when he stepped to the side. These were very strong puppets and he'd had issues taking on two at once.

Li Hao and the rest simply walked out instead of responding. "Just send one at first!"

Several puppets manifested—one each. Li Hao promptly deployed his abilities and rushed forward with his sword. However, his puppet disappeared. So fast! He was a five element Arcanus and had just barely managed to grasp the last element. Apparently, the Black Armor wouldn't let him just face a four element Arcanus. The puppet was also at the five element strength.

Li Hao exchanged a dozen blows with the puppet in the blink of an eye. He stumbled backward after the latest boom, disbelief brimming in his eyes. I can't even defeat a single blasted one?? How is that possible?! And I wanted to fight three at once!

Various thoughts flitted through his mind before inspiration struck. His sword aura flared—the aura was the center of his attacks this time, not sword intent!

You don't know sword aura, do you?

Characters materialized in a spray of wind, fire, lightning, and water. It was the puppet that was subject to immense constraints this time. Thunder and lightning crackled with fury and a ferocious tiger emerged to send the puppet flying!

“More!”

Another two puppets appeared—not just one. Three attacked at the same time!

Booms and roars echoed from all sides as the Black Armor quietly watched them, observing their performance. When it looked at the little tree and saw that the tree was summoning the imperial palace again... it quickly shouted, “You pass with excellent marks! This...”

This is almost cheating! Who in the modern world can stand against a corner of the imperial palace?

But it hadn't said before that the palace couldn't be utilized, not to mention this was part of the little tree's heritage. There was nothing that could be said about it.

Damn that cheating plant!

The little tree quietly backed off of the battlefield. It had no choice as it didn't really stand a chance against the puppets and could only use its trump card.

There were two unlucky souls having a difficult time—Hou Xiaochen and Qian Wanhao. Qian Wanhao had just set foot into four element Arcanus and Hou Xiaochen had just become a supernatural. They were both stronger than they'd been before, which would be a good thing, but that meant they met stronger opponents now than they would've!

Qian Wanhao was utterly routed in a few seconds! Just as Hou Xiaochen seemed destined for defeat, he shouted and broke another supernatural lock to send his puppet flying.

“Breaking through in the field...” grumbled the Black Armor. “Fine, that counts too!”

Hou Xiaochen spontaneously breaking a lock was cheating as well, but again, the Black Armor hadn’t said ahead of time that that wasn’t permitted.

Hou Xiaochen didn’t say anything, choosing to stop after defeating one puppet. He brooded silently, despite being able to challenge two or three puppets if he so wished. Instead, he was caught up in the shame of having almost been defeated.

Qian Wanhao wilted in the distance like he’d just lost his wife. He might be the only one to fail this stage. It was an awfully depressing possibility. He looked with resignation at Li Hao and the rest. Those guys were very strong—much stronger than him despite being of the same cultivation level. Despite that fact, why was he so dejected at being less than them?

Qian Wanhao sighed to himself. Was he really going to be trapped here forever?

In the meantime, Li Hao was starting to have too much fun. These puppets were susceptible to the characters and couldn’t really follow the trajectory of the abilities coming from the characters. It was a delightful discovery and he luxuriated in the exchange, despite being surrounded by three puppets.

The Black Armor quietly observed the young man. This was Tranquil Star’s ultimate art, but also not quite! It contained energy, blood qi, mental strength, and a unique dao related to the mind. It was rather surprising!

It then considered Hong Yitang. Here was another interesting person. He also employed written characters, but they differed from Li Hao’s in that his was one word going through multiple permutations. How strange, the two were of the same dao, but also different. It was interesting, in any case!

Li Hao defeated the three puppets after a while, as did a heavily panting Hong Yitang. He shook his head, however. He'd employed some trickery again because, like Li Hao, he'd won through attrition by taking advantage of the fact that the puppets didn't understand their characters. That was how he emerged victorious.

Chapter 780: Official Students (I)

"Not bad!" said the Black Armor. "You have done better than I expected and put a new twist on the ultimate art of Tranquil Star. That passes muster!"

"Three excellent marks, one good mark, one acceptable, and one fail!"

Sky Sword counted as a good mark since he'd defeated two puppets. Hou Xiaochen was acceptable since he'd only defeated one. Those who had passed grew expectant. What would the third test be? And what was the special reward for passing with good marks?

"The third test... is easy." The Black Armor seemed to be smiling. "You will be official students of Evenround Martial if you pass! If not, then all of you will be eliminated!"

When it next spoke of the third test's contents, Li Hao and the rest blinked, dazed.

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The first test had been of civil subjects, the second of martial. What the Black Armor described of the third test, the group looking around blankly.

"Enter!" The Black Armor waved a door into existence. "If you four and the plant spirit can emerge, you will be official students and may leave at any time. If not, all of you can stay forever!"

Li Hao frowned at the transparent door. "Where does the door lead to?"

“The battlefield!” the Black Armor responded calmly. “You will be official students when you come back from it. Go on in!”

The battlefield? So the third test was a battlefield? Where did this battlefield come from?

Li Hao was confused. It was very strange that this place could still connect to a battlefield. “Is it... dangerous inside”

“Of course!”

The young man looked at his companions. They were frowning as well.

“Who is the enemy?” Hou Xiaochen asked solemnly.

“The enemy is the enemy, you just need to know that they are the enemy! Additionally, with wartime regulations in effect... you just need to obey orders, do you understand?” The Black Armor seemed to be laughing. “Go in, or stay here forever!”

There was no helping it. The quartet exchanged resigned glances. They had to go in!

As the four people and tree prepared to enter the door, Panther suddenly barked.

“What are you afraid of? Will those people dare kill you without reason?” remarked the Black Armor. “Your counterattack will be without fault if they attack you. If they kill you... then they are at fault!”

It was clear to see that Panther was terrified. What should it do once Li Hao and the rest were gone? Qian Wanhao and the others were still here!

“Give me all of the mysterious power stones you collected...” Li Hao suddenly thought of something. “Without them, you don’t have any treasures on you and there’s nothing in it for them if they kill you. They might actually set their eyes on you if you keep them!”

“.....” Panther wanted to curse out the human! But it also felt that Li Hao made a lot of sense. It’d swallowed all of the mysterious power stones—what if that vast quantity tempted their opponents to make a desperate gamble? Their troubles might be over after they paid the fine.

Although reluctant, the dog spat out some storage rings. It couldn’t possibly outright put all of the stones in its stomach. Panther had placed them in storage rings for convenience. Li Hao laughed when he received the storage rings. Panther was growing ever more greedy these days. Did it think it could keep the spoils for itself? What was with the obvious disgruntlement?

I never forget you in a cultivation session!

Next to them, Qian Wanhao and the rest didn’t make a sound. Although they’d been disqualified, so had the dog. It wasn’t a given that Li Hao and the rest would pass the third test. At the very least, staying here meant that they wouldn’t die.

Perhaps there would be other chances to leave this place. The ruins wouldn’t be closed forever—they may very well open during the second awakening. Would everyone present still elect to stay when that happened?

.....

Li Hao’s group didn’t consider much else before setting foot over the threshold at the same time. The door immediately vanished.

The Black Armor fell silent and the rest began waiting with expectation. Qian Wanhao and the others were also very curious. Where had Li Hao’s quartet gone?

.....

At the same time.

A gray and murky world.

Li Hao's four and the little tree abruptly manifested. It was a very gloomy scene—they seemed to be in a city. A hubbub of sound rang around them; they seemed to be residing inside a bubble barrier.

The vicinity brightened around them a few moments later and vision was restored to them. They seemed to be in a messy military barracks.

“Headmaster!” A muscular man in armor walked over as the group stared around in bafflement. He addressed Hong Yitang. “Headmaster, strong enemies surround us on all sides. We cannot hold onto Hope City. Let's retreat!”

“General, you guys should go first! We'll bring up the rear!” Another armored warrior walked over, looking at Sky Sword. “You should go too, general. We'll safeguard this place and destroy the transportation passage. They will not set foot on human territory!”

Sky Sword and Hong Yitang were both rather bewildered. Huh?

Li Hao was quickly processing the situation when someone turned to him as well. “You go too... As the peerless genius of the age, there is hope so long as you remain alive!”

Another burly man walked in from outside. He was grinning, despite being bathed in blood. “Seniors, you are old and your blood qi is declining. It would just be your death if you stayed. Leave with the students! Although humanity is losing this battle, we'll go down fighting to the last! Retreat!” He bowed. “Seniors, please leave with the students!”

Hong Yitang was frowning, wanting to say something, but not knowing what to say. Was this... a battlefield? An illusory realm? Or what?

He couldn't immediately tell as it felt very real. Determining the situation at hand was their first priority. Therefore, Li Hao asked brusquely, "What's going on here?"

"it's only to be expected that you don't know since you were unconscious for a few days!" responded Burlly. "Skygate City has marched on us in a pincer movement with Eastflower City. They've sent dozens of high-ranked powerhouses. Hope City doesn't stand a chance. You new students are in the battlefield for the first time, so you don't know how strong the enemy can be. You'd just be remaining to your deaths! Go back!

"You too, seniors!" the man laughed. "Surviving is the greatest pain! We will eradicate the enemy outside of human territory! Please go home with the genius students, seniors, and keep the spark of hope alive for humanity!"

Li Hao blinked, mostly understanding the situation. The enemy was upon them and too strong to be contended with. Hou Xiaochen and the rest represented the older generation of powerhouses—so old that their blood qi had started to decline. He was a genius of high potential and the hope for the future. These cultivators in the prime of their lives were trying to convince them to leave.

But... we're here to pass a test! We have to kill the enemy!

Whether it was an illusory realm or a real battlefield, they had to take to the field. Otherwise... how would they complete their mission? Another unknown was the number of enemies they had to kill to count as being finished.

"How can we do that, we must participate in this battle!" Li Hao immediately said when his thoughts traveled here.

"The enemy attacks! Prepare for battle!" someone roared outside.

BOOM!

Heaven and earth shook outside, mountains threatened to topple over. The middle-aged generals rushed outside without a word. In the lead, Burly turned back to yell, “Withdraw! There is no surviving this battle. I only hope that humanity can reclaim this land in the future and rebuild Hope City!”

He was gone, as were the others that’d been standing around. Li Hao’s quartet looked at each other before Hong Yitang quickly said, “Let’s go and take a look. Our mission is probably to defeat the enemy. We’ll probably pass if we succeed in beating them back!”

The others nodded, this was in line with their thoughts as well. They swiftly walked outside. It was only now that Li Hao noticed the little tree also resembled a human. It even wore armor, which was further proof that they were in a realm of illusion and not a real battlefield.

I was thinking where they would get a real battlefield after the ancient civilization collapsed! It’s so much easier knowing that this is an illusion.

Four humans and one tree swiftly walked outside. There were almost no people inside the city at the moment, they were all at the frontlines. Light sparkled in the distance. Powerhouses were traveling through the air—domineering and inexorable.

Li Hao’s group quickly broke through the air and set foot on the city walls. They could see a dense army churning across the land, coming their way. Hope City defenders were standing outside the city gates, arrayed in battle formation.

“Kill!!” howled a general before leading the charge!

The two armies commenced pitched battle in a blood-red patch of land outside the city. War cries shook the heavens. Although the quartet knew that this was an illusion, they were still deeply moved by the sight of tens of millions of martial masters erupting blood qi.

They faced enemies that were ten times their numbers—they all seemed to be energy cultivators.

“Is this a battle between martial masters and supernaturals?” Li Hao asked in a low voice.

“Possibly... and the other side isn’t human?”

“Very likely!”

“There’s so many...”

Li Hao looked at the sky. Rays of splendor shot through the darkness as powerhouses on the city walls leapt up with a roar. They evaded the army and engaged their enemy high in the sky, the collisions ringing through the land!

“Fight fight fight!!” Howls and shouts echoed through the vicinity.

“Hurry and engage the enemy!” Hong Yitang quickly said. “Our mission might be affected if too many on our side die!”

The rest nodded and shot out into the air—BAM! Powerful enemies immediately engaged them and Li Hao was instantly waylaid by an expert. The incomparably strong energy cultivator punched with metal sparks shimmering around their fist!

Li Hao reflexively unsheathed his sword in response, but cursed lowly. Where’s Stellaris?! Damn it, where’s my sword gone?? How had he not noticed earlier that his sword was gone? Was it unable to enter this illusion?

There was nothing to do but to use his hand as a sword. He struck with his palm!

BAM!

Formidable force exploded in his hand and enormous pain traveled up his arm. His eyes widened with shock and the Black Armor's voice sounded in his ear at this time. "While this is an illusion, you really will die if the enemy kills you!"

Li Hao really broke out in curses this time. Then where's my sword?! Damn it, the Black Armor hadn't just seized it, had it?? The overwhelming pain in his hand let him know that if he died here, he would be truly dead.