

Star Gate 781

Chapter 781: Official Students (II)

BOOM!

The barbarous enemy that Li Hao faced was unbelievably strong. Punch after punch forced Li Hao back; their staunch body as if an invincible construct!

Li Hao's hand connected with their body, but only inflicted a small cut as opposed to obliterating the enemy. After the young man withdrew his hand, he saw the cut rapidly return to pristine condition.

"Damn it!" Li Hao cursed. What kind of healing ability was this?? It was like how he was when he wielded Stellaris! Any injuries he inflicted instantly healed, whereas his blood flowed freely now because he lacked sword energy. There was nothing he could do to heal himself!

He wanted to see how the others were doing and tilted his head in their direction. Li Hao gasped with horror when he gained a clear look. It wasn't just him—everyone was suppressed and unable to move from their spot.

Is the Black Armor trying to fail us on purpose?

"You have a hope of joining Evenround Martial if you win," sounded the Black Armor's voice. "This is a real battle truly recorded in history. Humanity won that battle! You can also withdraw, of course. Withdrawing will mean that you fail the test!"

A real battle recorded in history? Li Hao's eyebrows raised upward.

BAM!

His moment of distraction permitted the barbarian to land a punch, almost shattering his bones. Spewing blood, Li Hao flew backward. Sky Sword was also sent flying not far away from the young man. He, too, vomited blood from the force of the palm strike!

Hou Xiaochen, Hong Yitang, and the little tree...

Even an entity as strong as the little tree could mount no resistance whatsoever. It couldn't seem to use its imperial palace projection, so it was completely under the thumb of a powerhouse and gave way with every blow!

Heated battle raged on all sides, but humanity was firmly on the losing side. The middle-aged men who'd spoken to the group earlier were doing battle as best they could, but they were firmly suppressed. Some even had to hold off three or four opponents at the same time and endure purely through sheer willpower!

How are we supposed to win?! This is a farce! Li Hao cursed to himself. They were hemmed in on all sides, how was this supposed to lead to a human victory? The enemy outnumbered them many times over and was so strong that no one could fight back. How was turning the tables at all possible like this??

It's just trying to get us killed!

Hou Xiaochen flew backward after a loud impact, a bloody hole in his chest. He coughed painfully, disbelief in his eyes that his immense strength was once more being dismantled. His opponent had overcome him in every aspect possible! There was no chance for him to strike back!

The voice that Li Hao heard had also sounded in their ears. All of them wanted to curse out the Black Armor! They were somehow supposed to pull a win out of this situation? Who was it kidding??

"I forgot to say that all of you fail if more than half of the human army is lost," came the Black Armor's voice again. "You will forever stay here and believe me, it's impossible for you to break this illusion! So make haste if you wish to withdraw from the test!"

Li Hao and the rest sagged with the implications. They faced an army ten times their size and wouldn't be able to withdraw from the scene once their side's losses exceeded half of their total number. Should they give up now?

Giving up now meant admitting to failure and then... being forever trapped in these ruins. No one could determine how strong the Black Armor was, but they all knew that a powerhouse that could imprison them within an illusory realm was someone that they could not measure up to.

The little tree constantly fell back from the force of the blows it suffered; its voice echoed by the group's ears. "What the Black Armor says is true, he's too strong. I don't know if he's dead or alive, and he was very likely a Saint when he was alive!"

"A... Saint?"

"The Saint cultivation level exceeds the Apex level. What comes after Apex is the Emperor level, which was later changed to simply Immortal to indicate the unending eternity one reaches at that level. Only after that is the Saint level!"

Li Hao and the others shook. Da fuck?? That strong?! The little tree wasn't even an Apex, but their enemies were several major cultivation levels stronger? Didn't they say that very few powerhouses had stayed behind when the Human King left? How was there such a premier existence in a minor martial university? Did they even stand a chance of getting away from the Black Armor?

No wonder the little tree had been so meek and humble after encountering it!

The group was caught between a rock and a hard place. The little tree suffered a relentless barrage from the enemy because it'd split its attention to talk to them. Its armor was dented and it shrieked with agony. Plainly, it was no match for the enemy either.

Li Hao's quartet were having the living daylight beaten out of them and heavyweights were dying one after another beneath them.

Fucking hell!

This was an impossible mission! The Black Armor wanted to keep them all in the ruins forever! The only course of action they could take was to withdraw and keep the Black Armor company as they all grew old together.

BOOM!

A loud impact sounded as Li Hao saw a person erupting with bloody sparks out of the corner of his eye. The person instantly coalesced a blade of blood and decapitated an enemy with a loud whirl, but they burst apart as well!

The Incantation of the Blade of Blood!

Li Hao recognized it! These people were employing that method! Intense pain burst from his ear—his opponent had grazed him with a punch. Blood dripped down Li Hao's face as he roared and slammed his palm out.

Damn it!

He didn't have Stellaris, the Windchaser Boots, or even a storage ring. All he could do was truly rely on his personal strength. There were no external objects that he could make use of. Even the characters found it difficult to stop the enemy!

What should they do?

People were dying very quickly beneath them. If this continued... they would have to stay here forever.

“Withdraw!” Li Hao transmitted to the others. “Withdraw so that we can retain a sliver of hope. At the very least, we’ll be able to grow stronger in the ruins and eventually make it out one day!”

They couldn’t fight the Black Armor. They could only keep it company as everyone grew older in the ruins.

Hong Yitang’s resigned voice echoed in his ears. “Do you know... what the consequences will be... if we do not... return?”

Li Hao blinked. He’d almost forgotten! His expression shifted with dismay when he thought over the consequences. If they did not emerge from the ruins, then the outside world would think that both sides had gone down together in mutual destruction or were trapped inside, that exit was impossible.

At that point, those holding down the fort outside... would be exterminated. Without Li Hao, Hou Xiaochen, Hong Yitang, Sky Sword, Sky Mountain Manor, the Silver Moon Guards, and the newly joined Night Watchers would soon fall apart.

The nine ministries looked to have suffered great losses, but other than Qian Wanhao, the other seven ministers from the old guard were four or fewer element Arcanus. Deputy Zhou and Yao Si could not stop them.

Li Hao’s eyes darted around. He’d been tunneled in on the events at hand just now and failed to consider the ramifications of his actions. The young man had come with quite a great deal of confidence and he did have the reason to be so. Reality had proven that if nothing untoward developed, none of Qian Wanhao’s side would be getting away!

It had been a massive victory for Li Hao’s side!

So... what now?

BOOM!

The powerhouse across from Li Hao seemed to be wary of something. They backed a few steps away to give the young man some breathing room. This gesture was repeated with the rest as the enemy looked cautiously around them—at the martial masters that'd exploded.

The Incantation of the Blade of Blood! Going down with the enemy!

The method came across as a threat, genuine intimidation, and fear inducing! Where one thousand enemies went down, so did eight hundred troops on one's own side!

Hong Yitang looked around him, suddenly realizing what the ancient civilization had done to win this battle. He smiled ruefully, finally understanding that this test subject was. They had to triumph to become a student; only students were allowed to leave school grounds.

There were too many powerhouses here, a faithful replication of the scene in ancient history. There was no way to win as there were too many heavyweights present. The only course of action was to kill large sums of powerhouses to demonstrate their determination. They had to scare the enemy and let them know that they would only lose more as the battle dragged on!

Yet the enemy was stronger than them. How should they eliminate their foes in an instant that would also horrify these powerful beings?

In this moment, Hong Yitang understood. He wasn't the only one—Sky Sword, Hou Xiaochen, and Li Hao grasped the idea at nearly the same time.

The young man's expression shifted drastically and he broke out in loud curses. "You bastard! This isn't a test, tests should not be like this! You're just forcing us to our deaths!"

The Black Armor was forcing them to utilize the Incantation of the Blade of Blood so they could erupt with sufficient strength against their enemies. Li Hao wouldn't care about this course of action if he had easy and unfettered access to sword energy. But without it, melding mental strength and life force into the incantation was guaranteed death!

The Black Armor remained silent.

Li Hao's quartet would create bigger trouble in the outside world if they withdrew from the test, but if they didn't... they wouldn't have a chance to once casualties exceeded half of the human army.

Someone had to use the Incantation of the Blade of Blood if they were to win! Only through shocking slaughter and hearty intimation could they hope to save one or two out of the quartet. The survivors could become students and smoothly exit the ruins.

What kind of test was this?! Li Hao raged. This was just a death sentence! Damn it, didn't the Black Armor lack life essence for its revitalization? It'd taken a lot of deaths at Battle Heaven before some of the soldiers were revived. This was just a repeat of that occurrence!

The Black Armor must be limited by rules that said it couldn't outright kill trespassers. But once the trespassers broke the rules in the university, that opened the playing field. The Black Armor could do whatever it needed to cause their deaths and absorb their life essence. It could even claim their storage rings—there were a lot of treasures in Li Hao's storage ring, such as a mountain of mysterious power stones!

He was onto the Black Armor's scheme!

Chapter 782: Official Students (III)

"Withdraw..." Li Hao angrily transmitted to the others. "We'll go out and show that guy what we've got! This is all a scheme from that fucker!"

The young man was enraged beyond words, but Hong Yitang and the rest looked at each other with an inward sigh. Show that Black Armor what they got? Go toe-to-toe with a Saint? Wasn't that the biggest joke of all?

They were no match for that august personage even if the Black Armor commanded only one tenth or one hundredth of his strength. Their speculations coincided with Li Hao's thoughts—there must be some overall rules restricting the Black Armor's actions. If they won this battle and became official students, they likely really would be able to leave this place.

Hong Yitang looked at Hou Xiaochen and transmitted, "You should understand the situation as well. I don't mind. Look after the Sword Sect a bit for me and leave the rest to fate!"

A dark expression stole over Hou Xiaochen's face, but he wasn't able to respond. His opponent firmly had the upper hand.

Hong Yitang laughed wryly. What in the blazes was this situation that they were caught in? Did all martial universities test their students like this back in the day? Or was this an exception because their proctor actually wanted them to die?

There was no need to say anything else. Blood qi rose to the fore and overwhelming sword intent manifested between heaven and earth. A 'sword' character hovered in the air.

"KILL!" A sharp yell echoed as domineering blood qi became one with mental strength. It was just the Incantation of the Blade of Blood. Plenty of people knew it. Yuan Shuo knew it and those on good terms with him knew it as well. It was just... who actually used it back in the day? Yuan Shuo didn't, not before sword energy appeared. To do so was to cherish a death wish.

"Li Hao!" Hong Yitang shouted as his presence built. "You need to make it out alive! Everything is lost if you don't! Take care of my daughter... the rest doesn't matter! You can win! Whether it is the nine ministries or royal family... All of them are completely worthless!"

"Be careful of the ancient civilization!" A sword pierced through the world and ran through the head of the enemy facing him. Hong Yitang immediately turned on another powerhouse, his longsword of blood qi rampaging through the battlefield. He was indomitable!

Li Hao watched lividly and suddenly set his jaw, summoning his blood qi as well. He ran his hand through his opponent's heart and sneered at the sky. "I am a rogue, not a king! It's enough that Director Hou makes it back. Silver Moon has stood for many years and it makes no difference if I am there or not.

"If worst comes to worst, just retreat to Silver Moon! Senior Sky Sword still has Sky Sword Mountain to take care of. I have absolutely no ties to others in this world, so what do I care about this? I am Li Hao! Do you think so little of me??"

Li Hao's blood qi erupted after he clawed out an enemy's heart, melding with his mental strength. His characters flew out with a rumble and exploded in the air, ripping through the powerhouse that Sky Sword faced!

"I brought Senior Little Tree here. If the two of you have the mind to, escort it back to Mount Cat Head when you leave. You can continue to transact with the senior for Water of Life. As for my teacher... Tell him... to go home... and stay home... Don't go running around anymore!"

Li Hao raised his blood qi to the maximum amount possible and charged in front of Hou Xiaochen. The director glowered to see the young man run off. His blood qi had gathered as well, but Li Hao was one step ahead of him and so fast that he completed the Incantation of the Blade of Blood in the blink of an eye!

"Stop fighting, you two. There's no need to coalesce the incantation. Having one more person die is just the actions of an idiot!" Li Hao's expression was chilly. He blazed with hatred! He hated that Black Armor! He knew that he was caught squarely in a plot, but there was nothing he could do about it as he wasn't strong enough.

"Kill Ying Hongyue for me if you have the chance to!" Other than that, Li Hao didn't hold too many regrets in life. The world was just this unfair at times, what was he supposed to do?

I wanted to do something because I was motivated to from the bottom of my heart. Since I cannot achieve my goals, there is nothing that I regret.

Hou Xiaochen landed on the ground, grinding his teeth. He suddenly howled with outrage and jabbed with his spear, stabbing all around him and pulverizing all of the powerhouses that came for him!

“KILL!” He didn’t know who to hate, just that he’d failed so completely and utterly on this excursion! He’d even briefly hesitated when he coalesced the Incantation of the Blade of Blood. He was as sickly as they labeled him, alright!

Heavily injured, Sky Sword thudded heavily to the ground. He lost himself in thought as he stared at the sky. Under normal circumstances, they should ensure Li Hao’s safety. But when Hong Yitang erupted with the incantation, he’d hesitated briefly, wondering if Hong Yitang alone was sufficient to defeat the enemies.

Reality demonstrated that... he could not. Even with Li Hao momentarily raising his strength to new heights, the enhanced duo could not overcome their numerous opponents. Even more enemies charged them while their presences grew weaker.

A period of decline inevitably followed the enormous eruption of strength for the Incantation of the Blade of Blood. The opponent facing the little tree, in particular, was highly formidable. The tree didn’t know the incantation, so its situation was dire indeed. Hong Yitang rushed over, but found himself unable to turn the situation around!

It wasn’t until Li Hao joined him that they managed to suppress the opponent three on one.

Sky Sword watched dumbly, noting that more and more enemies were rushing them. He suddenly found himself bereft of his senses...

Silver Moon martial masters...

He looked at Hou Xiaochen and suddenly said, “Sky Sword Manor is just a place that discusses dao. I have never sought to become an overlord! I am a swordsman... and swordsmen... should not

conduct themselves in this manner. I rather regret being one step behind him. Hou Xiaochen... help me disband my mountain after you leave. Tell everyone... that they're on their own!"

He laughed. I am Sky Sword! The greatest swordsman beneath the heavens! Since when do I need other people to save me?

Hou Xiaochen brooded, not saying a word.

Sky Sword shouted, throwing himself forward like a sword—a blood sword that drilled through countless powerhouses surrounding them. Bodies rained down from the sky!

"I was just thinking that it's still a bit tough!" Li Hao laughed heartily. "Well met, senior! This should be enough now. There's no need to be conflicted about anything, Director Hou. Didn't you hear what those people said earlier? Those who stay have the hardest choice of all! Don't be brash. All of our efforts will be wasted if you give in to impulse!"

Hou Xiaochen stood on the ground and mechanically swung his spear around, decimating everything in his path.

KABOOM!

Hong Yitang's 'sword' character exploded and eviscerated the little tree's opponent. The man himself smiled ghastly, looking at Li Hao. "You really dragged me down into the thick of things this time... You were so confident that I thought we could win!"

"I did win..." Li Hao answered with resignation. "Who would've thought that a bullshit Black Armor would appear out of nowhere? What can I do about that?"

BOOM!!

Hong Yitang exploded!

Grief flashed through Li Hao's eyes, a sorrow that quickly turned into a smile. I didn't anticipate this either, sorry, Martial Uncle Hong. He grabbed some handfuls of flesh and blood, thinking back to when they first met. Earthturner Sword had told him that this was not how one employed the sword...

"KILL!!" All of the young man's characters detonated, annihilating endless heavyweights. Li Hao's presence climbed to its peak as a sword aura surged around him. It transformed into a sword that swept in all directions!

Rumble!!

Powerhouses died in droves around him! Li Hao charged into the enemy army and detonated himself, causing maximum damage to their opponents.

Sky Sword took a page out of his book and slammed his broadsword down, turning tens of millions of enemies into ash. His body started falling apart as he turned back to smile at Hou Xiaochen. Some irritation and pride marked the bend of his neck. "This is... what we call the martial world!"

KABOOM!

The one known as Sky Sword exploded and vanished from the world.

Hummmmm.

Bugles sounded as the enemy retreated like the tides. All of their countless numbers were completely frightened out of their wits. Although their powerhouses still stood in the sky, they were horrified and didn't dare set foot forward.

On the ground, Hou Xiaochen said nothing as he hunted down their stragglers. He didn't know how many he killed and knew that it was all an illusion, so it didn't matter how many he killed. But still, he wanted to kill someone.

All of his companions were dead! Even he couldn't comprehend why he'd been a step slower than Li Hao. Li Hao was the hope of this age, wasn't he?

Why did you guys leave me behind? Is it because I'm weaker? Or is it because I'm a bureaucrat and not the martial hero of their definition? They think less of me, do they?

The Broken Will Spear swept in a wide arc around him as he tore everything to pieces. There was only slaughter in his eyes!

Behind him, the little tree looked on dumbly, thrusting its roots into the ground as it dragged its branches forward...

Li Hao was dead? What should it do now? Go back to Silver Moon with this Hou Xiaochen? Continue to guard the imperial palace?

The Black Armor's voice sounded in the duo's ears after an indeterminate period of time. "The enemy has retreated and our side has not suffered more than half its numbers as casualties. We have won this battle! Congratulations, you two are official students at Evenround Martial University!"

The scene flickered around them as the human and tree abruptly appeared in a classroom. The Black Armor was there as well and greets them happily. "Congratulations!"

Hou Xiaochen stared silently at him before asking slowly, "Where is Li Hao's sword, the Windchaser Boots, and his storage ring?"

"He's dead..." The Black Armor was surprised.

“I know. Where are his belongings?”

The Black Armor thought for a moment before producing a storage ring, sword, and a pair of boots. Hou Xiaochen took them and looked at Panther. “Can I take the dog with me?”

“Well, no...”

“Very well, then the little tree and I will be departing...” He looked at the little tree. “Senior, please enter the storage ring. Let’s go!”

“Are we... leaving... just like this?” The little tree shook with shock. Li Hao and the rest had all died here!

“What else should we do?” Hou Xiaochen was particularly composed. The little tree remained silent before transforming into a sapling and vanishing into the storage ring. It remained motionless inside.

“Then I request the senior to send me out!” Hou Xiaochen looked at the Black Armor.

Chapter 783: Official Students (IV)

“Are you not going to stay for a while?” the Black Armor asked slowly. “You should know that many benefits await you after becoming an official student. I didn’t lie to you about that. You won’t need too long in here, just a month before you set foot into Apex—the seven element Arcanus realm by your system!”

“That’s fine.” Hou Xiaochen smiled faintly. “I think I know how to grow stronger from here. Thank you for your good intentions, senior. Send me out! Or is the senior going to go back on your word?”

“Of course not!” The Black Armor looked at him. “Are you... going to seek revenge on me?”

“No, you’ve misunderstood, senior. I have absolutely no intentions of doing that! Life and death are commonplace in the martial world, not to mention that I am not of the same kind as them. I am an official, they are bandits!”

“I see...” mused the Black Armor. “I also hope you understand that even if you become the seven element Arcanus that your age is familiar with, there are many, many Apexes who died to my hands back in the day!”

“Of course!” Hou Xiaochen remained calm, not saying anything else. He frowned as the moments dragged on with no sign of action from the Black Armor. “What does... the senior mean by this?”

“Nothing much.” The Black Armor suddenly shook its head after a period of silence. “I’m just assessing a few things. Forget it, it’s a bit complicated. Someone once said that the human heart should not be tested. I took the bit in my own teeth this time—the human heart is very difficult to be tested!”

The scene blurred in front of Hou Xiaochen—it was only now that he seemed to set foot in the real world. He blinked, dazed by what he found.

Li Hao was rubbing his head, a dark expression on his face. Hong Yitang had his head tilted toward the sky. Sky Sword avoided Hou Xiaochen’s eyes out of extreme awkwardness. However dashing he’d been with the dashing line of “this is what we call the martial world” was however mortified he was now.

Qian Wanhao and the others were still present in the surroundings, as was Panther. They looked curiously at the newly returned quartet. What was going on? Had they succeeded?

The Black Armor was in deep thought and said slowly after a while, “That... was a real battle in the annals of history... and this was how we secured victory that day! I placed you in the illusion because I wanted to see if you could walk out of it... If it would be one person walking out or all of you...”

One person meant that someone had sacrificed themselves. Everyone walking out meant that the mission had been failed as the group chose to withdraw. As for an option of everyone being alive after passing, that was impossible. That outcome did not exist.

“This battle happened in the early days of New Martial. Many people participated in or witnessed it. The identities you assumed were that of real people back in the day. A great number of people died in that skirmish, most of them the older guard of martial masters.

“Even the Human King participated in that battle, but as an insignificant soldier. Hong Yitang’s identity of headmaster was the old headmaster of Demonic Martial University. His fall in battle was a staggering loss to humanity. He taught untold powerhouses and geniuses, choosing to erupt with the Incantation of the Blade of Blood when his blood qi declined.

“Going down with the enemy was the choice of many veteran martial masters back in the day,” sighed an emotional Black Armor. “I had you participate in this battle simply because I wanted to see how you’d choose in such circumstances. Would you save your lives and withdraw, or would you consider the impact of your actions on the outside world and choose to save one or two of your number?”

“You would not have defeated the enemies if there wasn’t a certain degree of coordination between you, as well as the resolve to die! Trusting one another and a sacrificial spirit was key! Only in trusting one another and having most of you detonate yourselves to save one or two did you have a hope of beating back the enemy.

“That is a true martial master in my eyes!”

“It was completely unnecessary!” snorted Li Hao. He was still rubbing his head. “In my opinion, some things do not need to be tested. You said so yourself, the human heart should not be tested! Was there a need for this? What is Director Hou supposed to do with himself after surviving that test?”

“.....” Hou Xiaochen played deaf and dumb. He wasn’t just feeling awkward at this moment, he even wanted to die.

“And us too, how are we supposed to face each other after laying down all those heroic words?”

“.....” Sky Sword flushed with embarrassment. Pretend I didn’t say anything just now.

“That’s true...” sighed the Black Armor. “It’s just... I found this iteration of humanity to be ugly and repulsive for your fixation on scheming, plotting, and killing each other for energy stones. I felt that you would be the same even when faced with death, that although some of you look united, the base side of your natures would come out if survival was at stake. It was my speculation that your group, too, would fight among yourselves. Reality proved to me that I thought too much!”

This test had been a success, and a failure. The candidates had succeeded, but would a rift grow between the surviving Hou Xiaochen and the rest? Or would those who sacrificed themselves ostracize Hou Xiaochen?

The Black Armor didn’t know. All it knew was that these people had exceeded its expectations. It hadn’t wanted to actually kill them, there was no meaning in that. It just wanted to test them—this wasn’t the true third test.

Having been quiet all this time, Hong Yitang rubbed his head with a smile. “So do we pass? Do all of us pass? If so, then we will pursue the matter no further. As for Hou Xiaochen, don’t worry. We think that he’ll do better than all of us. At least this guy can hold his temper. See, didn’t he do a good job just now? Don’t worry, we won’t think less of him!

“Or do you think we should’ve saved Li Hao?” Hong Yitang laughed. “Honestly speaking, Li Hao might die very quickly without our help if he walked out of here. He causes trouble from morning to night, so his decision to sacrifice was right. We don’t have to default to protecting him just because he’s young. It should be those who can bide their time that stay. He obviously can’t!”

“What!” Li Hao laughed sheepishly. “That’s not true, I rarely stir up trouble!”

Even Sky Sword laughed at that! The normally taciturn and stone-faced swordsman laughed heartily. Rarely stir up trouble? Just look at how much trouble you've gotten into in less than a month! Can you really say that with a straight face?

Hou Xiaochen sighed as he looked at his companions. "If I were to say that I really don't have intentions of seeking revenge for you after I leave... would you regret saying those words?"

"Even if Director Hou doesn't want vengeance, Manager Yu would encourage you to grow stronger and avenge us after she learns of what happened." Li Hao grinned. "I believe in Manager Yu!"

"....." Hou Xiaochen didn't know whether to laugh or cry! He shook his head instead. "Don't do that next time. I... I've always firmly believed that I'm very strong. Never in my life have I felt so weak. It's a blow to my ego!"

The four laughed loudly. Meanwhile, Qian Wanhao and the rest frowned. Although they didn't know what'd just occurred, they could more or less piece together the puzzle from what they heard. So these guys had passed?

"All of you pass!" announced the Black Armor. "Well done. To be frank, I didn't think that you would succeed. I would give you another chance even if all of you withdrew and put you in the real third test. To think that you'd exceed my expectations!"

The four smiled without a response; Li Hao kept up a running litany of curses inside of him. Just you wait for your daddy to grow stronger! I'll beat the shit out of you! You better pray that your physical body is long gone, or I'll blow it to high heavens again and again!

"Do not let your thoughts run wild in front of powerhouses," the Black Armor said calmly. "You are so weak that you are not even an Apex. None of your thoughts can be concealed from me. My physical body is long gone, so I'm afraid you won't be able to make good on your wish!"

"....."

Stunned bedazzlement! Not only did Li Hao freeze, but so did everyone else's expression still for a moment.

"Did you not know?" laughed the Black Armor. "The difference in our cultivation is so great that your thoughts are as if lamps in front of me. I know what you think the moment it takes shape in your mind. You guys are right, this Director Hou of yours is indeed planning on going back and locking himself away in closed door cultivation to grow strong enough to kill me. However, dreams are easy, but reality is difficult."

Hou Xiaochen held his breath and emptied his mind, not daring to think of anything. His actions were imitated by the others as well. They couldn't believe it—it was terrifying that the Black Armor could read their minds!

"I just wanted to have some fun with you, but I shall take the situation seriously now. You are official students of Evenround Martial University now! Congratulations, new students!"

Five medallions hovered in front of the four humans. The little tree was still brooding in the storage ring.

Not a word was said as the four accepted their medallions.

"According to the senior's words," Hong Yitang suddenly raised. "Would you have gone back on your word and not let us leave if we passed the real third test instead of this one?"

"Of course not," the Black Armor responded calmly. "If that had been the case, the only difference was that you would not be able to access certain things and your level of authorization wouldn't be too high. You would just be a visitor!"

The quartet looked at each other. So... does this mean our authorization level is now high?

"Then can we do with these people as we see fit?" Li Hao pointed at Qian Wanhao's group.

“You would not have the right to do so if you were visitors. But as official students, you may!”

Qian Wanhao’s eyes widened with dismay and he furiously roared, “You can’t do that! Senior, I am exceedingly high placed in the outside world and can facilitate your revival! I can supply one hundred million mysterious power stones for you...”

BOOM!

Li Hao struck with his sword! His opponent didn’t have any treasures or weapons on him, and was weak after the earlier battle.

The Black Armor simply watched the resulting action. He really wouldn’t have handed over the trespassers to these people if they’d only passed the regular third test. But in this moment, he decided to bestow them with the identity of true students. What did it matter if students killed a few outsiders, a few invaders?

Nothing at all!

All that rot about identity and revival... it was the living dead a long time ago, what did it care about this?

Li Hao wasn’t the only one to make a move—Hou Xiaochen and the others did so as well. All of them were crazed fiends as they struck with vicious ruthlessness. They seemed to be regarding their opponents as the Black Armor!

Kaboom!

A furious barrage of explosions ensued. The quartet would've beaten a five element Arcanus to death, to say nothing of a four element! Qian Wanhao had the chance to scream once before Li Hao's sword ran through his throat! Hong Yitang turned him into a sieve the next moment!

The other three ministers, including the resentful Hu Mingfa, were churned to pieces in a mad frenzy. The one from the City of Supernaturals wanted to run away, but Panther tore it to pieces with a bite!

The dog spat out the body and regarded the Black Armor with an odd look.

"It is of no consequence that students keep a steed around," the Black Armor was unmoved. "You do not need the identity of a student, but do not harm other students or you will be executed for it!"

Panther relaxed with relief. It'd been testing the Black Armor just now. Thank goodness the effects seemed good. But that suit of armor was definitely scary to read what it was thinking.

All was truly quiet now. Li Hao and the rest were feeling much more content after venting their frustrations. Even the Black Armor didn't seem as irritating as before, although it'd been very maddening when it was testing them!

None of them like this kind of examination!

"All of you should rein in your thoughts." The Black Armor was as calm as before. "Your first thought after surviving a calamity is how to reap benefits from me and loot the university. That is not a good thought!"

"....." Four humans and one dog immediately blanked their minds. Are we that obvious?

The Black Armor seemed to be smiling.

Chapter 784: A Book (I)

Everyone was very much on guard against this ancient personage who'd been dead for countless years. Based on what the Black Armor said, his body was long gone. That meant he was similar to those of Battle Heaven and existing only in mental form. That made Li Hao curious—if the Black Armor was on the Saint level, did Saint level bodies also decay?

How many years had it been since the ancient civilization?

Fifty thousand? One hundred thousand? Hadn't the Black Armor already ascended past the Immortal level, which meant he'd reached a state of undying eternity? And yet, his body decomposed a scant tens of thousands of years later. How was that immortal? Or was there another reason at play? And, just what benefits could be had here?

The Black Armor had said at the second test that defeating two puppets would result in rewards and three would result in special rewards...

The quartet's thoughts were simple since they couldn't defeat this person—get as much as they could from him before leaving and avoid further contact with him. If there was nothing to be had, they could at least swing a waiving of their penalties, right?

Panther had taken half of the one hundred million energy stones; this one should have the other half. Li Hao's group wasn't able to do anything about that. The idiots that ruled the various factions had just outright dumped the stones on the ground. It might've been safer to hold it all within storage rings. That they'd insisted on cramming it into the small pond meant that this one could've absorbed it all.

It might be because of this energy that the Black Armor awoke. He would've stayed sleeping otherwise. If not, earlier expeditions from the Ministry of Finance should've perished down to the last man.

The group suppressed their various irritations as numerous thoughts flitted through their minds. The Black Armor didn't say anything either. He rose and looked at the quartet with his usual calm.

“Come with me!” He introduced the school as they walked. “Evenround Martial is not big—there are only four buildings of the classrooms, offices, cultivation, and dormitory. Teachers and students share the same dormitory. This one is the classroom building.

“Each building has one hundred Evenround puppets in residence, overseeing daily operations...”

“What level of strength are these puppets?” Li Hao looked at the puppets following them. So there were four hundred of these puppets before?

“Apex,” the Black Armor responded faintly. “Of course, they’re not truly Apex in terms of strength. They reach that level in terms of defensive and offensive capabilities, but puppets are puppets in the end. Their powers of adaptation are much weaker and will not prevail against a true Apex.”

As much as the group understood, their hearts quailed. Apex! That was very strong! No one in the modern world could reach that level. Even Li Hao was very far from it. It would require at least a seven element Arcanus to reach it.

For supernaturals, they would have to open all five locks of the organs as well as wind and thunder to barely reach it. It was almost the same for martial masters. These were all the locks discovered in the human body for now. As for the one of the head... no one dared touch it. Therefore, the current limit of strength for martial masters and supernaturals was seven element Arcanus.

Just a puppet here was that strong! It was incredible. Li Hao said nothing further as he’d known long ago how strong the ancients were. He would just keep putting in the hard work.

The Black Armor continued walking at the head of the group. “Unfortunately, Evenround Martial does not have anything precious to offer new students due to our state of inertness. As compensation for the third test, I’ll take you to a place. It’s up to you what you gain there. If you reap a harvest, it may be a precious one indeed.”

He suddenly looked at Li Hao. “For you... it may be a very bountiful harvest!”

Li Hao was surprised by the attention. For me? What bountiful harvest?

The Black Armor didn't say anything, leaving the young man to his thoughts as they walked. Treasure? Weapons? Or something else?

The road ahead was long until they reached a small attic that had been built underground. Li Hao was struck dumb by the incongruity, but perhaps there was much more to be seen here.

There were puppets outside the attic as well, ones that bowed to the Black Armor like they were alive. Plainly, the Black Armor possessed a high status. The attic doors opened automatically when the group approached, revealing countless books to the group's eyes. Was this... a library?

"The Voidbreak Incantation, Indomitable Golden Body, All Methods As One, Sacred Record of Origin, Dao of Wind and Cloud, Eating in All Directions..." Li Hao sucked in a sharp breath after taking a casual glance around. There were quite a few familiar titles—not familiar in the sense that he'd read them before, but that he'd heard of their name.

Eating in All Directions was said to be a top three monster spirit secret art. The Voidbreak Incantation was the ultimate secret art of the Battle Heaven Army. Sadly, he hadn't had the merits to trade for it. All of this was here?!

Li Hao became agitated. Did the Black Armor mean to give them these secret manuals?

Although Panther couldn't read, it stared fixedly at a book of jade. The dog seemed to sense some presence wafting off of it and was growing agitated. Even highly learned individuals like Hong Yitang and the rest gasped with astonishment. What kind of place was Evenround Martial?

They'd heard of these ancient manuals before, some mentioned in other ancient books. These were cultivation methods of the greatest people in the ancient civilization. Although the martial universities contained all of the learning from that time period and powerhouses didn't hoard their knowledge, it wasn't just anyone who could learn or practice their martial skills. Therefore, most methods were stored safely in a sacred land somewhere. Only heavyweights who reached a certain level were permitted to practice them.

But today, they could be found everywhere!

Each manual still exuded the light of great dao, despite it being years since they'd been written. The group could sense that if they cultivated here, they wouldn't even need to read the books to quickly reap great rewards.

The Black Armor was used to the sight and looked at his new charges. "These battle methods are left behind by the powerhouses of old. Evenround Martial's background is far from ordinary, so it stores almost all of the martial knowledge available from experts back in the day!"

The group took sharp breaths.

"What kind of background does Evenround Martial have..." asked a shocked Li Hao. "How can it... have copies of all of the greatest martial knowledge?"

"Not just that, that's only part of it. Even the Sword Sovereign from your Li family left behind a copy of his sword method here," the Black Armor said faintly. "It's not specific instructions, just some reflections. They might be helpful for you, but not all of your desires will be satisfied in one go since you're a new student.

"You can choose one manual this time. Other than Hou Xiaochen, that tree and Hong Yitang can also choose one themselves. Sky Sword can choose one of lower caliber."

Hou Xiaochen was rendered speechless. He had to go without? Fine, he'd only just passed the second test.

A new thought had just occurred in Li Hao's mind when the Black Armor promptly responded, "Don't think of sharing what you learn in the outside world. This isn't regular martial knowledge. There are restrictions within as this knowledge touches upon the great dao. You won't be able to speak of it no matter what you try!"

That's... crazy. Li Hao didn't quite believe it, but he didn't say anything to the contrary. The rewards were good enough. Reflections from his ancestor's sword methods? That was the martial knowledge of an exalted emperor, an absolute titan! That was a supreme treasure to him.

However, the Black Armor took a look at him. "I don't actually recommend that you choose the sword method. Everyone's sword is different and your ancestor was not skilled at teaching others. It is not very suitable for you."

Li Hao blinked. What did that mean? Was the Black Armor not giving it to him anymore?

"As compensation for the third test, I recommend that you peruse another battle method..."

Li Hao frowned, but quickly smiled. "Might I ask what kind of battle method it is?"

"You'll see when you see it." The Black Armor led Li Hao forward, then looked back at Hong Yitang. "You can come as well if you'd like. The battle method might be useful for you too."

Although confused, Hong Yitang followed after momentary consideration.

"Sky Sword, you can read the books that can be moved," the Black Armor's voice sounded as they walked off. "You won't be able to read the books that you cannot move. Hou Xiaochen, you can read the free books. You will have certain gains from them regardless. These are the benefits as provided to the students."

"Stop staring at the monster spirit method, Panther. You'll naturally learn it if you're strong enough. If not, reading it would just be a waste of time. Let the tree out. There are monster spirit cultivation methods here that will be helpful to it."

Standing in the back, Hou Xiaochen listened to the instructions with resignation. How sad he was! The Black Armor even seemed to be pulling Li Hao and Hong Yitang aside for special tutelage! How envious and jealous he was!

.....

The Black Armor walked ahead with the two; they walked for an indeterminate period of time as the attic seemed to run to the heavens. Finally, they reached a tiny enclosed area. There was a book here.

Just one book.

“The Accounts of Evenround.” Li Hao paused after reading the title. What... was this? A storybook?

The Black Armor seemed to be caught in memories as he looked at it. It was a long moment before he introduced, “This book was written by the headmaster himself back in the day. After it was written, he invited the Human King to edit it.”

Li Hao’s heart shook. The Human King himself edited this book!? Just what kind of status did Evenround Martial possess??

“Of course, this book was just the headmaster’s imitation of a powerhouse’s methods. Now that the headmaster is no longer among us, we can speak of this freely.”

Li Hao looked curiously at him. “Does the senior mean that... this book is a copy of another work?”

“Ahem... you can’t put it that way!” The Black Armor smiled. It’s not a copy, just... some of the methods... are similar to a certain ancient powerhouse. That powerhouse was very strong! What a pity that they ultimately perished in battle.”

“Perished?” Would the strong perish? Li Hao didn’t think much of such a heavyweight.

“Don’t go thinking that only the weak fall!” The Black Armor said emotionally. “On the contrary, although that one died countless years ago, he was still a benefactor to the New Martial that developed later. The Human King was so strong in part thanks to the methods left behind by that one. Battle Heaven is an auxiliary branch of the Exalted Blood Emperor, and the Exalted Blood Emperor had a very complex relationship with that one.

“Strictly speaking, Battle Heaven’s name represents the powerhouse who fell. He has left indelible traces in the world since the beginning of time!”

Li Hao couldn’t help but remark when he saw that the Black Armor was outright using some titles. “You... Senior Little Tree said that the titles of those truly strong can not be mentioned...”

Chapter 785: A Book (II)

“This is Evenround Martial,” laughed the Black Armor. “There’s not much of a problem with mentioning titles of the powerful. However, you should not do so in the outside world or other places. Evenround Martial is a bit unique. While there aren’t many treasures left here or the lingering traces of any supreme existence, there is a special dao circulating that cannot be sensed in the outside world.”

These words encompassed so much meaning! Li Hao and Hong Yitang looked at the book. It seemed very ordinary with nothing unusual about it. Yet the Black Armor said that it would help them, and that it borrowed from the methods left behind by a supreme powerhouse.

Li Hao gathered that he’d once seen the exalted emperor of Battle Heaven in the scenes created by the two characters of the city’s name. Was the one who wore a longbow on his back and wielding a bloody blade the Exalted Blood Emperor?

But the Black Armor said that the Battle Heaven characters represented the one who’d perished, so Li Hao was confused. Of course, that was neither here nor there. The key was that this book might truly be very impressive.

“The two of you should decide for yourselves if you choose this book or another. I’ve made a unique opportunity available to you, it won’t be this way next time.”

“This one then!” Li Hao decided after some thought.

“Me too!” Hong Yitang nodded as well. There didn’t seem to be a reason for the Black Armor to lie to them. They could all freely choose from the incomparably precious secret arts out there. Was there a need to go to this trouble to deceive them?

Not to mention, this book was here by itself on this floor. It was clear to see from that alone that it was extraordinary.

“Then, enjoy your reading!” The Black Armor seemed to be smiling again.

“What did he mean by that?” Li Hao suddenly asked when the other disappeared. “There seemed to be another meaning behind his words.”

“I don’t know.” Hong Yitang shook his head ruefully. “We’re ants in here, so let’s not think too much and just go with the flow. We wouldn’t be able to offer much resistance if he really wanted to kill us.”

“Let’s leave the rest for the future!” Li Hao smiled, not the least bit dejected. “We have time to later. It’s only been how long since we started cultivating?”

Hong Yitang chuckled and didn’t say anything. The two of them sat down in front of the desk. Li Hao looked at the book resting on it; it seemed that others had once sat here to read it before.

The Accounts of Evenround sounded more like a diary or records of certain events. What was so special about it?

Li Hao blinked when he opened the cover.

“We were very poor when I was growing up and I really wanted to eat something delicious. But we didn’t have any money then, not until big brother practiced martial dao and earned money. That was when I received an allowance and could buy what I wanted. Life was so good then...”

Li Hao looked around blankly after he flipped through the entire book. This was a storybook! No, it was a memoir. It recorded the day-to-day mundanity of a woman growing up. It mentioned that she had an older brother that doted on her and often bought her food. She had an adorable cat that loved to sleep and ate a lot. It always ate so much that she didn’t have enough food for herself.

She had many elders who spoiled her, but she knew that it was because her brother was a genius. They liked her because of him, but she didn’t mind.

She spent a period of time away from her brother with a teacher surnamed Li. She cried a lot then and really missed home. She later killed a lot of people in that place, but she didn’t tell her brother about her actions.

And then... that was it. There was nothing else. These mundanities were all that the book covered. Li Hao looked at it carefully up and down, left to right, front to back... and was completely perplexed! Utterly baffled!

He looked at Hong Yitang; the man was stroking his chin.

“Have we... been toyed with... once again?” the man asked.

“.....” Li Hao was so baffled that his reactions were slow. “Is there a point in doing so?”

Did the Black Armor have too much time on his hands?? I wanna beat the shit out of him right now! You made everything so mysterious that we thought you knew the error of your ways and wanted to give us something good. But it turns out... that you just wanted to give us a memoir??

The heck is this?!

There's no discussion of great dao or any information about martial dao. The only killing it mentions is described by a single line. There's not even a mention of methods! The book is pretty much a stream of consciousness and it's really boring to read.

It can talk about a meal for half a page and mention a great battle by simply the fact that they won!

“.....”

The hell was this?! The author could at the very least describe the battle in more detail or the martial methods used. That might be useful for the reader. But this is all there was to the book?

Li Hao almost wanted to vomit blood in his anger!

“That one... has no need to provoke us over and over again, does he? What would be the point in that?” Hong Yitang asked thoughtfully. He picked up a book to consider it. “Perhaps there's a hidden page or compartment in it!”

Li Hao nodded and quickly inspected the book, but still found nothing.

“Will a secret manual appear if we burn it?” Li Hao looked at Hong Yitang.

“Can we burn it?” The man frowned.

“I... think so? He didn't say that we can't.” Flame appeared in Li Hao's hands, but it was a futile effort. It went out as soon as it touched the book.

“I understand!” Li Hao’s eyes darted around. “The book itself is a treasure!”

He finally understood—the book was a precious object! The Black Armor wanted to give them a treasure!

“Damn it, we still fell for it!” Li Hao was still regretful. “One book is only one treasure, he had us choose between it. Perhaps he wanted to see us fight for it. The book may be a very high level treasure, high enough to the point that we’ll fight for it!”

A sigh traveled through the air; resignation colored it. “The book... is indeed a treasure, but it cannot be removed from the premises. Look at it carefully! Concentrate. I’m sure that it will be helpful for you!”

It was the Black Armor. Li Hao looked anew at the book—so the issue wasn’t with how high level the book was? Then what was it?

He looked at it carefully, going from back to front, picking the first character of each line, skipping lines, reading backwards, trying to locate anagrams, reading the last character of each line, skipping every other character...

No matter what he read, he still didn’t come away with anything. Li Hao’s head was aching. Is he really not messing with us?

Hong Yitang had also been considering the item closely when he said, “Calm yourself and have a look. Don’t think of anything else.”

Calm myself? His heart was indeed not calm. But there might be something to what Hong Yitang was saying, so Li Hao calmed himself down and stopped complaining. This was all extraneous gains in any case, so it didn’t matter if he walked away with anything or not.

As he perused the book, Li Hao seemed to return to the days of the Veteris Institute, of when he studied ancient tomes with his teacher. Regardless of how valuable this storybook was or how unique the font may be, it was ancient writing at the very least. Written in a plain and straightforward manner, it was ideal to use as instructional material. There was nothing arcane or abstract about the words, which made it suitable for beginners to study when they learned the ancient language.

Li Hao became much quieter after he stilled his heart. He wasn't as impatient as before, and actually thought he was seeing things as he continued to read the words. The young man rubbed his eyes, was he seeing afterimages from staring so hard? Surely not.

But as he looked carefully at each individual character, they seemed to come alive and move with a will of their own.

Whaaaat?

Li Hao concentrated on a particular word—it didn't move. Surprised, the young man continued to fixate on one word and assessed it for a very long moment until the scene suddenly shifted in his eyes. The character had become a person!

The person was practicing martial arts and had a bit of their blood qi seep out. The components gradually drifted apart and were stripped out. Li Hao seemed to see blood qi separated into countless portions and become a dragon in the next moment!

The dragon howled, startling Li Hao so much that he took a quick step backward and immediately fell out of this mental state.

He was shocked! What... was that? He looked at the book's pages again and lost himself in the characters. This time, he discovered some profundities—each character represented a type of martial knowledge. No, it might all be the same. He could tell that this was a... combination?

Indeed, the characters that'd taken human shape seemed to be endlessly rearranging themselves. Blood qi was being broken up to countless portions and rearranged in a different manner, ultimately giving rise to a distinct final form.

Li Hao blinked with astonishment and was beside himself! Was this... the true nature of martial dao? The core essence of ancient battle methods? They took the same portion of blood qi, or internal force and mysterious power, to fragment, rearrange, and then bring back together in a different battle method.

What was this? A reconstruction of the microscopic world?

Li Hao lost himself in the sight, suddenly understanding why the Black Armor had let him read this. Was it because of his supernatural abilities involving the characters? Could his characters be reassembled? Could they be fragmented again? Could his 'water' character be divided into endless water characters, then reformed as 'ice', 'snow', or 'frost'? Could he give rise to anything having to do with water?

It was like an entirely new world had been opened up to him. His mind was in a foggy haze as he marveled at the wonders of this book. It'd opened a new door to him, one that led to the microscopic world and spoke of the base nature of battle methods!

It wasn't martial dao, but directly expounding on ancient battle methods. It helped everyone understand how battle methods came to be and why they differed...

Heavens above!

Li Hao could barely believe the single glance he took. One character could undergo endless permutations to form different characters. Therefore, one method could become endless methods...

A myriad of changes! Didn't this reflect Martial Uncle Hong's thoughts? Their characters were formed from various individual strokes—didn't that hold true for all words? Therefore, wouldn't that mean that their characters could undergo a myriad of changes in the microscopic world?

Li Hao immersed himself in these new findings and could scarcely extract himself from them. He'd really run into a fortuitous occurrence this time! A massive stroke of fortune! There were no mysterious power stones, weapons, treasure, or whatever that measured up to this book...

Chapter 786: A Book (III)

In the darkness.

The Black Armor stood silently, head tilted toward the sky as he contemplated something.

The Accounts of Evenround Martial was the university's greatest offering. It was an ultimate art in the truest sense of the word. It imitated some of the Battle Emperor's methods—the headmaster had used his own techniques to retell the story.

The Human King had personally reviewed the work. Though he found it lackluster, he gave it a glowing review.

The outsiders that had barged into Evenround should not have a right to read from it, but the Black Armor could tell that Li Hao and Hong Yitang had some skill to their name. They'd greatly modified the ultimate art of Tranquil Star, but they seemed to be stuck after that and could not identify the path forward. Perhaps the book... and the composite nature of its blood qi battle method would give them some inspiration.

They would inherit the wisdom of the past to pave the way for future descendants. If it hadn't been for them utilizing the Incantation of the Blade of Blood in the third test, he wouldn't have brought them here. One could only say that they'd stumbled onto their stroke of fortune through sheer luck.

"Whether it is Initial Martial, Mid Martial, or New Martial... all battle methods of martial dao are of this nature at their core. There are a myriad of battle methods and their only importance is to see which is most suited for the wielder. There are more great daos that can be counted, but they all become one in the end..." murmured the Black Armor as he stared at the sky. Can I... still go back?

When the heavens changed and the Star Gate closed, the teachers such as Mister Li had left first. The Black Armor had brought up the rear and wanted to settle everything at the university first before quickly joining them. Who knew that the heaven and earth would suddenly turn upside down, that energy would be spontaneously emptied from the surroundings, that the core origin dao would abruptly be severed from connection with the outside world?

He was forced to go into deep slumber and missed the timing to leave. And now, could he leave still? There must have been undesirable developments outside the Star Gate. Had powerful enemies come upon them? Who else could kill one of their greatest teachers, the Eternal Sword Sovereign?

The city lords of the eight great cities, commanders of the eight great armies, and tens of millions of troops had departed with the headmaster that day. How could they have all fallen in an ambush?

“Damn my lack of potential! I could only walk the path of core origin and couldn’t bring core origin into my internal world. Losing support from core origin dao meant that I was reduced to hibernation...” The Black Armor found his plight both helpless and tragic. If it hadn’t been for the infusion of energy this time, maybe he would’ve died in his slumber.

A red light shone in his eyes when he thought of something. “The spontaneous vacuum of energy and the breaking of great dao... means that there must be a traitor in the Silver Moon Territory! They worked with the enemies on the outside to kill the headmaster and teachers. Who dared be so bold?! They deserve death!”

The territory’s sudden loss of energy was certainly indicative of foul play, of inside agents who’d worked with the enemy to stab their people in the back.

A large current of thoughts ran through the Black Armor’s mind. When he looked at Li Hao and Hong Yitang again, he did so with sorrow. The end of New Martial had come upon them, the world completely changed, and a new age had arrived. Their time was over, and in this new era... were these people the strongest of humanity?

What an utter tragedy!

It was because he could read their thoughts that he found the situation to be even more wretched and helpless. Could the Star Gate be opened once more? Perhaps he could only stay in this place for the rest of his life and quietly wait for death. The one in front of him was the heir of the Li clan, he wielded Stellaris. Could he open the Star Gate?

Can you do it... Li Hao? I don't know.

The Black Armor wanted to cry, but his body had long died up and withered to dust. He had no tears to shed.

The age that belongs to us has died in this land. But I don't want to become like those from the primordial past... When the nine emperors sank into slumber and chaos gripped the world, people either died or surrendered. What should I do?

As a steady stream of thoughts rushed through his mind, he suddenly felt that it might be better not to awaken.

.....

Inside the secret chamber.

Li Hao had completely lost himself in the book. Hong Yitang was the same. His 'sword' character shifted through a variety of permutations. He summoned various abilities and dismissed them with a casual wave of his hand.

Both of them knew that they'd truly encountered a fortuitous opportunity. As they perceived the changes of the character, they felt that an entire era had been printed in that book. It was so much more precious than the books they'd received from Battle Heaven. There was no specific secret art inside, just the description of the core nature of martial methods.

Yet this was incredible!

After an indeterminate period of time, Li Hao waved his 'water' character into existence. It instantly transformed into an 'ice' character and a world of ice froze around them. It then transformed into a 'snow' character, leading to snowflakes fluttering around them. However, they quickly dissipated.

"My mastery is incomplete and my comprehension insufficient," Li Hao murmured after a grunt of surprise. "So it turns out that I'm far from where I want to be!"

"It's been four days," came the Black Armor's voice when he turned over his reflections in his mind. "You guys seemed to want to leave in five days. You should not delay your schedule, it is time to emerge now!"

Li Hao immediately jerked awake and promptly found his head so full that it ached. "How many days?" he asked incredulously.

"Four days!"

Hong Yitang's eyes were bloodshot as he looked blankly at Li Hao. "Four days?"

How was that possible? It'd only been a moment!

"Your mental strength is weak and you were lost inside. Four days passed by in a heartbeat for you!" The Black Armor appeared in front of them and waved the book closed. The two looked at it longingly.

"I don't have treasures to give you, this is your ultimate reward!" he said calmly. "You may go now, this place will continue to be sealed off. I need a period of quiet. If you wish to come next time... come after I have recovered!"

"Are you... going to revitalize as well?" Li Hao was still in a trance.

“Revitalize?” murmured the Black Armor before he laughed. “That is not on my mind. So what if I do? I’ll think about it. You should convene with the rest!”

The surroundings spun around them as they vanished from the room. Instead of leaving, the Black Armor sat down cross-legged and read the book closely with some nostalgia.

.....

Four humans and one dog were present in the field. Hou Xiaochen was rather envious when he saw Li Hao and Hong Yitang appear. “Did you get anything good?”

He was so envious! Of course, he’d also learned quite a great deal over the past couple of days from the free material that’d been available to him.

Li Hao breathed out and wanted to say something, but found that he couldn’t. He was shocked by the inability, then looked at Hong Yitang. Hong Yitang was likewise stunned and nodded, “I can’t speak of it either!”

“We tried earlier and found the same,” Sky Sword said faintly. “That’s a normal development. The secret arts available in this place are too high level and it seems that some powerhouses have set up unique methods to prevent their sharing unless unauthorized! We don’t need to discuss what you’ve gained. Is it time to leave now? It’s been four days.”

Li Hao suddenly thought of their fines. They hadn’t paid the penalty yet! Had the Black Armor forgotten about it? Regardless, thanks to the enormous gains they’d reaped from the book, the young man didn’t mind if they still had to pay the fine. Of course, it was best if they didn’t have to. That would mean they’d gained some material goods from this expedition.

Paying the fine meant that their gains would be erased. Everyone needed Water of Life at their current stage of cultivation. This trip had almost completely depleted his resources.

“Senior Black Armor, can we leave at any time?”

“You may with the medallion!” came the Black Armor’s indifferent voice. “But you still have to pay the fine, that is a rule set by the headmaster. I can grant you a postponement of a period of time—don’t think I’ve forgotten about it. The Skystar Mine is nearby, you can go for a look. There seems to have been some plant spirits there and they might still be alive. If they don’t give an Evenround student and Battle Heaven Army division leader what you wish, that makes them traitors. As such, you can kill them!”

Li Hao, however, was focused on the fact that the Black Armor still remembered the fine. As for killing supposed traitors? Please, he knew full well how weak he was. Anyone he encountered in the ruins would be at least an Apex. Am I supposed to head butt them to death or something?

So Skystar Town was nearby. Evenround Martial might have been constructed there for that mine.

“Is that mine... big?”

“If the trash stones that you had before came from small mines, then the difference between those mines and the Skystar Mine is the difference between a creek and the sea. A true mine can supply an entire world with energy. There were countless powerhouses back in the day, the trash you use can hardly measure up to it!”

Li Hao sucked in a sharp breath, he understood! I was wondering how so many powerhouses could rely on just one mine. So it was a huge mine! I wonder how much of its reserves are left?

“Then... can we go at any time?”

There was no reply forthcoming. Plainly, the Black Armor couldn’t be bothered to respond. He gave them no further instructions or bid them farewell. It was different from its brethren, and Li Hao wondered if he was stronger or Director General Wang. Perhaps... he was?

However, this Black Armor was more eccentric and seemed quieter than the director general.

“Let’s go!” Sky Sword intoned. No one knew what the Black Armor was thinking and this was no place to linger for long. Although he’d given them some benefits and treasure, his casual killing of the lord of Buddha Mountain was still fresh in their minds.

These ancient powerhouses didn’t seem to think much of modern experts. Perhaps... they found their modern counterparts to be too weak. Why would an elephant care about ants?

Just as the group prepared to leave, the Black Armor’s voice sounded by Li Hao’s ears again. “They seemed to place high hopes in you... and even Battle Heaven may find some hope in you. But I must remind you to not seek to open the Star Gate even if you collect all eight heritage weapons. That is all. You can go now!”

The world spun around Li Hao’s group again as they were sent out. Once they were gone, puppets manifested behind the Black Armor. He turned around to regard them solemnly.

“You do not need to be thus, teacher,” one of them suddenly said. “We feel no regret—we are... at least alive! Although we are now puppets, we are still alive, are we not?”

The Black Armor was silent for a long while before he responded, “I’m sorry... that I could not complete my protection duties like the rest...”

There was no sound forthcoming. The puppets thumped their chests in lieu of any response.

“Eternal glory to humanity!”

The Black Armor remained quiet. Did New Martial exist anymore? When could they go home? He missed home!

Chapter 787: All Sides Tremble (I)

The world spun and the group found themselves back at Skystar City when their vision cleared.

The city's western outskirts.

Quiet descended upon the world when the quartet reappeared. It was like everything froze for a second. Li Hao was out!

Indeed, it hadn't been five days yet—just four. Therefore, not that many noticed their reappearance. There were watchers on duty nearby, but the world itself was still. Jaws dropped when the watchers registered the quartet. Li Hao and his companions were out! Then... what about all of the powerhouses that'd gone inside?

The four ministers? The lord of Sky Roc Mountain? The lord of Buddha Mountain? The Stable Mountain Prince? Where were all of the overlords of the various locales?

Those in the surroundings watched silently, so motionless that it seemed even their thoughts were petrified.

The world was very, very quiet. Just as Li Hao's quartet shifted uncomfortably, the void split open. A middle-aged man with stately features walked out. The manner of his appearance jolted Li Hao's heart. Had the man ripped the void open?

...no... he'd simply moved so quickly that it looked like he had. But it also meant that he was astoundingly strong. Who was this?

The middle-aged man was wearing a military uniform. Ah, Li Hao could hazard a guess then.

The imposing middle-aged man looked at them for a long time before saying slowly, "Are they dead?"

Li Hao raised an eyebrow. Hou Xiaochen glanced at him and answered calmly, “They should be dead.”

“Did your group kill them, or did the existences inside the ruins do the deed?”

“What do you think?”

The middle-aged man didn’t respond. He looked at the ruin entrance, then at Li Hao. Still coolly composed, he proclaimed, “You may establish your Skystar Commander Office, but cease killing. Wait for the second awakening before you seek to resolve further problems!”

“Is your word definitive?” Li Hao frowned.

“It is!” The middle-aged man inclined his head. “Me and the other fellow have only stayed out of this because we are restricting the movements of the one in the royal family. Once your level of threat surpasses that one, however, I will be involved!”

“But I think... you may not be able to interfere!” Li Hao’s presence rose with a sneer. “The founder of the Ministry of Armed Forces is also spoken about in history books. Are you the Military God Qi Pingjiang?”

Indeed, this middle-aged man was the founder of the Ministry of Armed Forces. According to Yao Si, the old minister of Armed Forces, Administration, and the Inspectorate were the most terrifying existences among first generation ministers. They were of one civil and one military background, and the one at the Inspectorate was a bit of a wily old fox. He was skilled in both civil and military areas, but was suppressed all around. It was these three who led the other six old ministers in overcoming the royal family eighty years ago!

It was clear to see just how strong they were. One had to know that Li Hao had met quite a few old ministers by now and even killed two of them. Most of them... weren’t anything to write home about. The royal family was so strong that it took the three strongest old ministers to keep them under control.

Military God Qi Pingjiang was known throughout the lands for his military might. He'd even led his troops to triumph over the Black Armaturas back in the day—ample demonstration of his strength. Li Hao suspected that he was at least a six element Arcanus. He might have touched the threshold of Apex—also known as seven element Arcanus in the modern system. But it was difficult to determine what the specifics were.

Li Hao opened his eyes on the man; there was some energy leakage in his ball of light, but it seemed slightly piercing like that of someone converted back to martial dao. Qi Pingjiang might have been a supernatural before, then reverted back to being a martial master. It was difficult to determine his exact condition without exchanging blows with him.

Qi Pingjiang had come very quickly—as soon as Li Hao left the ruins. Clearly, he'd realized trouble was at hand. Qian Wanda and his group had all died! Not only that, but the plant spirit replicas with them had all perished as well. Their main bodies hadn't sensed their replicas' death yet due to the isolation effect of the ruins. Now that the doors were open again, their dead presence would quickly spread and be noticed by the plant spirits.

Too many powerhouses had been lost on this expedition. There were two lords of the seven divine mountains and a prince. The losses were more severe than last time as they were down another old minister and three current ministers.

The void shook as more people appeared. Some looked toward the ruins, others gazed sorrowfully upon the scene. Of them, there were the old ministers of Examinations and Foreign Relations. There were only seven left of the old ministers.

The old man from the Inspectorate also flashed into the scene. He looked at the ruins to the rear and then at Li Hao's group. He said not a word and made no sound. His son was equally quiet and, in fact, quite wooden with shock. Li Hao... had made it back out alive!

His father had said that he should take the Inspectorate and join the Skystar Commander Office if the young man survived. The inspector general remembered that, but he'd thought that Li Hao would never be setting foot back out again. Even if he did, it would surely be a pyrrhic victory.

But at the moment, Li Hao's quartet was out safe and sound. Apart from Hou Xiaochen's presence being a bit disarrayed—the man seemed to have become a supernatural—the rest were fine. Even the dog was out, but everyone else who'd gone inside was absent. Their absence was indication enough that they were dead. How else would Li Hao's group make it back out?

Another person broke through the air at this time—the long vanished Minister of Finance, Liu Yunqing. The fat man looked at the ruins, then at Li Hao. Confusion and wariness lurked in the bottom of his eyes.

He'd mounted an expedition to the ruins before and visited the classroom buildings. There were incredibly strong puppets inside. He hadn't known about them at first until a younger cousin of his accidentally barged into a restricted area. Numerous puppets instantly appeared to kill his Arcanus cousin. It only took them one move, which immediately informed him that these ruins were a deathtrap!

The puppet was likely an Apex, and there were at least one hundred of them!

He couldn't begin to fathom just how terrifying this martial university was. That was only puppets they encountered, they hadn't provoked anything hidden deeper. Therefore, his thought was that all explorers would die once they started fighting each other!

Liu Yunqing knew that outright dumping mysterious power stones in the ruins was the easiest way to provoke ancient powerhouses into reviving. However, reality proved him wrong. Someone had died, yet it was Qian Wanhao's side instead of Li Hao's group.

Had they died to the existences inside the ruins? Li Hao had emerged a day earlier, which was very possibly a sign that something had changed inside the ruins. Why else would the replicas of the plant spirits die otherwise? They were all five or six element Arcanus, and there were so many of them!

He did not believe that Li Hao would be able to kill them. The situation stared him in the face. Li Hao was out, and he'd inspired the old monster from Armed Forces to arrive. The one who'd suppressed countless powerhouses eighty years ago was in the habit of keeping a low profile and

balanced out the one from the Ministry of Finance. They raised up the nine ministries to defeat the royal family.

One had to know that this one hadn't put in a showing when the three great organizations rose. Neither did he appear when the seven divine mountains declared supremacy. He still didn't display himself in the public eye when the City of Supernaturals was built. Yet today, here he was to warn Li Hao!

At the same time, it was just a warning. Plainly, he was starting to feel threatened as well.

All was quiet on the four sides, the group simply looked at Li Hao and Qi Pingjiang. No one could believe the results that their eyes registered.

"Do you want to give it a try?" Qi Pingjiang asked solemnly.

"Why not?" Li Hao smiled.

BOOM!

Overwhelming aura exploded as a domineering sword aura manifested, striking with unparalleled speed!

BAM!

Qi Pingjiang struck at the same time, seeming to break the very void. He was also as fast as lightning!

A loud impact rang out as the resulting shockwave erased a small mountain that'd stood in the western outskirts for many years. A haze of light appeared—the door to the ruins.

Li Hao took a few steps back, blood seeping out of the corner of his mouth. “So that’s all there is to you! You’re just around a six element Arcanus and you might be able to call upon more, but the void won’t support more power. It’s impossible for the Apex level of the ancient cultivation system to appear before the second awakening. In that case, what are you throwing your weight around for?”

All sides trembled when they heard Li Hao’s words! A six element Arcanus! Qi Pingjiang’s might was dreadfully shocking. However, it was Li Hao who was more appalling. Although he reeled from the blow, there wasn’t a significant gap between the two of them. How could that be??

Surprisingly, Qi Pingjiang wasn’t taken aback. If Li Hao could suppress Qian Wanhao and the others, he had to grasp at least five elements.

“You have the right to be so arrogant and impudent.” Qi Pingjiang looked calmly at Li Hao. “That is why I said that you can establish your Skystar Commander Office. The old and current ministers of Judiciary have all perished, so you can take over their duties if you so wish. However, that does not mean you can continue to slaughter people!”

“You make it sound like I’m the devil and you’re the saint!” Li Hao sneered. “Look around, does the Ministry of Armed Forces have a better reputation, or does my Skystar Commander Office? Qi Pingjiang, are you worthy of being the military god?”

“So what if I am, and so what if I’m not?” The man was as coolly composed as before. “Do you think you would be able to make it to today without the nine ministries suppressing the royal family for the past eighty years?”

“Those of Silver Moon carved out our own world,” Li Hao snorted with laughter. “Whether it is the royal family or the nine ministries, their reach does not extend to Silver Moon!”

Qi Pingjiang didn’t bother arguing that point. Silver Moon denizens were so ferocious that the royal family had also found them hard to contend with. Instead, he repeated, “Whether you make use of the existences inside the ruins or the replica of a premier level plant spirit, none of them can emerge

into the world at present to help you! Do you know what you will face once we release that old fart from the royal family?"

"Is he very strong?"

"Of course!" Qi Pingjiang looked noncommittally at the young man. "Would he be able to confine me and the fellow from Administration if he wasn't? Li Hao, you are indeed strong with your weapon in hand, but have you forgotten about the weapons that stood against you that day? We just aren't willing to use them yet. You already have what you want, don't you?"

Li Hao raised an eyebrow. If possible, he wanted to outright kill this old guy. But this one had the power of six elements and didn't seem to be utilizing his full strength. He seemed to be on high alert against the royal family. As strong as the royal heavyweight was, he couldn't be stronger than seven elements, right? So why were they so cautious?

Chapter 788: All Sides Tremble (II)

Li Hao looked around as he pondered the situation. Almost everyone was here, apart from the old minister of Administration. There were eighteen old and current ministers from the nine ministries; Li Hao had killed five of them—two old, three current. There were more than ten ministers present, making for only two or three that hadn't come.

More powerhouses materialized after a moment. Some wore armor and were completely enshrouded by black armor—the Black Armaturas. So the royal family had also sent their people. Moments later, a figure floated gracefully to the ground—the seventh princess from the Nine Dragons Pavilion.

"Congratulations, Commander Li." She smiled radiantly and looked at Li Hao. "Royal Uncle Stable Mountain... showed signs of an obsession. Royal Uncle Steppe turned traitor and colluded with external enemies, yet Royal Uncle Stable Mountain could not discern right from wrong and followed in his footsteps. However, can we... bring back my royal uncle's body to inter it in the royal mausoleum...?"

"I'll give you the body if you guys take action right now and kill the rest of these guys for me. How about it?" Li Hao smiled back at her.

“.....” The princess nearly choked on her spit and squeezed a smile out. “Surely you jest, commander...”

“Why would I be joking?” Li Hao looked at her. “With the situation as it is, you and I can work together. Other than Qi Pingjiang, I’m sure I can end all the rest = for you. Can the royal family not even handle two six element Arcanus? Then what good is your talk of conquering the world? And you wish to rise again after your defeat? You’re an absolute joke!”

The seventh princess hadn’t thought that Li Hao would be so unforgiving. She suddenly found herself at a loss for a proper response and overcome by his overbearing presence!

Li Hao watched the scene for a while before sneering, “What a nest of rats and snakes. All of you are incompetent to the extreme and simply watch as the perfect timing slips out of your hands. None of you will amount to much!”

He left through the air without another glance at these people. Qi Pingjiang didn’t stop the young man. Of the others, some were furious, others were saddened, but no one stopped him either. Hong Yitang and the rest followed him without a word.

“I welcome everyone to the inauguration ceremony taking place the day after tomorrow!” Li Hao laughed heartily as he sailed through the air. “Come take part! I won’t bother sending invitations!”

He was the very definition of being cocky as he traveled through the air and his voice echoed in the four corners. Skystar City shook as they knew that Commander Li had returned. Had this powerful being accomplished something major again?

Li Hao announced peremptorily, “Qian Wanhao of the Ministry of Commerce, Hu Mingfa of the Minister of the Judiciary, Zhang Zhen of the Ministry of Examinations, Yu Qing of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and the Stable Mountain Prince Jiang Chao colluded with the City of Supernaturals, three evil organizations, monster spirits of Sky Roc Mountain, and bandits of Buddha Mountain to attack enforcers of the Skystar Commander Office!

“They have all been brought to justice and executed! I hope that all sides take warning from this, that the Ministries of Examination, Foreign Relations, and Commerce learn a lesson from it! We must punish even our own relations when it comes to right and wrong, as opposed to blindly following what our elders say. The Skystar Commander Office welcomes these three ministries to deliver their traitors at any time! Do not employ unauthorized punishment of your own initiative. Only the Skystar Commander Office has the right to enforce the law!”

The city was eerily quiet after his announcement. No one was able to immediately digest the news. Who’d died now?

Some hotshots it seemed...

Had they heard wrong, maybe? Four ministers had just been named and one of them was the old minister of Commerce that was mentioned in history books. Hu Xiao had just died a few days ago, and now another renowned existence was dead too?

As for the lords of Sky Roc and Buddha Mountain... they were set aside. No one was familiar with them anyhow. The Stable Mountain Prince... was one of the nine princes. A Steppe Prince had died last time, and here was another one dead?

The entire city was busy digesting the news.

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The Night Watcher headquarters.

Yao Si’s face shifted rapidly through various expressions. He was rather stunned—had the young man truly succeeded? Were they all dead? Li Hao was... certainly vicious!

Little Ye kept taking large mouthfuls of air next to him and murmured, “I knew it, Commander Li can do anything! He’s terrifying... How dare the nine ministries and royal family provoke him? Do they have a death wish?”

“.....” Yao Si didn’t say a word. C’mon, I knew he was a four element Arcanus before he went in, but still I thought he was gambling with his life. What did a little girl like you know to be saying things like this?

Yao Si walked out of his office and looked out. The entire headquarters was eerily silent. Dao Sword and his group were also quiet. That one... really had become invincible. He was so brazen right now that he publicized the deaths and even fabricated charges against them. Well, it wasn’t fabricated charges—to the victor went the spoils. Anything that Li Hao said now was right.

“How horrifying!” Having held a begrudging view of Li Hao all this time, Big Eyes was also scared at the moment and rather shocked. Had so many died in one go??

Dao Sword looked toward the west and observed rays of splendor cross the sky—Li Hao’s group. He followed their trajectory with a complicated gaze. Was killing Arcanus as easy as stepping on ants? Had that one... reached that level? Apparently the latest edition of the Divine Masters Ranking was about to be published, but was there any meaning to it anymore?

If Li Hao wasn’t number one, who dared say that they were stronger than him? Not only was he incredibly strong, but more critical was that he wielded power and influence. There was a host of powerhouses under his banner; Silver Moon martial masters flocked to support him and some local overlords had already openly declared their support.

In the past couple of days, unrest had shaken the eastern continent. Some of their local rulers hunted down the Xus in the name of the Skystar Commander Office. Perhaps they were just borrowing his name... but now that the young man had subdued the four corners, one might have to sell themselves in order to borrow his name. Was Li Hao’s influence that easy to borrow?

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News swept through the land.

The City of Supernaturals.

Various terrifying existences stood in the middle of an opulent hall. A breathtakingly beautiful woman sat primly over the assembly.

“Li Hao!” she breathed out after a while before taking a look around. “The City of Supernaturals was formed without restrictions as we meant to construct a paradise for supernaturals. We wanted to become a sacred land for superhumans, just like the Tranquil Star City of the ancient civilization was! But now, that one doesn’t seem willing to let matters proceed in such a fashion. The nine ministries and royal family have chosen to give way before us, but this Li Hao chooses to kill four Arcanus from our city...”

“The Jiangs of the royal family and the nine ministries are all trash!” someone bit off below her. “The three great organizations are hardly good for anything either. They sent so many powerhouses, but still failed...”

“Enough of that!” softly rebuked the woman. “Did you think we would fail before this? We even sent plant spirit replicas with our people, so did you really think that Li Hao’s side would win? There’s no point in touting the wisdom of hindsight! Li Hao and the one at Armed Forces have reached some sort of agreement. A lack of condemnation of the young man is proof enough. Then his greatest remaining trouble lies with the City of Supernaturals and three great organizations...”

The three great organizations were difficult to pin down, but the City of Supernaturals was situated in the central region and towered like an immobile structure.

The female city lord sensed threat creeping in around her and sighed, “Li Hao likely won’t suppress the nine ministries further if he wishes to establish his authority. The movements of the three great organizations and seven divine mountains are difficult to forecast. Only we have a million supernaturals gathered under our banner! More than half of the supernaturals in the central region have joined the City of Supernaturals. Who does everyone think is a suitable target if the Skystar Commander Office wishes to denote some rules for supernaturals?”

The answer was extremely obvious. It was the City of Supernaturals, of course!

“Li Hao is no fool,” an old man intoned beneath. “If he offends the three great organizations after offending the nine ministries...”

“Do you want to say that he won’t dare offend us?” the woman laughed. “Do you think that’s a realistic notion?”

He wouldn’t dare? What a joke! Was there anything that Li Hao didn’t dare undertake?

“Even if he does, he’ll understand why the City of Supernaturals stands where it does if he comes to us,” the old man continued. “There is a reason why we stand firm, the nine ministries give way before us, and the royal family treats us with respect!

“Ancient aristocracies are not a matter that he can comprehend...” he sniffed.

“Don’t bother mentioning this in front of him, that would just be making a laughingstock of yourself,” laughed the woman. “When it comes to ancient aristocracies, is there any more ancient than the Lis of Silver Moon?”

That shut the old man up. The Lis were indeed most ancient... but did they even count as a family anymore? On the other hand, Li Hao’s domineering appearance awakened the people to a fact—large numbers were not needed at times, one was enough. Whenever the Lis of Silver Moon were mentioned now, discourse only said that their feats were as expected of an ancient clan!

“Then... what might the city lord have in mind?” The old man looked up at the woman. She wasn’t elderly, yet was the lord of the City of Supernaturals. She had the support and tacit acceptance of the various families. It was certain that she must have some aces up her sleeves.

The woman looked into the distance and said slowly after a while, “Just wait and see. Doesn’t Li Hao wish to lay down the law for supernaturals? Let’s see what his rules are first and if they will affect us. If the effect is not great, then he can do as he wishes!”

“Do you mean to say that Li Hao’s rules can be applied to City of Supernaturals?” someone immediately protested. “That cannot be allowed, that would make us his vassal...”

“Are we to pit ourselves to the death against him for such a small matter?” chuckled the woman. “Why is he so brazen and unprincipled? It’s because he faced the nine ministries, royal family, and three great organizations! Those were not one singular faction and brewed many of their own plots! Most of them wish to sit on the side while tigers fight.

“Our losses aren’t great for the moment and Li Hao is caught in the throes of his cockiness. If we beat him back when he comes, how much will we have to lose for it? They will be the ones watching our show then.”

The crowd fell silent. Despite knowing beforehand that this would be the outcome, they still couldn’t help but participate. All sides had participated in the expedition, but they’d lost everything they put in!

Do they try again? Would they have a chance to? Perhaps everyone was waiting for a good opportunity—but what would be that good opportunity after this failure?

The second awakening, perhaps!

Would these people dare take continued risks in the absence of that? Perhaps even Ying Hongyue wouldn’t dare!

Chapter 789: All Sides Tremble (III)

At the same time, the Red Moon headquarters.

Ying Hongyue leaned against a chair and stared up at the sky. He said softly after an indeterminate period of time, "Orange Moon is dead, the scarlet shadow puppet is also no more. We've lost the mallet of the Hongs too... What an outcome!"

He'd even stood a chance of eliminating the ones at Armed Forces and Administration, but everything he'd sent was lost despite the sheer number of powerhouses they coordinated with. How ludicrous!

Ying Hongyue laughed and shook his head with a sigh. There were only Indigo Moon and Violet Moon by his side now.

There were fewer and fewer among the Seven Moons; Violet Moon's eyes were red. Although Black Widow's reputation was very poor and the Silver Moon martial world always mentioned her name with contempt, that was her mother...

She'd shielded Violet Moon for many years and the latter's position was so high within Red Moon because of her mother. But now, her mother was dead.

The father in front of her was a cold-blooded man. He seemed gentle and caring, but Violet Moon knew very well that he was only her father in name. His blood ran ice-cold through his veins. There were a lot of people missing in Red Moon these days. Where had they gone?

Violet Moon knew where. They were all dead! They'd transformed into the power of the scarlet shadow and entered the ruins with her mother. None of them had come back out. There had been so many powerhouses and even multiple members of the elder council among them, but they were all dead.

Red Moon had experienced smooth sailing through its rise and counted innumerable powerhouses among its ranks. But now, almost all of its supernatural heavyweights were dead. There were only the Ancient Guard and some premier martial dao powerhouses left.

"Leader!" Indigo Moon didn't vie for favor in this moment; she simply felt an inexplicable sadness.

Nothing major seemed to have happened, yet Orange Moon, Yellow Moon, Green Moon, and Blue Moon were all dead. Most of the elder council were dead as well. Truth be told, there weren't many left of the elder council after the three senior elders died. How had the domineering Red Moon suddenly declined by so much? She didn't understand. It'd only been less than half a year since Li Hao's rise. How had such circumstances befallen a Red Moon that'd reigned for more than twenty years? Of the original Seven Moons, only she and the leader were left.

"Are you worried?" Ying Hongyue smiled at her.

"Not, it's just..."

"It will be fine, don't worry!" Ying Hongyue gently lifted his hand and regarded the sky again. "It's just some setbacks. Now is not the time for despair. When Yuan Shuo defeated me that day, I was forced to my knees from his strength. I had to eke out survival amid humiliation and suffering. But ultimately, I succeeded! This is just a repeat of an old story, not to mention that Li Hao cannot defeat me yet."

Violet Moon had been standing quietly nearby. "Why does father not take the field?" she suddenly asked. "Is melding the bloodlines of seven families together really that important? With father's many years of accumulation, you are a supreme heavyweight of the age. The combined seven bloodlines aren't important! Why must you be so fixated on them?"

"You don't understand." Ying Hongyue smiled.

Violet Moon was at a loss. That's all you know to say. I just don't understand it. What I do know is that if you weren't obsessed with combining the seven bloodlines and just focused on cultivation, this ready-made father of mine would absolutely be an invincible existence in this modern age. You wouldn't be restricted by the bloodline of the Lis like you are now and unable to fight Li Hao.

Ying Hongyue had immense potential and only lost to Yuan Shuo because he was much younger. After the rise of the supernatural, Ying Hongyue occupied a first mover advantage and rose at every turn. The scarlet shadows had helped him resolve a lot of issues plaguing other people. In the modern age, Ying Hongyue was absolutely one of the strongest out there. Even if he had his opponents, it would not be the likes of Li Hao.

But now?

Perhaps none of the dead was important to her father.

Ying Hongyue said nothing further and simply remained looking at the sky. It was highly unexpected that Orange Moon had died, but... everything was possible. It wasn't completely unacceptable if she was truly dead. He was simply contemplating a few things.

Ying Hongyue waved a hand, indicating that the two were dismissed. Violet Moon left without a word, still reeling from her sadness. Do you see this, mother? Your death results in simply a sigh from him. He may not even be sighing for you. Out of all the Silver Moon martial masters who left home to follow him, how many are still alive?

It seemed that Indigo Moon was the only single one. No wonder Silver Moon martial masters said that any woman who left with Ying Hongyue lacked a brain, that they would regret their actions sooner or later. I wonder if mother ever regretted her choice?

"All these years, you've never once revealed how to fully combine the eight bloodlines," Ying Hongyue suddenly said when everyone was gone. "Li Hao has risen now, you see it and hear it too. Weren't you concerned that I'd grow overly strong and break free of your control? And now? Do you still think the same?"

A scarlet shadow had soundlessly appeared in the great hall. It wore a red cloak and seemed to reside in another world in a slightly intangible fashion. The feeling of a smile exuded from the figure.

"You misunderstand, I have no intentions of restricting you. It's just that the void is unstable and if you truly combined them, you might spontaneously break through to another level. With how unstable the void is, you might be churned to pieces?"

“It’s old existences like you who will be churned to pieces,” Ying Hongyue refuted calmly. “You attached yourself to core origin, we do not. Will those of our age also be ripped apart?”

“You will!” Red Cloak said softly. “Don’t dismiss my words—the instability of the void does not target one person, it applies to all! You must know that the void is horrifically shattered. It has broken again and again. No matter how strong you are, you will be completely torn apart!

“Only with the second awakening is there a chance of stabilizing it. That will be when you can combine the seven bloodlines.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Ying Hongyue chuckled. “Will I have a chance to do so? Don’t you think that Li Hao will come for me?”

“He will not escape this rule even if he comes. No matter how strong, they will fall under this restriction! Not to mention... are you afraid of him?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? His rate of improvement exceeds the imagination. This kind of person reminds me of the ancient Human King as recorded in the ancient tomes! How long is it until the second awakening? That will be time enough for him to come for me!”

“Don’t worry, come to me if that happens. If worst comes to worst, just go into hiding for a while.”

Ying Hongyue sneered and didn’t say anything.

“You must make precautions ahead of time for Silver Moon,” Red Cloak continued at seeing Ying Hongyue stay silent. “There are many powerhouses in residence still at the eight cities...”

“I don’t care about that. I just want to know if a premier heavyweight still exists at Evenround Martial University. Otherwise, how could so many have died so easily?”

“I don’t know...” Red Cloak answered after a pause. “They should’ve all evacuated during that year. Even if there are people left behind, there won’t be that many. Evenround Martial... has a great reputation, but not that many true powerhouses. There weren’t that many premier personages within the university and all decamped for the battlefield. Powerhouses would not easily stay behind to protect a university...”

“So you don’t know either?”

“Correct.”

“What kind of background does this particular university have?”

“It is backed by a terrifying existence... related to the ancient Human King that you speak of. It’s just... I’m certain that even with the departure of its headmaster, disturbances would not have appeared in Silver Moon had she not left as well.”

There was a large quantity of information in this response. Ying Hongyue mulled it over and suddenly cursed, “Unable to achieve anything, but good at spoiling everything!”

He was both cursing at the Ministry of Finance and Red Cloak. Since he’d known that Evenround Martial had a prestigious background, why hadn’t he said so earlier? He only touched on it after the entire operation failed. This might not have been the result if they’d switched to another location.

Red Cloak said nothing, despite knowing that Ying Hongyue was possibly obliquely insulting him. This result truly was a surprise. Who knew that there would still be powerhouses in residence at the university? Not to mention, the situation wasn’t clear at the moment. Perhaps it was just an Apex holding down the fort? All was unknown since they were unable to make a closer investigation.

Red Cloak vanished amid Ying Hongyue’s silent gaze. Hah, this is just as well! You’ve been restricting me at every turn and can only watch Li Hao’s rise. Let’s see what you do about it now!

.....

On this day, every locale across the lands received the news. The world shook!

White Moon City.

Director General Zhao laughed! He looked at Huang Yu, then at Kong Jie.

“This wasn’t what I expected,” he finally said. “It looks like we’re not far off from upheaval in Silver Moon! Make your preparations and invite the various old seniors to set foot in the world again. Silver Moon will welcome visitors soon!”

“Don’t talk to me about that.” Kong Jie flicked a glance at him. “Those old farts are really difficult to deal with. Some of them already ran off after they heard about what Li Hao was doing! You know how the old guard has long itched for action, are they going to listen to me? You sent Hou Xiaochen away and I’m not too familiar with them...”

“.....” Director General Zhao stared silently at him before enunciating carefully, “Then... you tell me... what good are you for?”

“I ain’t good for shit!” Kong Jie griped. “I should’ve hauled ass and gone to Skystar City a long ass time ago if I’d known there would be so many opportunities there! Look at the state of the world now! Arcanus are rotting cabbages by the side of the street and I’m still debating if I should ascend as a supernatural or not. Look at Hong Yitang, he’s almost one of the strongest in the world after following Li Hao around. It’s you who’s been keeping me here all this time. I ain’t doing this anymore!”

“.....” Director General Zhao remained staring. “You want to go there too?”

“What?” Kong Jie snapped. “Hou Xiaochen’s gone, Ole Zhou’s gone, am I not allowed to leave too?”

“You’re not allowed!” The director general held his head with his hands. “I... Don’t go. I’ll use treasures to saturate your supernatural locks—all of them! I’ll saturate as many as you find. You’re not weak either, I’ll give you all of their resources!”

Don’t you go too! If you go as well, am I supposed to handle everything? Fights are better left to martial brutes!

Chapter 790: The Demon Hunter Army (I)

Kong Jie stroked his chin and came back with, “But Li Hao has sword energy...”

“Are you close to him? Will he going to give any to you?”

“Why not?” Kong Jie snapped. “I’ll just join the Skystar Commander Office as well then. What’s the big deal in that?”

“.....” Director General Zhao coughed and tried placating his old colleague. “Don’t be like this, we don’t have many old friends around anymore. You’re at least familiar with the ins and outs of the province. How about this, I’ll give you some Water of Life.”

“How much?”

“Ten drops.”

“Screw you! Do you think I don’t know that Li Hao spent two hundred drops to get Ole Zhou?”

“Are you worth that?! Go ask Li Hao. He wouldn’t even want to spend ten drops on you! Why else hasn’t he talked to you yet?”

“.....” That hurt the ego too much! Kong Jie rose with gritted teeth. “Don’t you regret saying this!”

“Ah, don’t, Little Kong, I was joking. How about twenty drops? I really don’t have that many... I’d give it all to you if I did!”

Kong Jie snorted and turned back for a glance. “Send it all to me this afternoon. That’s all. It’s not like I don’t have anywhere else to be!”

Director General Zhao irritably slapped his hand on the table after the man was gone. “One after another... do they think Skystar City is some idyllic place? That it’s a haven of relaxation?”

“.....” Huang Yu was deep in thought before he said quietly, “Ole Zhao, my portion... should be doubled as well. I need to undergo some tough closed door cultivation in the days to come.”

“Wait, Ole Huang...”

“Send my portion this afternoon as well. It’s not like I don’t have anywhere else to go!” Huang Yu rose without a look back.

“.....” Director General Zhao broke out in loud curses when Huang Yu was gone. He couldn’t hold it in anymore! What was all this?! So what if Silver Moon was a bit poor compared to the rest? What does Li Hao having a grand time in Skystar City have to do with the rest of us? How are you guys leveraging him to exert pressure on me?!

Pah!

I won’t give you shit, let’s see if you go! You’ll help me save money if you go! It’s not like you guys don’t know the province’s situation! There’s a bunch of gluttons here that devour any treasures that pop up. When is it ever our turn?

“What a bunch of bastards!” the director general cursed for a while before he got it out of his system. “Double, is it? Very well, I’ll have you guys pay it back tenfold later on!”

As good as venting his emotions felt, Director General Zhao was still depressed at the end of the day. Why did everyone want to leave? Li Hao was truly such a troublemaker!

.....

Winds of change surged in Skystar City as waves of reaction reared through its streets. This savage from the north... was vicious, ruthless, and ferocious! People who’d been worrying over whether it was safe to attend the Skystar Martial Academy or not were now utterly tempted. What was there to be afraid of?

Those brave enough to take a risk would gain plenty of benefits for doing so, but those too prudent and cautious to set a toe out of line would obtain nothing for their cowardice. It was rare for an academy to not levy many restrictions and be open to all. Nobles probably wouldn’t dare attend, but this was an enormous opportunity for civilians. While the academy wouldn’t accept that many this time, it was still a chance for all.

Were they willing to be so mundane for the rest of their lives? Did they wish to live under another’s suppression forever?

Although Li Hao had already killed a lot of people, many could tell that an era of chaos was still inevitable. There were some nobles inside the capital yet to become aware of the situation, but the common popular was already cognizant of it. The price of grain had increased lately!

Any with general practical wisdom would understand that it was an indicator of things being severely wrong. Skystar Dynasty had enjoyed favorable weather for many years and ample food was no issue. But after several years of war in the central region, the northern region, and scuffles elsewhere...

The price of regular grain in the marketplace was rising!

Winter was upon them, making sea transport difficult. Skystar City was just the capital of the dynasty and had few farmers among their numbers. There were already signs of a food shortage in various locales around the central region.

Those with sharper wits could tell that disaster was nigh. It'd been many years since the dynasty had suffered from a shortage of food. Not only that, but this winter was shaping up to be extraordinarily cold. The climate seemed to be changing, making life more difficult for ordinary people.

Skirmishes often erupted and supernaturals required more nutrients than mundanes. A portion of fertile land could be reduced to barren wasteland after their attentions. Supernaturals absorbed mysterious power—this was an energy that naturally emanated from nature. The more fertile a location was, the more mysterious power there was. It could be found in the air, ground, and all locations.

After some supernaturals furiously absorbed every drop of energy they found, certain tracts of land were exhausted to the point of sterility.

Under such circumstances, Skystar Martial Academy thronged with applicants. It'd been wholly ignored before, but after Li Hao's recent demonstrations and the state of the world, no one cared about serving up revenge later!

They could barely survive these days. It was a difficult question whether they'd still be alive next year if they didn't find a way to survive the harsh winter. If such were the scenes in the rich royal capital, it was easy to imagine how miserable other locales must be.

.....

People jostled for space at the sign-up spot. As Li Hao returned through the air, he called out, "Men, follow me to the Avenue of the Nine Ministries to occupy the governmental seat of the Ministry of the Judiciary! Screw setting up a complex for the Skystar Commander Office! That's just bullshit! Set out for the Ministry of the Judiciary!"

The crowd was stunned by the words. They weren't aware of Qi Pingjiang's conversation with Li Hao, so they didn't know that Li Hao had permission to replace the Ministry of the Judiciary. All they knew was that this was a ministry that had stood in Skystar Dynasty for eighty years. It was one of the nine and incomparably powerful. But now... it was to become the Skystar Commander Office??

Incredulity slowly turned to excitement and agitation.

“The commander is mighty!” Roars erupted. What a domineering show of force! What good was a complex for? He was going to outright occupy a seat of government! Li Hao had killed both generations of Judiciary ministers—even if the Hus had anyone left, who would dare fight Li Hao for territory?

“Forward march!” A command mobilized thousands of soldiers dressed in black armor. They presented an awe-inspiring sight with their spears and longswords.

Thud thud thud!

Drums pounded and the Li tiger flag unfurled in the air.

“Give way, the Demon Hunter Army is coming through!” yelled a soldier.

Thump thump thump!

The drums were thunderous as high emotion gripped the Demon Hunter Army. They were excited, agitated, and inexplicably proud of themselves. This last feeling had been absent from their hearts before, but now it arrived in spades.

.....

The Avenue of the Nine Ministries.

Powerhouses hovered in the air as silent spectators. They watched as an army of thousands mobilized through the city, watched by countless other eyes. The Skystar Commander Office was officially installing itself in Skystar City. But when these heavyweights saw the troops make a beeline for the Ministry of the Judiciary, their composure still cracked.

“How arrogant!” Cold looks flashed out of some eyes. It wasn’t like everyone at that ministry was dead.

Countless agencies were still operating at the Avenue of the Judiciary. This ministry oversaw enforcement of all the laws in the land. Law and order were still present in Skystar Dynasty, to say nothing of anything else. It was just that the superhuman, local overlords, evil supernaturals, and nobles didn’t fall under its purview...

Was Li Hao really going to occupy one of the nine ministries today?

.....

The Avenue of the Judiciary.

Of the various agencies, some had their doors tightly shut, others had their doors wide open. Expressionless officials and managers walked out of the latter. No one knew what they were thinking as they quietly watched the street ahead.

There wasn’t a soul to be seen on the avenue. Gates were flung open at a massive seat of government located at the end and a hotbed of activity had engulfed out. Various experts were in a panic as the old and current minister were dead. The Hus were done for!

With only the minister being dead, it would be fine as there were still heavyweights at the judiciary, as well as vice ministers. They were Nova at the very least, with quite a few metamorphosis.

But now, what good were they?

Judiciary also had an independent army of supernaturals named the Judgment Guard. They meted out punishment on behalf of the heavens!

This supernatural army possessed three thousand troops, almost all of which were stronger than Darkmoon. This was an army trained by the Ministry of the Judiciary for use against the Night Watchers.

Their commander-in-chief was Hu Mingfa. He was dead, which put the second-in-command in charge. Dressed in green armor, an old man with white hair gripped a spear. Five thousand troops had surrounded the ministry and didn't let anyone in or out.

The old general stood in front of the doors and his army prevented anyone from moving. They'd sealed off the entire ministry.

"What do you mean by this, General He?!" someone shouted angrily. Why was he doing this now??

"Are you betraying the ministry as well?! Is this a demonstration of loyalty to Li Hao?"

The old general seemed to be sealing off the complex and preventing anyone or any treasures from leaving. He was keeping everything intact for Li Hao.

The old general raised his spear at the door and turned his back on the people. "No one is allowed in or out! Those who violate this order will be executed!" he said unusually calmly.

“How dare you!” shouted the vice minister. “Are you rebelling?!”

The old general simply flared his presence instead of responding. The crowd immediately fell silent with hushed shock. When did this one set foot into the Arcanus realm? Metamorphosis had been the mainstream peak of strength before—Arcanus was just a recent development. The old general had been a metamorphosis as well, but he’d set foot into Arcanus after just a few days!

This agitated the crowd, but they knew that they couldn’t afford to irritate this one. He was an Arcanus! The Hus had also heavily invested in the five thousand supernaturals of the Judgement Guard. There were more than ten Novas, a dozen Solars, and half of their number were Sunflare. The rest were Darkmoon. This was not a faction to get on the wrong side of. If it wasn’t for the two ministers dying, the Judgment Guard would’ve dared go toe-to-toe against the Night Watchers.