

Star Gate 791

Chapter 791: The Demon Hunter Army (II)

An army dressed in black tramped down the avenue. Their march raised a loud hubbub, and they were greeted by bowing personnel at some doors. That represented surrender and acceptance. Those behind closed doors indicated a desire to keep observing the situation.

On this day, some were willing to surrender and submit to Li Hao! They yielded to this tyrant from the north.

“Halt!”

The army stopped as Liu Long frowned, surprised by the supernatural army in front of him. There were so many supernaturals! Was this... the Judgment Guard? He knew a little about the nine ministries as he'd asked around. “Does Vice Commander He Liang of the Judgment Guard stand in front of me?”

“That is this general!” The old general walked out with his spear. “Are you Liu Long of the Demon Hunter Army? The son of Silver Spear from Silver Moon?”

“That is I!” Liu Long looked at the old man—the general was known for using the spear. He'd set foot into the supernatural now and even become an Arcanus!

One could not avoid mention of the Three Spears of Silver Moon if one was a spear wielder. Although Silver Spear had died long ago, his name yet remained and was known throughout the land as part of the Record of Thirty-Six.

“Commander He should be stationed with the army. What are you doing here without the requisite orders?” Liu Long frowned.

“Orders? Whose orders? The nine ministries or royal family? Or is it the Skystar Commander Office?”

Liu Long looked at the old man, uncertain of what he wanted to do. “Is Commander He waiting for the commander?”

“You can say that.” He Liang smiled, then scanned the Demon Hunter Army standing behind Liu Long. He sighed, “You can stop guessing. I am only here to say that so long as I stand here, none of you will set a single foot into the Ministry of the Judiciary!”

What?!

All sides rustled with this declaration. The old man was crazy, wasn't he??

Although surprised, Liu Long also understood his decision. “Why do you persist in this course of action? The Hus were not good masters! The chaos rocking the world has much to do with them and the general was part of the martial world back in the day...”

“That's right!” laughed the old man. “Just like you say, I was part of the martial world—and the martial world isn't just limited to Silver Moon. There is no talk of right or wrong, just of gratitude. The Hus helped me reach the Arcanus level, so I ought to repay them with some loyalty in these troubled times, shouldn't I?”

Indeed, the Hus were not good or wise masters, but he was also of the martial world! There is no talk of right or wrong in the martial world, we're just a bunch of crazed fiends with weapons out for blood. It is enough that I owe a debt of gratitude to the Hus, I am no hero! I am a rogue of the martial world!

“Who comes to take my head?” He Liang soared into the air. “It would be a worthy death if Commander Li shows me face!”

Various powerhouses took to the air in response. Light Sword and Southern Fist were present, as did Yang Shan and Qin Lian quickly arrive. All four champed at the bit. Killing He Liang would be a deed of great merit for the inauguration of the Skystar Commander Office!

“You go, Vice Commander Liu!” came Li Hao’s voice on the wind.

Everyone blinked. Who?

Liu Long walked out of the crowd, stunning those around him. What the heck? Was Liu Long supposed to go to his death? This must be a joke! It hadn’t been long since Liu Long became a Summoner of Spirit. He could kill Solars and barely manage Novas. It was a very big stretch for him to handle Arcanus. It would be better for Hao Lianchuan to go as he was at least a Nova! Although Li Hao was the vice commander of the Demon Hunters now, he was very weak.

“Does the commander think so little of me to insult me in this way?” He Liang laughed, knowing full well what Liu Long’s cultivation level was.

“No, I think very highly of you!” Li Hao arrived in the air. “You are right—you are of the martial world and only consider personal relationships, rather than principles of righteousness. The Hus may be no more, yet I understand your desire to send off your benefactor and protect his family property. Therefore, I will send you on your way with Silver Spear’s son and the vice commander of the Demon Hunter Army. That is showing you high respect indeed!”

“In that case, I am honored!” He Liang grinned widely.

“You could say that!” Li Hao looked at Liu Long. “Kill him. If the Judgment Guard does move, eradicate the Judgment Guard!”

“Understood, sir!” Liu Long rose into the air and shouted, “Assemble the formation!”

Boom!

Thousands of soldiers snapped into formation. Their blood qi surged and the world shifted; black armor glowed with a faint hue.

Liu Long roared and struck with his short ax!

Bam!

Taken aback, He Liang erupted with his supernatural abilities and sent a spray of metallic sparks through the sky!

Additional heavyweights had appeared in the surroundings and one of them identified with shock, “An army formation! The one in the air is just an initial Summoner, which puts him on par with peak Solar at best...”

Peak Solar Liu Long broke through the skies with his weapon!

Bam!

Waves reared as nine waves overlaid on top of each other. The Nine Forged Force!

A spear and ax collided in the air. Liu Long somehow did not automatically end up on the back foot. Jaws sagged as onlookers gasped. Two thousand ordinary soldiers in formation had facilitated a peak Solar to triumph over an Arcanus!

That was... incredible!

“So what of ordinary people?” Li Hao’s voice boomed throughout the city. “Two thousand mundanes can kill an Arcanus all the same! The people’s heart cannot be ignored and the people’s will cannot be violated. Our overwhelming momentum is not to be defied by you, a mantis trying to stop a chariot!”

Two thousand soldiers roared at the same time when he finished speaking. “KILL!” Their killing intent soared to the heavens. Liu Long broke through the sky and earth with a massive roar!

Concentrating fiercely, the presence on his ax increased explosively as he delivered hundreds of strokes in one blow.

The spear snapped with a loud collision and a trace of blood appeared on the old general’s head. He looked at all and suddenly smiled, “It is... a pity... that Silver Spear’s son... doesn’t use the spear...”

KABOOM!

His mysterious power detonated as he fell to the ground. The bloody mark traveled down his head.

Liu Long’s face and body also dripped with blood, but no one could see it since he was wearing armor. This had been too much of a stretch for him. While his body was strong and could endure the blood qi from two thousand soldiers, he nearly burst in the end.

Even so, his morale soared! I just killed an Arcanus!

“General!” Thousands of soldiers wailed behind the old man. Their general was dead! They’d expected this development, but no one expected that the general would die to Liu Long. The Judgment Guard thought that one of Li Hao’s heavyweights would take the field, but it was Liu Long!

Liu Long didn't look again at He Liang. To the victor went the spoils. If Li Hao was the one defeated today, then it might be Liu Long paying the price with his life. There was nothing that needed to be said here!

He regarded the supernatural army in front of him and called out, "Are you going to fight or surrender?"

"To fight or surrender??" roared the two thousand in the Battle Heaven. Their blood qi still agitated and their emotions ran high. There was nothing that compared. Heavens above! Our formation killed an Arcanus!

"An Arcanus!" This was the most preeminent existence of modern society! Even the weakest Arcanus was a heavyweight, but the soldiers' combined strength had taken one down!

Around them, the crowd were stunned beyond belief. Two thousand soldiers could kill an Arcanus?? What was this world coming to? Did they fight or surrender?

The army wavered before a Nova stepped forward with an angry shout. "Those afraid of death can stay back and those unafraid can charge with me. We'll see for ourselves how strong the Demon Hunter Army is! The Hus have been kind to us and keep us around for the one critical occasion in which they need us. Today is the day! FIGHT!!"

"Fight!!" Liu Long waved his ax around. "Kill!"

BOOM!

One thousand soldiers charged with the Nova and clashed with the Demon Hunters. The Demon Hunter Army were methodically organized—ten people a team, one hundred a troop, and one thousand a formation.

Rivers of blood flowed in the spacious Avenue of the Nine Ministries! Screams, wails, shouts, and the collisions of weapons were the only sound that could be heard. The one thousand supernaturals were dead to the last after ten minutes, while the black-armored soldiers stood proudly in place. The disparity in strength was plainly obvious.

“Impossible...” someone murmured. This simply wasn’t possible! That had been one thousand supernaturals and a few Novas among them. Although they faced two thousand Demon Hunters, the result couldn’t possibly be 0 to 1000! The Demon Hunters had suffered no casualties! It was incredible and so astounding that no one could believe it.

The Military God from the Ministry of Armed Forces strode through the air, surveying the Avenue of the Judiciary with a solemn expression. “The Demon Hunter Army is quite something. They wear armor from Battle Heaven and assemble into formations with blood qi. Ten people to a minor formation with interconnected blood qi...”

Their defensive ability was on par with Sunflares; ten people to a formation made their offensive power greater than Sunflares. Thus, it was to be expected that the Demon Hunters would stamp out Darkmoon and Sunflare opponents, but this was still incredible! It was too hard to believe!

“Do you fight or surrender?” Liu Long demanded again.

“Fight or surrender?!” chorused the soldiers, the battle intent flaring and killing intent soaring to the sky! A combined aura rose from them and swept through the area. Some Solars shook in their boots, finding the aura to be as imposing as heavenly might and unable to look at it straight in the eye.

It was just a bunch of weaklings they faced, why... were they so strong?

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Li Hao watched impassively. This was precisely the effect that he wanted. There weren’t many opportunities for two armies to clash against each other in organized combat. It proved to be highly effective for the Demon Hunters to flex their muscles.

Of the two thousand soldiers, there were several hundred Dominators within their ranks. It made for a formidable force. With ten people to a formation, they could almost ensure one Dominator per formation. One formation could suppress a Solar—two thousand people could suppress two hundred!

Outsiders simply looked at him as wasting resources on weaklings. Today, they knew if he had wasted the resources or not!

There were thousands of supernaturals standing across from them and numerous Novas, but all of them were shaking like leaves. Some Novas stepped forward and a middle-aged officer sighed, “The Judgment Guard is willing to surrender!”

Not everyone was He Liang, and not everyone was the muscular officer who stepped forward in his wake. The Hus had been kind to them, yes, but the Hus had lost! He Liang was dead and one thousand supernaturals were instantly eliminated. The enemy was completely unscathed, so the Judgment Guard collapsed. They could not overcome the Demon Hunter Army. The latter hadn’t even sent out a powerhouse yet.

Their strongest before was Liu Long, but now?

“We surrender!” shouted the Judgment Guard.

“You will be shown mercy if you kneel!” Liu Long roared.

“Mercy if you kneel!”

Expressions flickered across some of the Novas’ faces, but they sank to their knees a second later. Thousands of Judgment Guard knelt behind them, their faces stark white with dread.

They had lost! Lost utterly!

Within the Judiciary's seat of government, someone trembled and plopped to their knees. That started a domino effect of others capitulating as well.

"What a bunch of wusses," He Yong snorted. "Let's just kill them all and be done with it!"

Hou Xiaochen glared at him. Their conflict with the nine ministries was just beginning. If they killed surrendered enemies, were they to kill everyone beneath the heavens after that? These supernaturals were highly useful—at the very least, they could work in the mines much more effectively than mundanes.

He Yong was a crude martial blockhead already, he knew jack shit! Four thousand supernaturals could build a city in a single day. The hell did he know??

Idiot! Hou Xiaochen sneered inwardly. Li Hao was a bloodthirsty sort, but his intentions were clear in being willing to accept a surrender for once. Do you think Li Hao is more merciful than you? As he expected, he saw a widely beaming Li Hao when he looked at the young man.

Four thousand supernaturals! It didn't matter that they were short on resolve. Such was a common sight in major battles. Once the main commander, vice commander, and resisters were killed, the only ones left were those who drifted with the currents of life.

These types of people were found in abundance in any era. Strictly speaking, the armies of this age were just another type of job posting. What could one expect from their soldiers? Truth be told, having one-fifth of them step forward earlier already exceeded expectations.

Li Hao had thought that the Judgment Guard would outright surrender or disband. That they could maintain their order up to this point was testament to He Liang's leadership skills. His methods were orderly and he was popular with the troops. It was not an easy task to rush here with five thousand supernaturals given circumstances at the Ministry of the Judiciary!

That there were one thousand soldiers still willing to fight after their commander was dead and morale nonexistent... Li Hao had to say, their discipline was strict!

“Enter the complex!” he commanded softly. Liu Long and the others pushed aside the supernaturals in the way. Apart from a few still on their feet, everyone in the Ministry of the Judiciary kowtowed on the ground.

“Please enter, Commander Li!” Everyone chorused.

All was quiet on the Avenue of the Nine Ministries. Li Hao’s golden armor drew sidelong glances. Some powerhouses were stunned by the sight—golden armor from the ancient civilization! No wonder he commanded more than a thousand soldiers! So the young man was a division leader in the ancient civilization. That was incredible!

Even Qi Pingjiang was surprised; he quickly vanished after taking a look. There was no need to watch further. There was a new master at the helm of the Ministry of the Judiciary. Everyone who stood in his way was dead. Who could contend against Li Hao now?

From now on, the nine ministries would still be the nine ministries. However, the Judiciary was now the Skystar Commander Office.

Li Hao strode in and scanned the scene of people cowering on the ground, punctuated by a few still on their feet.

One of the ones standing was an extremely elderly man. He looked quietly at Li Hao for a while before asking slowly, “Commander Li, we are just regular officials of advanced age. The battle of the superhumans has nothing to do with us. May we... leave?”

Regular officials?

Li Hao smiled. They looked old, but they weren’t weak. He chuckled and inclined his head. “You may, but only if there are no crimes on your record! You will be taken in for questioning first. You may go freely so long as you are innocent. Those who are guilty of crimes... will be executed!”

Some remained composed and some became apprehensive after his response.

“Take them away and investigate them thoroughly!” Li Hao commanded. “The rest of you can get up and resume your duties. You are to scrupulously abide by your responsibilities!”

“Yes, sir!” his people yelled. Someone swiftly walked up to escort the unyielding elderly away. No one dared resist, and no one could resist.

A shaking Nova lifted his head to look at Li Hao. “Commander Li... we... are familiar with everything that the Judiciary oversees... We are willing to work for the commander... Please... take us under your banner!”

It was difficult to lay down the reins of power. Since Li Hao didn’t randomly slaughter them all, various thoughts were starting to percolate through their minds. Could they stay at their posts? Li Hao needed people to work for him, didn’t he? As for the nine ministries and royal family, who was afraid of them anymore? Could they take down Li Hao?

“Alright!” Li Hao laughed uproariously. “Get up and do your work well. Of course, the caveat is that you have not committed any major crimes. If you’ve committed regular ones, turn yourself in for some punishment at most. Your lives will be safe enough to return to work and redeem yourself through new achievements.

“But if you’ve committed grave crimes... then you cannot blame me for showing no mercy! I am the law enforcer, after all!”

Someone heaved a sigh of relief. This was good. It looked like this one wasn’t as belligerent as rumors said he was.

They weren’t the only ones to relax—some observing outside sagged with relief as well. These people not from the Ministry of the Judiciary were wondering, could they do the same and surrender when Li Hao came for them next?

Some, however, were less than pleased by this development.

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Inside the palace.

“This Li Hao... is not the picture that he is painted to be,” frowned a prince. “He didn’t wildly rampage through the defeated. It would be good if he killed indiscriminately as uncontrolled cruelty will only lead to fear and no one daring to surrender or join him...”

It was easy to tell from the reactions on the scene that some people were relaxing. This was not good for the royal family!

The Skystar King simply watched; he didn’t offer any commentary. It was surprising that Li Hao had eliminated all of his powerful opponents, and it was equally surprising that he chose to seize the headquarters of one of the nine ministries. The Demon Hunter Army was a further surprise, and Li Hao’s decision to show mercy was the surprise of surprises.

This was not the mark of a rogue of the martial world! Those from the martial world took pleasure in exacting revenge. Wasn’t it thrilling to put all of them to the sword?

And yet... Li Hao had not done so.

The Skystar King closed his eyes, trying to wrap his mind around these moves. Li Hao, do you seek to be a king? Only a king would do what you’ve done. A real wandering hero would not engage in such actions. We would be more than willing to see you rise to lead the martial world, but to rise as a king? That will not be permitted!

The king vanished from his spot.

The rear yard.

The Skystar King looked at a little tree. “Why is Li Hao improving so quickly?” he intoned. “He can even exchange blows with Qi Pingjiang now. Although he is the heir of the Lis and can utilize a heritage weapon, he should still not be improving so quickly!”

And he was so strong! That didn’t make sense! The king was equal parts jealous, furious, and begrudging.

The Skystar King understood that perhaps the royal family had raised a tiger that had turned on them, but who would’ve anticipated that Li Hao would improve so quickly?

“I’m not sure, perhaps a heavyweight has modified his body.” The little tree swayed. “Or perhaps a powerful plant spirit has bequeathed him a large quantity of Water of Life. Maybe he has extraordinary potential...”

How was it to explain Li Hao’s rise? It was impossible to.

“Does he not have any bottlenecks?” demanded the king.

“Don’t worry, no one can exceed six elements in this age without the second awakening taking place. Any who reach seven elements will be ripped apart by the void in their moment of breakthrough!”

“What if they advance in a ruin? They can stabilize their cultivation level and retract their strength before emerging...”

“Are you thinking of your royal father?” laughed the little tree. “That is the path he has chosen. Nothing can be seen from it thus far, not until he breaks the seal imposed by the nine ministries.

However, I still think that it won't be possible! Although you are natives to this time period and may be able to set foot back in the world if you retract your strength, your powerhouses have a very weak control over their power. Martial masters are slightly stronger in this regard, but there's almost no hope for supernaturals to do so."

"So you mean that martial masters that exceed seven elements stand a chance of not being churned to pieces by the void?"

"Yes."

The Skystar King frowned. Could martial masters reach the seven element level? Was that even possible? They were on par with only two or three element Arcanus after saturating eleven locks. Breaking them would mean that they were no longer martial masters.

Therefore... it was impossible!

"I understand!" The king nodded after a heavy sigh. In that case, there would be no appearance of a heavyweight on par with an ancient Apex before the second awakening took place. That was good! It meant that no matter how fast Li Hao improved, six element Arcanus was the limit of his reach. That set the Skystar King at ease.

Chapter 793: Probing for Partnership (I)

"Then... will royal father be able to emerge in the world if he breaks free of nine ministry control?"

"I don't know," the little tree responded indifferently. "He might be able to, he might not be able to."

"Is father a supernatural or a martial master still?"

"You ask too much!"

The Skystar King frowned. The nine ministries had shown great wariness all this time and refused to ease up their guard. Whenever his royal father showed signs of movement, they reached through the ruin to suppress him anew. Was it possible... that he was still a martial master?

That had to be impossible! How could a martial master be on par with an Apex? It was only feasible if his father walked the path of ancient martial dao. But with core origin having gone inert, how was he to reach the Apex level?

The king couldn't make sense of it! Was there... some special method in play? The old farts at the nine ministries might know something since they'd remained so incomparably fearful all this time. It was the Skystar King himself who didn't know much. Looks like my old man hasn't given up the desire to come out! Very well, continue keeping the nine ministries in check then!

Cheering from thousands of people outside sounded at this time.

"The Skystar Commander Office will be established on the old address of the Ministry of the Judiciary. The Ministry of the Judiciary is dismantled from this day forth. All superhuman and mundane laws will fall under the purview of the Skystar Commander Office. The Skystar Commander Office oversees law and order beneath the heavens!"

"....." The Skystar King looked frostily in the relevant direction. Just listen to those words and that ambition! The kid had only wanted to meddle in the affairs of superhumans before, now it was the mundane part of the world as well. Li Hao was so greedy and full of wild ambitions!

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Varied reactions abounded on the Avenue of the Nine Ministries. Some sighed, some were sad. Others were resigned. Fear and anger were found in equal parts.

In the rear yard of the Inspectorate.

Inspector General Chen Yao was mulling over his next course of action as his father read a book next to him. After a long while, Chen Yao sighed. “Did you mean it when you said that I should fall to my knees in front of him after he comes out of the ruins?”

“You decide for yourself!” His father turned to him with a smile.

Chen Yao didn’t say a word. What the hell can I decide?? The Ministry of the Judiciary is no more!

With one less ministry among the nine, Chen Yao grappled with a complex mix of emotions. Li Hao had risen so quickly that he couldn’t really accept it. The lad had been a Night Watcher under his command just a while back, but now Chen Yao was the one who had to call upon him and ask to be taken in?

The nine ministries had wielded power over the dynasty for eighty years, making the Chens a local tyrant! Chen Yao himself was like an emperor! And now he was supposed to surrender to Li Hao? He wasn’t willing, was quite reluctant, and immensely irritated!

Today, Li Hao demonstrated his power and prestige to all sides and killed formidable enemies. He’d seized the Ministry of the Judiciary and defied Qi Pingjiang. He employed great force and threat to deter those who stood in front of him. Two thousand soldiers under his command had jointly slain an Arcanus and eliminated the Judgment Guard!

Li Hao had fully found his footing this time.

“What are Qi Pingjiang and the rest thinking?” Chen Yao looked at his father. “The situation has progressed to this point, yet they still let Li Hao continue like this? What do they mean by their inaction?”

“Nothing,” smiled the old minister. “Just that no matter how strong one’s potential is, one cannot break the shackle of six elements. Only when the second awakening arrives will the victor be decided. We will see then whose foundations are deeper and whose backer is stronger. It will be apparent who is more prepared. Although Battle Heaven of Silver Moon stands behind Li Hao, the

second awakening likely won't reach that province. Silver Moon is the common target of many factions instead. Tell me, why do they feel the need to go against Li Hao right this very moment?"

Chen Yao frowned. "Is he not afraid of Li Hao breaking through the shackles through pure potential alone? He might become seven elements or everyone stronger prior to the second awakening..."

"Why do you think that way?" The old minister blinked and looked at his son.

"Why not?" Yao Chen answered with confusion.

"I mean to say that the second awakening has become a spell that no one can break. This is a foregone conclusion, a problem with space itself and a contradiction that cannot be resolved. Do you think Li Hao can break it?"

"Why not?" Chen Yao blinked. I just feel that Li Hao's rate of improvement is astounding. Everyone thought of it as an impossible task, but what was impossible to Li Hao? The only thing the old man thought of was that his own son had many problems to deal with! Was Chen Yao not supposed to think in this direction?

"Everything is possible, particularly when it comes to Li Hao!" Chen Yao declared.

"Do you therefore think that he can create a miracle? In that case, what are you waiting for?" laughed the old minister. If you think that a miracle will spring forth from the young man, that means you've already lost and think of Li Hao as a terrifying person. If you think he's terrifying, why the hesitation?

"But... if he doesn't succeed... he does indeed lack a powerful patron for the second awakening," Chen Yao said haltingly. "It's unknown whether he seized the mysterious power stones on this expedition and if he can revive the plant spirit in Battle Heaven or not. In that case, he will spontaneously become one of the weakest..."

“That’s right,” chuckled the old minister. “So there’s no helping it, we have to take the risk. Go tell him these matters in detail—we’ll help him out in his time of need. Joining him at this time means we’re gambling for a future chance! We’re betting that Li Hao can create a miracle. If not, you can continue to rest and cavort with the Ministry of Armed Forces.”

Chen Yao sank into deep thought. Gamble for a miracle? The key question was, could Li Hao break his restraints before the second awakening? If he could and occupied first mover advantage to eliminate his enemies, then he would be able to safely retreat to Silver Moon even if ancient existences revitalized.

But if he couldn’t, then he was abruptly insignificant when the second awakening began. Plant spirits would dominate the world and batches of powerhouses such as Qi Pingjiang would instantly set foot into seven element Arcanus. It would no longer be Li Hao’s world then, so Chen Yao would only be creating trouble for himself if he threw himself under the young man’s banner.

“I’ve been curious about one thing—since Li Hao can stand against Qi Pingjiang, that means he wields more than the temporary strength of five elements,” Chen Yao said after a long silence. “The outside world thinks he’s only at three or four elements. Do you think... that he can conceal his presence? If he does that, will that prevent the void from churning him to pieces?”

“.....” the old minister burst out laughing. “Can you stop asking me questions? I’m not a god, how would I know? As opposed to asking me, you might as well ask Li Hao! Just ask him. It’d be a happy surprise if he tells you, and you can just make the call yourself if he doesn’t. He must have something up his sleeves if Yao Si bowed his head. Just do as you see fit and stop asking me. I’ve been retired for many years now.”

Chen Yao sneered and didn’t say anything. Forget it, who knows what this old fart thinks of from day to night. Fine! Then I’ll go ask Li Hao! I’ve never had an official negotiation with him, so I’ll visit him tonight!

The inspector general rose and walked outside. If he made a choice in these circumstances... then the future of the Chens would be unknown indeed.

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The Avenue of the Nine Ministries, the Avenue of the Judiciary.

The Demon Hunter Army had officially taken up residence. All was quiet outside, deathly quiet. It was like the entire city had gone silent. Only in the old Ministry of the Judiciary was there some noise.

In the rear yard.

Many powerhouses were gathered. The seats of government for the nine ministries were utilized as offices in the front and residences in the back. There were plenty more than just Hu Xiao and Hu Mingfa to the Hu family running the Judiciary—it was a large clan.

Hu Mingfa had died so abruptly and Li Hao took over equally suddenly that the family hadn't had time to evacuate. Therefore, the rear yard was full of Hu family members.

A wizened elder tottered his way forward, one hundred dispirited people at his back. He looked at Li Hao's side and hadn't said much when the young man entered the back. He knelt on the ground and raised a wavering voice, "The Hu sinners greet the commander! Hu Xiao and Hu Mingfa committed irredeemable crimes and it is only right that the commander killed them. However, the best of the family is innocent..."

Li Hao scanned the crowd—there were approximately one hundred elders, youngsters, and children. All of them shook like a leaf.

"Who are you?" He looked at the old man.

"I am Hu Xiao's younger brother and the current family patriarch!" sighed the old man. "My older brother sought to slay the dragon in years back, which led to the family's rise. Sadly, his ability fell short of his wishes and he succumbed to tempting whispers from ancient plant spirits. He desired immortality and set foot into their schemes. He permitted the world to get out of hand and so it is only deserved that he has perished."

The old man raised his head. “Both my brother and Mingfa are dead. The commander is a merciful soul—please spare the innocent young. Many were those sheltered by my brother among the family, so they would have no regrets about their death. But we have seventeen children under the age of ten, please show them mercy!”

Thud!

The old man cowered on the ground and banged his head as he kowtowed for mercy. To the victor went the spoils. The two strongest heavyweights of the family were dead, the Hus had officially declined. The nine ministries had also given up on them as the one at Armed Forces simply told Li Hao to not randomly kill people anymore.

When the Hus heard of their exchange, they understood that the Hus of the Judiciary had been ejected from the table. Although half of their remaining family were supernaturals with even some Novas present, how did one fight Li Hao with this kind of strength? What good were Novas for?

The old general who’d died outside was the last Arcanus who supported the Hus. He knew that he would die, but hadn’t even summoned a martial master from the Silver Moon old guard in his final struggles.

The old man on the ground wasn’t a weakling as he was an initial Nova. He simply looked old, yet was still a tyrant on the outside. But here, he was also an ant.

Li Hao watched him impassively. As pitiful as he looked now, he was certain to be domineering and overbearing in regular times.

“Deputy Zhou!” the young man said softly. The deputy walked out from the rear of his group and looked at those kneeling on the ground.

“The Skystar Commander Office is established on the basis of the law and simply needs to follow the law. Whether the Hus are guilty or not can be determined by the law! As law and order are incomplete in the dynasty these days, they need to be reassessed and rewritten.

“However, they will certainly follow the basic principles of morality. Commander, we can put the women and children in one residence and offer them food. We only need to restrict their movement. The men will be taken in for questioning and punished according to their crimes or released if innocent. The Skystar Commander Office never wrongly accuses someone or acquits a criminal. All of the Hu property will be confiscated by the government as it is the accumulation of the Hu father and son’s embezzlement...”

“So it shall be done!” Li Hao inclined his head.

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“Our thanks for the commander’s mercy!” The old man kowtowed with gratitude.

It was a common outcome for an entire clan to be exterminated when their struggle for power ended in failure. With only Hu Xiao and his son dead, as well as a few others that’d made mistakes to be exploited dying as well, this was much better than the anticipated downfall of the entire family.

“Men, take them away!”

Demon Hunters quickly swarmed the rear residence and escorted the Hu men away. The Hu patriarch was the last to leave; he hesitated when he passed by Li Hao before saying, “Commander, there is a passage in the rear garden that leads to the family ruins. All of the families overseeing the nine ministries have such a ruin. My brother and his son maintained exclusive access to the ruins, the others were not permitted entry. I don’t know if there is a key or anything like that. My brother is dead and no one else in the family may enter...”

Li Hao inclined his head without further word.

The various families of the nine ministries all owned crucial ruins. Some controlled more than one, but the others they grasped might not be nearby. There was an entrance to a ruin inside each of the nine ministries—this was also why the nine ministries had been built at their respective locations.

In actuality, the royal family had built this layout when they ruled the dynasty. The nine princes protectively encircled the royal family!

As for why the nine princes had built such a layout... perhaps it had something to do with the ruins. It was Li Hao's guess that the ruins around Skystar City were part of a larger whole during the ancient civilization!

This area might have been a sprawling metropolis back in the day. Although Battle Heaven said this land was known as Skystar Town, just their defenders alone numbered one hundred thousand. It was clear to see that this had been no ordinary town.

Ruins might be found everywhere beneath Skystar City. Evenround Martial University was one further away since it was on the outskirts. As for why they were located so close to each other... Li Hao had his speculations. They shouldn't have been that close back in their day, but the terrain shifted with the times and the ruins themselves could expand or shrink in size. At the very least, Battle Heaven could do so. These ruins had gradually shifted near each other after these long years.

The rear yard quieted down when everyone from the Hus was escorted out. The place was free for the Demon Hunters to conduct their search. Li Hao looked at the depths of the rear garden. If there was a ruin here, then there would be a plant spirit.

The Hus...

Li Hao's thoughts turned to the plant spirit replica that Hu Mingfa had brought to Evenround. His had been a... coconut tree, right? At least, the young man thought so. It looked like a massive coconut tree.

Deputy Zhou soundlessly drew near and said softly, "The ruins of the nine ministries are not ordinary ones. Out of the major ruins, their plant spirits awoke earlier than their brethren, despite their higher strength. It might have something to do with the royal family's ruins."

“Doesn’t that mean they’re weaker if they awoke faster?” Li Hao raised a brow. Only the weak revived faster since they needed less energy.

Deputy Zhou laughed softly, “That’s Silver Moon... This is Skystar City. It’s a bit different.”

“Why is that?”

“Silver Moon...” The deputy thought for a while before responding, “There are too many heavyweights in the province that require energy. There’s not enough to go around, which leaves sufficient energy only for those weaker because they require less. Hence, the stronger recover slower. At Skystar City, there is enough energy to go around. The stronger one is, the more easily one absorbs energy. Hence, they recover faster.”

It had to do with the energy mines!

Li Hao understood now. Then this meant to say that the plant spirits of the nine ministries might have awoken eighty years ago? That early? So... how strong were they? Nothing could be determined about their strength from replicas. Based on the cultivation system of the ancient civilization, Immortal came after Apex, and Saint after Immortal.

Could the plant spirits measure up to the Black Armors? Director General Wang and the rest seemed to only be Apexes. So... did that mean that the plant spirits were stronger than Battle Heaven’s officials?

Li Hao rather doubted that. It was too difficult to say without actually seeing a plant spirit, neither was this a good time to venture into a ruin. If there were Hu powerhouses hiding within, alongside the primary body of a plant spirit, the young man would be in for a world of trouble.

This couldn’t be all the experts that the Hu family possessed. How could it just be the Hu patriarch and his son keeping the world in order for eighty years? Did they rely on the Judgment Guard alone?

Under normal circumstances, most of these factions possessed a troop of elites specializing in ruin exploration. Most of these members were martial masters. The Xus that held the Steadfast Duke title possessed such a troop as well. It was said that their ruin was that of Tranquil Star City—the sacred land of ancient civilization. It was unknown if that rumor was true or false. Xu Qing had invited Li Hao to explore it with him before he died.

“Each of the nine ministries has a divine weapon holding down the fort.” Li Hao looked around the area. “However, none of the ministers that we killed carried one on them. The one from the Ministry of Commerce pawned his Hover Sword for his debts. The others only took out regular weapons and didn’t even bring out the kind that could fight on their own...”

The Hus hadn’t either! Hu Mingfa hadn’t brought the divine weapon of the Judiciary. Only the old minister Qian Wanhao had brought the Hover Sword with him. It was said to have been forged by Lu Zhen, but Li Hao didn’t know if that was the ministry’s divine weapon either.

The nine ministries had utilized multiple divine weapons on the day he killed Hu Xiao. They were so formidable that Stellaris had been provoked into responding. But he hadn’t caught a glimpse of a similar weapon when he killed Hu Mingfa.

Li Hao actually lacked key knowledge regarding the nine ministries. The royal family had given him some material regarding the institutions, but left out everything having to do with their divine weapons. There was only basic information furnished for subjects like these. And now, it was even less likely that they would supply any confidential information.

Deputy Zhou was about to respond when Li Hao suddenly whipped his head around and looked at where the offices were located in the front. There was a furtive figure there, skulking through the shadows.

Several other figures surrounded it in the blink of an eye. Hong Yitang smiled faintly, Hou Xiaochen crossed his arms. Sky Sword was a bit slow, and Southern Fist and Light Sword even slower.

The unknown figure moved like a wraith; a hint of wariness marked its gestures. These guys... had such strong perception!

“You’re one of the overlords of the age, why scurry around in the shadows, Minister Chen?” Li Hao said calmly.

“Impressive!” Chen Yao smiled. “This place is indeed a dragon’s pool and a tiger’s den. I just wanted to probe the environment and see how the defenses of the Skystar Commander Office are. It seems that they are very capable!”

Inwardly, he took a sharp breath. He was strong, he really was. After Li Hao fought them in the capital, all sides had furiously enhanced themselves. He’d fortified himself to three element Arcanus, but was still instantly discovered when he snuck into the complex.

And he wasn’t detected by Li Hao! That was terrifying. Had Sky Sword and the rest all become three element Arcanus? Chen Yao wanted to snort at them—were they that rich? Even when it came to advancing himself to three elements, it’d been a slightly painful affair for his finances. He’d required drops of Water of Life to the tune of several hundred million mysterious power stones to stabilize his cultivation level.

Breaking through was possible for Arcanus, but each breakthrough first relied on mysterious power stones, second on plant spirits. The third came down to whether one’s mysterious power, internal force, blood qi, and body itself was of sufficient caliber for the advancement. Otherwise, simply relying on Water of Life wouldn’t prove to be effective.

Each progression consumed a significant amount of resources. How could the poor beggars of Silver Moon improve so quickly? That was rather unexpected. Even if Li Hao had so many treasures on him, he couldn’t turn it all to strength so quickly, could he?

“Li Hao, I’m thinking that there might be some things that you don’t understand with the institution that you’re about to establish,” Chen Yao replied without a flicker of change in his expression.

Li Hao smiled. The Chen father and son... were an interesting duo. They were classic fairweather allies. If he was to say that they were corrupt, well, they weren't fully corrupt. But neither was the Inspectorate all that good. In terms of good, the father and son had helped him last time. When it came to mundane cases, it was only the Inspectorate that did a passable job.

Father and son were the typical sort of not expending one iota more effort than needed, but also not committing one bit less than was required. Their deaths seemed imminent if anyone ever asked anything from them."

When it came to the Inspectorate, it could only be described as mediocre! That ministry was as mediocre as Chen Yao and his father. It was neither here nor there, neither good nor bad. There were two old ministers ranked ahead of them; there were plenty of other ministers ranked behind them. Their authority wasn't the greatest, but neither was it the smallest. Their strength wasn't the greatest, but neither were they the weakest.

One had to say, sometimes it was people like this who seemed the most disagreeable and irritating. Exemplary in nothing, yet refusing to fall to the rear. They were a sight that offended the eyes.

"You're too polite, Minister Chen!" Li Hao also found it wordless that the inspector general had snuck in like he was up to no good. The young man didn't mind conversing with their visitor, however. He'd never had a proper conversation with this one. He was curious what the other was here for.

"Let's just find a random place to sit. It's my first time here as well, so I'm none too familiar with it." Li Hao walked to a pavilion in the middle of a lake. This was quite a large backyard as it held an artificial lake and had space for a pavilion in its center. With the wintry gusts howling around them, it would be quite an outing if there was a grill in the pavilion. They could cook skewers and enjoy some wine.

"Folks... give us some space?" Chen Yao looked at the others still surrounding him. What are you still in my face for?

They laughed and vanished without a trace, just as they'd come. They were so strong that it put pressure on Chen Yao. These Silver Moon people improved too quickly.

.....

Within the lake pavilion.

There were no cozy fireside chats, steaming mugs of tea, or grilling meat. There were only wintry gusts howling around the two. As the wind wrapped around Li Hao, it gradually began to calm. It was like the wind itself avoided the young man.

Li Hao took a seat; Chen Yao took a seat across from him. It was only now that Li Hao truly saw the inspector general clearly. He wasn't old—forty years old at most. At the same time, looks didn't mean much. The man was on the skinny side, not too tall, and a bit flippant. He seemed more like a hooligan on the streets.

Chen Yao suppressed the urge to shift uncomfortably, he wasn't at ease here. Since the two weren't drinking tea or wine, they were stuck staring awkwardly at each other.

Chapter 795: Probing for Partnership (III)

“Wine, commander?”

“Just a little!”

“Alright!” Chen Yao smiled and waved a jug of wine into existence. An enticing fragrance drifted through the air when he opened it. Two cups of white jade appeared in the air; one of them landed in Li Hao's hand.

Seeing that Chen Yao was about to pour him a drink, Li Hao smiled and manifested water mist. He swirled it over the cup to clean it, causing Chen Yao's expression to stiffen. What was this if not the height of impudence?? Did Li Hao hold him in such contempt?

However, the man didn't say anything. He directed the wine into the form a water dragon and into Li Hao's cup. Chen Yao lifted his own cup for a sip, finally feeling able to relax slightly. "Does Commander Li know how the nine ministries were established?"

"I'm not sure. The books have some records that the people groveled in abject misery eighty years ago, leading to the rise of nine saints. There were those from the dynasty, from the martial world, and the military among them. They were dissatisfied with the unlawfulness of the Skystar royal family and overthrew the previous king. After forcing the royal family to withdraw behind the curtains, they formed the nine ministries and commenced their age of the nine ministries..."

Chen Yao nodded, not minding the slightly sarcastic tone that Li Hao used when mentioning the "nine saints". "Honestly speaking, if you ask any elder over one hundred years ago if life is better now or eighty years ago, the answer will speak for itself."

"I've never denied that the nine ministries have accomplished a great deal. I heard about them back when I was in Silver City. After I reached White Moon City, I said that the nine ministries have done well in the world. But later, I discovered that I thought too much, that they're all the same! They look good, but they're even darker in reality."

"The nine ministries really did want to break the feudal system at first and build a stronger dynasty," Chen Yao responded after prolonged silence. "We wanted the people to be at peace and happy, for the nation to be prosperous. But later, we discovered that it wasn't possible!"

"Not possible?"

"It really isn't." Chen Yao nodded. "Particularly after the rise of the supernatural. The ancient existences also stir up trouble, aided by local overlords. The three great organizations, seven divine mountains, various monster spirits, various local tyrants, pirates of the Four Seas... all prove impossible to deal with!"

He sighed helplessly. "The world's situation wouldn't be thus if these were the only obstacles. The nine ministries still have our own level of strength. However, the key is that the royal family was only barely suppressed back in the day. They, too, have always agitated at their restraints. What would you have the nine ministries do then?"

“In the end, we decided to just follow the same path and take it one day at a time. If it came down to it, we’d break the status quo and start all over again. Rebuilding is easier than repairing sometimes.

“This dynasty has issues starting from its foundation. The nine ministries cannot keep a complete lid on it and can only patch things up here or there. In the end, we came to a tacit agreement to let the house of cards collapse as it would. It might be easier to rebuild after everything breaks.”

Li Hao didn’t say a word as he sipped at his wine. Perhaps Chen Yao made logical sense, but if this was truly how the nine ministries thought, why maintain the status quo to present day? It’d be better to completely let go sooner!

Holding a bureaucratic position, yet not enacting any policy was worse than Yao Si’s withdrawal from his duties. These guys were neither shitting nor getting off the pot!

“But that’s neither here nor there, I can tell that you don’t really want to listen to this!” Chen Yao laughed. “Let’s speak of what you do want to hear. The greatest enemy of the nine ministries is the royal family!

“The old Skystar King is still alive, and the ruins that we explore in the world were not just discovered in recent years. We knew about them a long time ago, but most of the plant and animal spirits had not awakened then. You should know a bit about the Skystar Army—they’re the suits of armor in these ruins. The royal family later created the Black Armaturas out of them.

“Eighty years ago, the nine old ministers suppressed the Skystar King and the nine royal princes at that time. We killed and destroyed whoever we could, including some of the commanders of the Black Armaturas. However, the old Skystar King fled into the ruins with the remnants of his supporters.

“The two sides settled down into a stalemate after that. We wanted to wipe them out entirely, but were unable to do so. The ruins being difficult to enter is one point, the royal family being strong is another. The ancient monster spirits are also involved...

“While they hadn’t fully awakened eighty years ago, their mental strength still lingered on the sites. It wasn’t as strong as they are now, but it still wasn’t something we could measure up to.” Chen Yao looked at Li Hao. “Therefore, both sides could only compromise that the old Skystar King abdicate in favor of the current Skystar King. And yet, the royal family wasn’t willing to fade away into obscurity. Certain developments occurred along the way...

“The most major of them was the revitalization of the supernatural twenty years ago. The old Skystar King obtained many benefits from his position in the ruins. He sought to return after his defeat and the nine ministers paid an exceedingly high price to defeat him. They suppressed him and utilized the nine divine weapons, as well as the ultimate art of Tranquil Star, to completely seal him away...

“Ultimately, however, they weren’t able to kill him. The plant spirit in his camp had awoken by a great deal twenty years ago. It employed core origin power to pull him back to safety at a crucial moment. The plant spirit likely wants to gain greater benefits through the royal family so that it can quickly recover. The royal family has become its representative, so it won’t permit the royal family to perish.”

“.....”

Li Hao listened attentively to Chen Yao’s lengthy explanation. “What’s the situation now?”

“The old Skystar King is still hiding in the ruins. He’s been sealed away and has to walk out of the ruins if he wishes to break the seal. He won’t be able to shatter it if he doesn’t emerge...

“We utilized the special sealing method of Tranquil Star, combining the blood essence of the old ministers with the nine characters and divine weapons to seal him away. That was why the old king saw an opportunity when some of the old ministers attacked you last time. He wanted to break free of the ruins and undo the seal, but was ultimately suppressed again...

“But after you kill Hu Xiao and Qian Wanhao, that seal might have loosened again.”

Li Hao nodded, then asked, “Why are you so wary of the old king breaking out?”

Was there a need for that? So what if he broke out? Why let the situation develop to the point in which the two premier heavyweights from the Ministry of Armed Forces and Administration couldn’t move around freely? They could only keep their eyes on the royal family and quickly respond whenever that one made an attempt to break out.

“He’s too strong.” Chen Yao smiled.

“Too strong?”

“Correct.”

“Stronger than the plant spirits?”

“Not to that point,” Chen Yao explained. “Being strong is one thing, the second is to prevent the old king from obtaining even more benefits after he breaks the seal. The previous king was quite an extraordinary character—he is highly authorized in the ruins. You know just as well what kind of benefits a high authorization in the ruins brings. He was a Golden Armor twenty years ago!”

Golden Armor, twenty years ago! Li Hao’s face twitched slightly. That meant he’d been a division leader twenty years ago!

“Do you understand now?” sighed Chen Yao. “The royal family’s ruins haven’t been excavated to a large extent, but the family is so strong even so. How dare we let that old guy wander around freely? He’s kept under firm suppression now, with no use for his identity, status, or strength. We’ll sense him as soon as he departs from the zone of the plant spirit’s protection and obliterate him!”

“Therefore, the stalemate stretched on. We don’t dare let him obtain more authorization—it would be an unmitigated disaster if he assumed control over the Skystar Troops. All of the ruins would

belong to the royal family and they would claim all benefits. The nine ministries would only barely hang on then.”

“The supernatural had only just reawakened twenty years ago,” Li Hao was surprised. “The strongest of martial masters then was only Dominator of Thousands. How could he have been a division leader then?”

That was incredible!

“You forget one thing,” laughed Chen Yao. “It’s true that the supernatural awoke twenty years ago, and it’s true that there were few powerhouses then. But remember, whether it was the armored warriors in the ruins or others... they were all in a state of hibernation. It was easier to obtain authorization then, assuming that one possessed sufficient strength and luck.”

There were fewer powerhouses in the world, but also more inactivity throughout the ancient existences. If an Arcanus could become a division leader now, then one could be a division leader twenty years ago as a Dominator.

“Is that so?” Li Hao raised a brow. “Then my master didn’t obtain that many benefits for his efforts in the ruins early on.”

“It’s not the same. Silver Moon had only just awakened twenty years ago and it was sealed away before that. There were signs of awakening in Skystar City two hundred years ago. It likely has to do with how the ancient records mention that this area held the energy mine for the Silver Moon Territory.”

Li Hao blinked with understanding.

“This is why the nine ministries and royal family are in a stalemate.” Chen Yao took a sip of wine. “I tell you this to point out that it makes it easier for the old Skystar King to break free if you kill a few more of the old ministers. There will be a world of trouble then, which is why Qi Pingjiang doesn’t wish for you to keep killing anymore.”

“Not to mention, you’re so strong that he knows all of the nine ministries must mobilize if they want to kill you. That will also free the old Skystar King then. Will he not retaliate after being confined by the nine ministries for so many years? It’s a tough situation on both ends, so he might as well put one down for now.”

Li Hao inclined his head without saying anything else.

“Everyone’s waiting for the second awakening,” Chen Yao had to continue upon lack of response from the young man. “Once the void is stable after the second awakening, everyone will be able to break through. No matter how strong the old Skystar King is, seven element Arcanus is available to all after the second awakening. They will be on par with the Apex of the ancient civilization, which means that everyone stands at the same starting line then. By then, it will come down to the strength of everyone’s backer. How many backers and level of strength will be the key.”

Chapter 796: Probing for Partnership (IV)

“Then why go to Silver Moon?” Li Hao asked. All sides could just quietly wait for the second awakening, why fixate on Silver Moon? He’d never understood what was in the province for the rest of the world and ancient monster spirits.

“We want to go to Silver Moon because of the ancient existences there. If they haven’t died yet, then almost none of them are fully awakened!” Chen Yao answered honestly. “You must understand that to the ancient spirits elsewhere, they weren’t the strongest back in the day. The truly great were all in Silver Moon! If those outside devour the protective plant spirits of Battle Heaven, they would take a large step forward and smash through their previous cultivation restrictions.

“For us, once Silver Moon’s ancient monster spirits and modern cities shatter, it represents another awakening of the entire Skystar Dynasty! Whether it is these ancient cities or ancient powerhouses, they keep a lot of things sealed away and cause the world to grow ever poorer!

“Silver Moon was the center of the world during the ancient civilization. As such, treasures abound within it. Heritage from powerhouses, ultimate arts of martial dao, corpses of ancient monster spirits, and lands of enlightenment from heavyweights... Only there can we break our shackles and take another step forward! Victory is possible only when the Silver Moon heavyweights are still in slumber. That is the only possible chance to rise to higher heights!”

Chen Yao looked at Li Hao. “The legends also say that it is through Silver Moon can we walk out of this world and enter a bigger world! It is the passage to the ancient civilization, and that the eight families protected this passage. Do you... know about this?”

The Star Gate?

It wasn't Li Hao's first time hearing of this. The eight families encircled the Star Gate and protected the passageway. Perhaps one could utilize the Star Gate to locate the ancient Human King and others. Of course, the Human King was long dead in the eyes of most and the ancient civilization completely destroyed.

But no matter what, it was a path to a higher level of being. Therefore, Silver Moon became a place that these people always fought over.

“And then?” Li Hao inclined his head.

“And then?” Chen Yao was speechless, so he had to put it more plainly. “Therefore, it won't be the ancient powerhouses of Silver Moon that first appear after the second awakening, but the plant and monster spirits that back the royal family and nine ministries. They will attack Silver Moon at first light, seize the bodies of the strong, devour their core origin, break through the Star Gate...

“That's why I say your true troubles will begin then, that Silver Moon's troubles will officially arrive then! You've demonstrated your strength at present, so everyone is biding their time. They simply think that there's no need to go toe-to-toe, that they can just wait.

“This is why you can withstand their combined offensive. It won't last long as the second awakening should be arriving soon. Skystar City is the key. Both the nine ministries and royal family know that the second awakening might have something to do with the enormous mine at Skystar City...”

“So the minister means to say that that will be the day of my death?” Li Hao finally understood.

“Not exactly... but the best course of action for you then is to run back to Silver Moon! I know that Silver Moon is very strong, that there are many martial masters, and many of the old guard still alive. They once attacked Skystar City and sought to seize some ruins. Most of them died, but a portion survived.

“And yet, can they stand against these existences that have survived for countless years?”

“I understand your meaning!” Li Hao laughed. “The minister would like to ask if I have a patron, do I? To be honest, no. You said so yourself, the powerhouses of Silver Moon are hard to awaken. When it really comes to that time, how are we to stand against the plant and monster spirits backing you guys?”

“.....” Chen Yao was growing weary of this conversation. Do you, or do you not, understand what I mean? “You can... quickly set foot into five elements, but my senses tell me that that will be hard for me. I’m thinking that if you can cross into seven elements before the second awakening, then you’ll have the ability to eliminate a batch of enemies before the awakening arrives. Perhaps you can partner with some plant spirits, such as the one of the Hus. The plant spirits need our help too, it’s just a matter of mutual benefit...”

“No, wait!” Li Hao interrupted him. “The plant spirits are incomparably powerful after awakening, so aren’t you afraid that they’ll eliminate you instead? Why do you think they’ll help you?”

Where did he get the confidence from?

“We naturally have our guarantees if we dare to work with the plant spirits,” laughed Chen Yao. “Silver Moon Territory is no longer suited for core origin dao, so the ancient plant spirits will have to attach themselves to a modern powerhouse if they wish to leave this land. That holds true even after they fully awaken and devour heavyweights of core origin dao. Under normal circumstances, we sign mutual beneficiary agreements...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means that we mutually benefit from each other!” Chen Yao explained. “Just as these agreements existed in the ancient civilization, we share our lives, energy, and great dao with each other. Neither side is able to hurt one another in this way.”

A mutual beneficiary agreement? Li Hao sent his consciousness into the storage ring. “Senior Little Tree, do you know about the mutual beneficiary agreement?”

The little tree trembled before sending back mental ripples moments later. “Do you... want to sign one with me?”

“No, I’m just asking.” Li Hao wanted to roll his eyes. What was it so afraid for? I don’t want to sign with you! But seeing at how afraid the tree is, this looks like it does exist.

“Mutual beneficiary agreements existed between humanity and plant spirits back in the day. They were a special method meant to prevent betrayal from either side. The two sides signed agreements to share their lives and depend on each other. Humanity could receive longevity and plant spirits would receive some benefits from humans.

“It was an arrangement of mutual benefit, but it was gradually abolished.”

“Why?” Li Hao asked curiously.

“There are certain drawbacks to mutual beneficiary agreements. For instance, if one side wanted to die, it would easily drag in the other. If one side is too weak, that easily implicates the other. Killing the weakling would easily cause the death of the strong.”

That made sense!

“And another thing, interference appears between the daos of humans and plant spirits. Hence, mutual beneficiary agreements are quite limited in the peaks that they can reach.”

Is that so? Li Hao asked further, “So they really do exist and are effective, is that so?”

“Right!” answered the little tree. “But you should be careful if you wish to sign a mutual beneficiary agreement. A lower level agreement was crafted later on to avoid some troubles—sharing a part of core origin, sharing a part of life. My replica can sign an agreement with you, but if anything happens, only my replica dies. My primary body is fine.”

Li Hao’s heart shook. That was confidential, wasn’t it? The little tree had just outright told him about it!

“I tell you this just to remind you to not easily trust mutual beneficiary agreements.” The little tree seemed to know what was going on in his mind. “If you place your trust in them, the other can condemn you to death with just the willingness to lose a portion of their core origin. However, most plant spirits will not do so unless they have absolutely no choice. Losing core origin is especially troublesome in this era!”

Li Hao understood, that made sense.

“Besides... you are the heir of the Sword Sovereign. Signing an agreement with you doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a poor bargain for me.”

Essentially, the little tree was saying that it would agree if Li Hao truly wanted to sign one. After all, his status was acceptable and his potential was good. They could sign one!

Li Hao was speechless. He didn’t want to engage in that course of action!

Across the table, Chen Yao frowned to see the young man deep in thought.

“Minister Chen,” Li Hao suddenly said. “You guys haven’t signed these agreements yet, have you?”

“No, we haven’t,” Chen Yao confirmed. “For one, we are too weak and so the plant spirits are unwilling. For two, they haven’t fully awakened yet. Signing an agreement now is a burden to them. If their person on the outside dies, it would implicate them in numerous ways. But once the second awakening begins, we’ll sign the agreements to prevent them from swiftly turning on us when they leave the ruins.”

I understand!

No wonder these guys weren’t worried about the plant spirits outright killing them. But if these plant spirits did as the little tree revealed and only used part of their core origin to sign... then that was all they would lose in the event of a betrayal. Those of the nine ministries and royal family would still die.

Did they know about the lower level agreements?

Perhaps they did, perhaps they didn’t. The plant spirits weren’t likely to kill their human and sacrifice that portion of their core origin before the crucial moment arrived.

Li Hao mostly understood Chen Yao’s meaning and smiled mysteriously at the man. “Did Minister Chen come to me today just to tell me this? You want me to be careful, and that I’m done for after the second awakening?”

“Does Commander Li really not understand?” Chen Yao’s frown deepened.

“What do you want me to say?” Li Hao burst out laughing. “Say that I’m sure I can find a big backer before the second awakening, or that I’ll become a supreme powerhouse myself and can defend against plant spirits? or what else?”

Exactly that! Chen Yao cursed. “You set foot into five elements so quickly... Do you... have a way... to avoid some trouble... and enter seven elements?”

He cut straight to the chase!

“How would I know!” Li Hao’s laughter continued. “I’ll tell the minister if I succeed. Wouldn’t I just be painting a pretty picture without substance otherwise?”

That’s right, aren’t you even willing to paint a pretty picture for me?

The young man chuckled. Deputy Zhou had once mentioned that painting a pretty picture would sometimes bring hope. But... why should I paint one for you? I want kindred spirits, not just to grow my faction. This Minister Chen wavers between various decisions and can’t make up his mind. I see right through you!

Chen Yao was here to inquire whether Li Hao could take care of some troubles before the second awakening and if he could locate a major backer. If he could, then the minister would throw his lot in with the young man.

And yet, Li Hao refused to give him that assurance! Come if you want, don’t if you don’t want to! He’d spoken of so many secrets, explained the origins of the nine ministries, and described the trump cards of the royal family in order to tell Li Hao that these two sides would instantly grow stronger after the second awakening. The enemy is very strong, do you have more aces up your sleeves?

But to the young man, his thoughts were that I don’t even know if you’re a good guy or bad. Why should I tell you this?

Chen Yao was growing agitated. Li Hao knew of his meaning and he displayed an intent to work with Li Hao, but the young man wasn’t continuing the conversation. Does he think so little of me??

Chapter 797: Probing for Partnership (V)

“Let us speak of the present, if not the future, Commander Li,” Chen Yao snapped. “The City of Supernaturals and three great organizations are a grave threat to you too. I’m sure that you need

some helpers. The martial masters of Silver Moon cannot always fight for you because the province needs heavyweights in residence as well.”

“So what?” Li Hao sipped his wine with a smile. “The Inspectorate is ranked among the top three of the nine ministries and the Chens are extremely strong. Why tie yourself to my sinking ship? You’ll drown at any time.”

“I...” Chen Yao was well and truly angered now. “Does Commander Li not have any desire to be courteous to the wise?? I come with sincerity, why must you show me such a dismissive attitude?”

“It is indeed a rare sight that the third ministry of the nine wants to join my side.” Li Hao sat up straight. “I hadn’t anticipated this possibility... but even if I wish to find helpers, I want those with clear goals and resolute attitudes. I do not want those who waver in determination and hesitate over what course to adopt. Moreover, I do not want those who turn hostile as soon as differences in opinion or weaknesses appear. These types of people are even more dangerous than enemies!”

“Do you mean to say that this is what the Chens are?”

“Correct!” Li Hao answered brusquely. “In my eyes, this is precisely what the Chens are! If you truly wanted to ally, you would’ve come out in the open, not skulk around in the shadows and look around furtively. That’s a lack of sincerity!”

“I am responsible for the Chens and the Inspectorate!” Chen Yao boomed. “I do not operate by myself, do you think I’m like Southern Fist and the others who feed their entire family if they themselves are full? You must know that there are 176 members in the Chen family and I have thirty-seven siblings alone...”

Li Hao’s jaw dropped. The hell?! How do you have so many siblings? You’re joking! This is more proliferate than Thunderleg... How does your dad sire so many kids?

“Don’t look at me like that, they’re not my children! They’re my siblings!” Chen Yao thundered. “I tell you this to show that partnership between factions is different from that of individual people.

Southern Fist and the rest only need to look out for themselves. And me? I need to think of the future. Otherwise, we'll be like the Hus of today and easily destroyed.

"You need to at least give me some hope if you truly wish to obtain my family's support. Take Yao Si, for example. You must have given him some hope for him to be willing to swear fealty to you. Otherwise, with his personality, would he easily give the Night Watchers to you?"

Li Hao blinked and turned over the man's words. That... made sense. Since Silver Moon martial masters didn't usually haggle, that meant he automatically disliked the inspector general. At the same time, Chen Yao made sense. The man led a large family and it would be all of their deaths if he picked the wrong team.

"I cannot give you any promises." Li Hao shook his head. "Because I myself don't know what is to come. What do you want me to say? Lie to you? Is there any meaning in that? The only thing I can say is... come if you're willing to fight for the same goals! As for the rest... Minister Chen should consider it for yourself."

Chen Yao sighed. If one said Li Hao was an honest fellow... well, that he was. He was unwilling to breathe a hint of anything even at a time like this. But this puts me in a very difficult spot!

After hesitating over his course of action, the man said, "Then I have one request. If you agree, the Inspectorate will put its full force behind you!"

"Let's hear it."

"As long as you can seize their ruin." Chen Yao looked at the Hus' former rear residence. "No matter the method, so long as you can take it, then the Inspectorate will assist you with everything we have! The Chens do not go back on our word!"

Li Hao thought it over and nodded with a smile. That worked too! It was a demonstration of strength. Being able to seize the ruins meant that he could do the same to the others. He would also expose all of his trump cards and foundation in the process of doing so since the plant spirits in the ruins were currently at the Apex level.

Chen Yao's worries would be dismissed if Li Hao could handle everything, and taking the ruins was already part of the young man's plans. In that case, he would push his boat along the current. As for whether or not the Inspectorate really would put their full force behind him... Li Hao didn't care. "Alright!"

"Very well!" Chen Yao's expression flickered with the young man's swift agreement. "In that case, my Chens do not practice a miserly style. I can arrange two Arcanus to help you in the meantime. They keep a low profile and are a token of our sincerity!"

"You're being so generous?" Li Hao laughed.

"It's also so that you do not think too little of us!"

"Very well, then my thanks," Li Hao smiled. "But I'll say this beforehand, I will not pay them a salary. And my commands are law. I'll kill them if they give me any trouble. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Of course!" Chen Yao rose without further discussion. "I await your good news!"

Li Hao sent him off for a few steps before falling back. He smiled at the interesting encounter. It likely wouldn't matter to the Chens even if those two Arcanus died. They just wanted to see if his side could really claim the Hu ruins.

"Why didn't you give him more hope?" Deputy Zhou walked out softly.

"The nine ministries annoy me!"

Alright then. The deputy had nothing to say to that. The young man's martial world blood was very apparent at times. But it was good enough that he'd accomplished what he had in such a short

period of time. There was no need for criticism. If they really took the Hu ruins, then the Chens would also make the right decision of whether to partner with Li Hao or await extermination.

“Then the Hu ruins...”

“We’ll have a meeting about it first!” Li Hao had put the ruins on his to-do list as well.

First, he wanted to rule out the possibility of the Hus from having any powerhouses hidden within. Second, why not? There might be treasure inside. Third, he wanted to see if he had the capacity to kill a plant spirit. Yes, kill. He’d never considered the possibility of cooperation. What for? He just wanted to try killing one!

Fourth, was the Hu ruin part of the Skystar ruin? That would be interesting if it were. That the nine ministries could suppress the old Skystar King through the ruins, it was food for thought that these ruins were all interconnected. Their potential interface was the key. He wanted to undermine the royal family’s foundation!

What royal family, the Skystar Mine was Li Hao’s! Are you going to awaken a second time if I dig it up ahead of time? You’ll awaken when I say you can! The Hu ruins were an opening. Li Hao wouldn’t have let them be even without Chen Yao.

.....

The others arrived after Chen Yao left.

“What did that little thug want with you?” He Yong was the most curious.

“.....” Li Hao blinked. Who was he talking about?

“Chen Yao!” He Yong laughed at seeing Li Hao look blankly at him. “You don’t know? Don’t be fooled by his age—prior to taking over from his old man, he was the biggest thug in Skystar City. He lived it up and did anything he wanted. After he succeeded his father, he still continued in the same style. His old man’s the same as him, but I’m not too familiar with the older guy. Apparently, he was also a thug back in the day...”

“His reputation was worse than mine in the martial world eighty years ago!” He Yong ended with a chuckle. That declaration drew various glances from the group.

“What you looking at??” he grouched. “You’re the ones who built my bad reputation! I can’t be bothered to argue with you anymore!”

No one said a word. So you also know that your reputation is poor! We thought you didn’t know!

“Then the one at the Inspectorate... is still a thug?” Li Hao burst out laughing.

“Of course. Don’t be fooled by his appearance like a gentleman now, apparently he passed himself off as a scholar in later years. He looks refined and genteel, but can’t read all that well. The books he reads are comic books with pictures in them!”

The group looked at him with meaningful looks, roughly grasping He Yong’s meaning. He Yong rolled his eyes again. I don’t mean it that way! I mean actual comics! Do you understand me or not? What are you all looking at me like that for?

“So Martial Uncle He means to say...”

“That this family comes from the streets and is good at analyzing the times, but they’re not reliable in true times of need!” He Yong assessed brusquely. “He came skulking through the shadows, probably because he sensed an opportunity...”

The group stared at him again. So... you've met your own kind, huh? It takes one to know one, you should be on good terms with the Inspectorate then!

He Yong wanted to weep from weariness! This is all because my reputation was sabotaged! My reputation is great! I'm a very loyal guy! I stick out my neck for my brothers and can sacrifice myself for them. I bare my heart to my friends! What are you guys looking at me for?!

"Just be careful. The Chens are reliable when you've got momentum on your side, but they'll run faster than anyone if the tides seem to be turning!"

The group stared at him again; He Yong really was ready to fly into a rage.

"What are you guys looking at me for?!" he scowled. "I'm going to start hitting if you lot keep staring at me!"

Stop looking at me! Why are you always looking at me??

The group returned to quiet and stopped regarding Southern Fist. So start hitting. You're the weakest among us, do your hits mean anything? We just can't be bothered to fight you since it's embarrassing to fight a thug.

Li Hao smiled and waved everyone to a seat. The tiny pavilion was immediately crowded with people. He Yong, Hou Xiaochen, Deputy Zhou, Light Sword, Hong Yitang, and Sky Sword were all present. Sky Sword hadn't left yet—he seemed different from his previous aloofness.

In actuality... Li Hao surmised that Sky Sword's presence had something to do with the young man's own changes. More likely than not, Sky Sword was waiting to see if Li Hao would say certain things.

Yao Si was at the Night Watchers and hadn't had time to come over yet. Manager Yu was assisting Liu Long and the rest of the Demon Hunters to reorganize the Judgment Guard. Apart from Yang Shan and his wife, Qin Lian, almost all heavyweights were present in the pavilion.

Silver Moon hadn't sent that many martial masters for this occasion—mostly because Li Hao made his move before the Silver Moon martial masters arrived. By the time he emerged, the other side was completely dead. Hence, the martial masters from the province might've turned back halfway. They could also have slowed down their pace to reach Skystar City or decided not to show up at all. Li Hao didn't mind.

They didn't need to support him at first light upon each occasion. He didn't voluntarily request support either. Coming once was already an enormous favor. He wouldn't be put out just because they didn't arrive within three days on the second time.

"Let's sit and chat!" Li Hao began and turned to Hong Yitang. "Martial Uncle Hong, people need to be killed and business needs to be conducted. Killing is secondary and conducting business is key. The dead of winter will be upon us soon. It's cold now, but it's not the coldest..."

"So you mean...?" Hong Yitang asked softly.

"It's almost December and the new year. The academy needs to open its doors before the turn of the year."

Chapter 798: A Massive Leap Forward in Strength (I)

"In actuality, the first batch of students we recruit will be those who aren't afraid of death," Li Hao said after some thought. "But that isn't the key point either. I'm just thinking of raising the school's banner and attracting some talent! I hear that the teachers of Skystar's former Ancient Academy are having a tough time in the world. We can also target our recruitment efforts and undertake some reforms..."

Hong Yitang inclined his head.

“No matter how many students are at a school, there is still a limit to what it can do,” Li Hao continued. “The key is that it becomes universal. Of course, that’s obviously out of reach now, but it has to continue down this direction... We’ll go at it from both sides and not delay anything!”

“I know what to do now.” Hong Yitang nodded slightly.

“I hear that the East Pole Duke and Yu Qiao are exterminating the Xus under my name over on the eastern continent.” Li Hao turned to Deputy Zhou. “This is the deputy’s handiwork, isn’t it?”

“I simply had a chat with them.” The deputy smiled. “They feel that since the world is vast and the central government is far away, it’s enough to have a legitimate reason behind their actions. They don’t actually think much of the Skystar Commander Office.”

“Mm, that’s alright. They use my name and say that their actions are to take revenge for me... then I’ll satisfy them and pay a visit when I go to the east next time.” That was just as well, it meant he wouldn’t need to pay attention to the Xus in the east for a bit. Those two sides alone were enough to keep them preoccupied.

Li Hao continued to discuss some trivial matters—all affairs that’d happened recently. He asked about them all, whether big or small, so that no one would say that he neglected his management duties.

He didn’t actually want to manage anything—his goal was simple. Set up the overarching goal, kill everyone who annoys him, and after that... whether it was him continuing at the helm or someone else, that was for the future to decide.

He hoped that the supernaturals would keep to themselves this winter. It was shaping up to be a harsh winter, harsh enough to freeze to death. If a supernatural war erupted at this time and affected the entire dynasty, then hundreds of millions of civilians would be displaced. Half of them could either freeze or starve to death in this season.

Li Hao coughed gently after discussing the matters at hand. Everyone perked up their ears and inwardly snapped to attention. It was time to discuss serious business!

“Chen Yao came to tell me that the nine ministries and royal family, as well as the other organizations, are waiting for the second awakening to move against us. He was here to offer opportunistic help, but he also wanted to see a demonstration of strength and performance first.” Li Hao laughed, “I actually don’t care how they choose, but he did say something correctly. The second awakening is when a lot of our troubles begin!”

Everyone nodded.

“Silver Moon has ever been on guard against the second awakening,” Hou Xiaochen agreed. “We suffered an enormous setback in the first awakening. Our ruins... ai, they have enormous appetites. They spontaneously devoured all of the energy that blossomed and sucked us dry in a split second!”

He was very resigned about the situation and gave a rare sigh. “Otherwise, with the hot blood that runs in our veins, we would’ve produced quite a few premier powerhouses. Silver Moon didn’t give us the chance to do so...”

“Troubles are certain to come,” Li Hao said. “But we can’t idly sit by either, that’s not a good choice. We need to launch an attack when all sides don’t dare provoke us!”

Deputy Zhou and Hou Xiaochen kept quiet; everyone else looked at them. C’mon, Li Hao means you two. Aren’t the Silver Moon powerhouses waiting for the second awakening so they can counterattack when others invade?

It was the best plan that Silver Moon could come up with, as the province was weaker than the enemies it faced. Many veteran martial masters had died during their first rising, so few were the province’s counterattacks in recent years.

“None of this is key today. The key is that Southern Fist, Light Sword, and Deputy Zhou might be martial masters.”

Might be?

The group focused on Deputy Zhou.

“It... is hard to hear such words,” Deputy Zhou protested weakly.

“What level of strength are you, Deputy Zhou?” Li Hao smiled.

“It’s not as complicated as you think,” the deputy said with resignation after a while. “Let’s put it this way. I’m a special martial master, is it clearer like that? I walk the path of the ancient martial dao and walk it completely. I can do so because I accidentally obtained some benefits when I was young and my constitution was modified to be similar to an ancient martial practitioner’s. Therefore, it’s really not that I’m concealing anything like you guys think.”

An ancient martial practitioner!

“The orthodox ancient martial dao?” Li Hao looked at him with surprise.

“Yes!” Deputy Zhou admitted frankly. “I accidentally obtained some benefits in a ruin. A premier heavyweight about to petrify passed on some heritage to me. He converted my constitution with great arts during his dying breath.

“Therefore, I’m a pure practitioner of ancient martial dao. I have some small accomplishments to my name according to the ancient system. It’s just that with the demise of core origin dao, it is hard for me to walk another path. Hence, my achievements are less than everyone’s.”

“In that case... I understand a bit more,” Hou Xiaochen laughed. “So this means that the deputy has a very strong body! The ancient martial dao speaks of a golden body—that’s what you have, correct?”

“I do have that...” Deputy Zhou smiled. “But with how sparse energy is, a weak golden body is hard to maintain. Thankfully, Commander Li gave me some Water of Life and helped me nurture it. Otherwise... I wouldn’t be able to easily employ it.”

His admission drew everyone’s interest. A pure ancient martial practitioner was different from a modern cultivator who practiced ancient methods. Someone who walked the ancient path was one who made the same journey and attained the same levels and great dao as the ancient civilization. Practicing ancient methods, however, usually required some sort of modification to the method. Modern humans had weaker physical bodies, so the two cultivation philosophies were different. Martial masters focused on the aura, whereas ancient cultivation focused on core origin.

Li Hao relaxed with understanding—no wonder he hadn’t been able to see anything before. No wonder he didn’t find the deputy to possess a frail body. The others coughed incessantly or had wan faces, but that never appeared with this one. There was no talk of weak organs in the ancient martial civilization, so those symptoms would naturally not appear.

Deputy Zhou being frank now was likely out of a desire to not start an image of someone crafty and insidious. He was quite resigned to have the entire group staring at him like this.

“Let’s move on from Deputy Zhou.” Li Hao smiled. “Seniors Southern Fist and Light Sword are both martial masters. The rest, including Director Hou, count as supernaturals now since they’ve broken their locks.

“The path of the supernaturals is not an easy path at the moment. The way ahead is unknown, but I have no need to worry about things for everyone.”

The group focused on him. You obviously have something up your sleeves, so out with it!

Hong Yitang was in the loop, so he was quite relaxed and awaited Li Hao’s next words.

“All of you can see it too, I am improving very quickly and don’t reveal anything in regular times.” Li Hao grinned. “I’m not purposefully hiding anything either. The biggest trouble that supernaturals run into is that mysterious power is an external force and the aura is off limits to them. They can only use supernatural abilities against enemies...”

“Out with it!” He Yong grumped.

“My point is, I’ve wandered off the path and may have found something new. But I don’t know what the future looks like or what the consequences may be, nor do I know what this means for my potential. For the moment, however, I can take mysterious power into my body!”

“Teach us!” He Yong immediately understood. “We love the unknown!”

“.....” You’re so frank and decisive that it’s frightening.

He Yong was no fool. What do I care about the future? Large numbers of Arcanus were appearing at present. If he still failed to improve, he would be suppressed by them. No matter what the road was, it was enough that it could be taken. Who cared what the consequences were! A path that could strengthen the self was a good path. When more people tread it, it would become an avenue.

“I have one question,” Light Sword frowned slightly. “If we take this path, does that mean we need to break our supernatural locks? Is there any sort of restriction in this detail? For example, can I only break the locks that I’ve saturated? Or can I break as many as I’ve found, even if they’re not saturated?”

“You can also break ones that you haven’t saturated,” Li Hao answered from experience. “But you’ll be much weaker if you break those. Not only that, it means that your physical constitution, blood qi, and others will also be weaker since you haven’t saturated them.”

“So this means that even if we walk the same path as you, whoever saturated more locks before is still stronger?” He Yong asked in muffled tones.

Li Hao nodded. Of course! What else? Are you going to outright eclipse someone for no effort whatsoever? How is that possible!

A saturated supernatural lock is an indication of strength in one's body, blood qi, mind intent, and five organs. It was possible to break an unsaturated lock, but the body might not be able to endure the strain.

The supernatural ability characters also needed a combination of mental strength and blood qi. Those that could not muster the requisite level of strength would fail. It wasn't like setting foot into Arcanus just for breaking a supernatural lock.

"Have a taste!" Li Hao summoned his 'fire' character. A ferocious tiger hovered in the air. It was dim at first, then abruptly flared with flames!

It suddenly disappeared and reappeared over He Yong's head. The man's heart skipped a beat and punched outward!

BOOM!

The tiger disappeared; He Yong retracted his fist and frowned at it. "That's really hot fire energy!"

There were scorch marks on his fist—what incredible fire energy!

Hou Xiaochen manifested a fiery phoenix and waved it at the ferocious tiger. Since he'd broken a supernatural lock, the phoenix was also a fire supernatural ability. It crashed into the tiger and immediately drifted apart since the tiger had ripped it to pieces!

"So it's not just good for looks," Hou Xiaochen mused thoughtfully. "The key lies in a denser concentration of power and easier manipulation. It's stronger than Arcanus of the same level and combines mysterious power, aura, internal force, blood qi, and mind intent. In terms of quality, it's stronger than even mysterious power!"

He'd sensed a lot of details from one exchange. Sky Sword was next to follow and sent out a ray of sword qi. He did not have the aura anymore, but his sword intent remained. He carefully probed the situation when his sword qi clashed with the tiger.

"Interesting, your teacher mentioned combining the five auras last time, whereas you've melded mental strength with internal force with mysterious power..." Sky Sword nodded. "It's a good idea. It has something to do with those people using the ultimate art of Tranquil Star, doesn't it?"

Chapter 799: A Massive Leap Forward in Strength (II)

"Yes!" Li Hao nodded. "It does have something to do with those guys using the ultimate art of Tranquil Star. It's also related to my master's Breathing Method of the Five Styles, and the Incantation of the Blade of Blood. This character is basically a massive melting pot. I'm still theorizing more details."

He wouldn't have dared say this before, but the young man had gained many more reflections after reading The Accounts of Evenround. He displayed his 'water' character without further ado. It wasn't just the water aura, but water and fire at the same time. They melded together, demonstrating resistance at first that Li Hao forced down.

A peculiar surge of fire and water energy assimilated together. BOOM! The young man tossed it to He Yong and singed his eyebrows.

Wide-eyed, He Yong stared out of his blackened face, his fist still extended. A blank expression hung on his face. "Hot damn!" He offered after a while. What the heck was that?? It was at least twice as strong as the singular character from before!

"I came across some new knowledge in the ruins," Li Hao chuckled. "That was my first try, so apologies, Martial Uncle He!"

He Yong was at a loss for words!

Hong Yitang smiled. "Interesting. Do you guys want to see mine?"

A 'sword' character manifested and sword intent oscillated, transforming into thunder and lightning. It morphed into flames before the group could react, which then changed into a massive mountain...

It all changed very quickly!

Hong Yitang didn't meld his two elements together like Li Hao did. Rather, he summoned each element with a casual wave. His character transfigured into a variety of elements in the blink of an eye—too fast to keep up. The most astounding of all was that there was no conflict between them!

The sight made the group suck in sharp breaths. Li Hao and Hong Yitang's characters seemed to be different, but no matter what, they could see what made this ability unique.

"Do you... guys count as martial masters? Or supernaturals?"

"I don't know either." Li Hao shook his head. "A type of fusion, I guess? Or a melting pot like I said. It's different from being a martial master and different from being a supernatural... If you want to call it a new path... but this is all there is to it for now, so I don't think it counts as one. What it does do, however, is resolve the problem of mysterious power being a resource in the outside world..."

This was the only way he could think of to solve the issue!

"There's another key problem that hasn't been fixed!" Li Hao added after some thought. "The one of the body!"

Indeed, the young man felt that if his path was to be smoothly taken to the end, then strengthening the body must be tackled for it to be a success. Otherwise, it would not be a new dao at all!

This path was more suited for people, but if one's body was weak, Water of Life was still required to protect the organs during each breakthrough. If there was no solution for this, were they all to give up cultivating if he ran out of sword energy one day, or if they could not rely on plant spirits?

There was an over reliance on plant spirits at the moment! This problem didn't exist in the ancient civilization, so ancient martial dao had been a wide avenue that led straight to great dao. Unfortunately, modern humans were not suited for it, not unless they underwent the same treatment as Deputy Zhou.

However, if everyone's body was forcefully modified by a premier heavyweight, that would change them from being modern humans! And was it possible to modify the bodies of tens of billions of people? Would there need to be a new dao then?

This was the great problem facing Li Hao at present; he didn't know how to resolve it. Hong Yitang said that he could coalesce more characters to resolve it, but what characters?

The characters had to do with supernatural locks; Li Hao's energy of wind and thunder were tied to strengthening the body and blood qi. And, yet, they didn't accomplish the effect that he wanted. Did other supernatural locks exist in the body to strengthen one's entire being?

"That's hardly an issue." He Yong was indifferent. "We all face that problem. Being able to solve part of the problem is a win at our current stage. Having an answer for mysterious power coming from the outside is incredible enough!"

That was the truth! He hadn't thought that Li Hao wouldn't be satisfied and want to resolve even the problem of their weak bodies.

"That's true..." Li Hao smiled. "I'm just thinking... that there may be an answer to the issue of our bodies. My teacher's breathing method may be the key, it's just not complete yet."

He somehow felt that the Breathing Method of the Five Styles might be the solution. Its effects were just too slow at present and not as noticeable.

The human body was a massive treasure hunt, not enough of it had been explored yet. The Breathing Method of the Five Styles ventured only into the five organs—that was insufficient. Li

Hao felt that his teacher confined himself to a tiny area. If his teacher incorporated a dozen more secret arts with the breathing method... he might be able to strengthen everything...

Mmhmm, it was time to seek out his teacher and have Yuan Shuo stay in one place for once. The old man should spend more effort on considering how to assimilate eighty more secret arts—ones for strengthening the limbs, the brain, the bones, and blood qi...

If all of them were incorporated, wouldn't the breathing method outright enhance the entire body then? That was the direction that his teacher should proceed in!

The group thought it over and nodded as well.

"Your teacher's idea last time was to meld the auras into the five locks and have them strengthen the body in turn. That is a good idea," raised Sky Sword. "But now you're individually separating them into characters. According to your teacher's theory, would it be the equivalent of melding all of the locks together if you combined the characters together? Would that resolve the problem of the body's weakness?"

Li Hao raised his eyebrows. Sky Sword's proposal was sound.

"I can give it a try, but right now... even I haven't melded my aura into that many locks. I need some time! But even if I succeed.... I think there will still be problems as you'd have to endure this process in the beginning."

"Stop worrying over it!" He Yong agitated. "Just tell us how to do it! Just teach us! As for how to fix the body... we'll all have ideas when more of us walk this path. I feel that we'll come across the answer more quickly when there's more of us cultivating in this way!"

His words made sense!

“Martial Uncle He is right...” Li Hao laughed. “But are you really not going to consider just outright breaking your locks?”

He Yong snorted. What would he consider that for? Just look around at the state of the world! He felt that he would turn into the next Golden Spear soon if he didn’t catch up to the others. Tragic, depressed, and running off elsewhere to possibly die in an isolated locale. There would be nothing left of his body to recover.

“Silver Moon martial masters cultivate the heart, not internal force alone. Let’s just be more decisive and do whatever should be done!”

Li Hao agreed with his words and quickly described his process. The group found it to be easy enough, which was to be expected. A cultivation path would not be suited for all if it was too difficult. Those who needed to could learn it—that was a new dao.

“This will require a lot of Water of Life!” Sky Sword frowned. “I have a bit left, but it might not be enough! Based on what you’re saying, it’s still a significant sum even if it’s less than what ascending as an Arcanus needs.”

Indeed, the resource consumption required was still significant! Granted, Sky Sword was already a two element Arcanus, or rather, three element now. His physical body had already been strengthened, but the process that the young man explained was one of devouring life force. Hence, Water of Life was necessary to fortify oneself with.

Now he understood Li Hao’s worries from earlier, why the body and life force were all problems.

“Don’t worry, I have Water of Life!” Li Hao smiled. The little tree had been converting this resource for him the past couple of days. It’d been doing so to pay the fine before. Now that there was sufficient quantity to pay it off, they were swimming in Water of Life.

He'd killed so many people this time that mysterious power stones were his greatest gain, after the mallet of the Hongs. Panther had collected roughly fifty-five million from the little lake. Most of the rest were poor, but the Sky Roc King had been very rich indeed.

The various factions hadn't seemed to want it to pay, so it'd carried five million stones on it. It'd all gone to Li Hao in the end. Combined with the other bits and pieces he collected, that made for sixty-five million stones in total from the Evenround expedition. It was less than what he expected, but thinking of it as spending fifty million stones to visit Evenround Martial—Li Hao found it quite a good trade!

He also knew now that the little tree might need only three thousand stones to coalesce one drop of Water of Life. It'd voluntarily lowered the price to four thousand pieces after the expedition. It, too, needed to recover and cultivate.

Li Hao actually wasn't going to hold back on payment. Even if they'd stuck to the previous ten thousand stones per drop, his gains from this exploration were sufficient for sixty-five hundred drops. That was an astronomical sum!! Granted, the little tree couldn't just endlessly convert Water of Life from morning to night.

"The senior helped a great deal in the ruins," Li Hao laughed before Sky Sword could say anything. "Those who didn't are..."

"Don't look at me!" He Yong raged with tragic sorrow. "What are you looking at me for?! I'll take out twenty drops, alright? That's all I have!"

And it was from Li Hao!

"I remember that martial uncle has at least twenty-five drops..." Li Hao smiled meaningfully.

He Yong nearly vomited blood. How do you even remember that? Yes, the young man had given him more before, but he'd forgotten it himself! Must you really empty me out? He Yong moped. I stood guard in Skystar City, I did my part too, alright?

“Then... Light Sword...” Light Sword scowled at He Yong. That guy has some savings, but I really don’t. If I did, I would’ve used it long ago, would I wait until now? Blast you, He Yong, why must you drag me into things?

“That’s enough, I’m just joking,” Li Hao laughed. “I’ll need everyone’s help in the operations to come. Obtaining benefits means needing to put forth equal effort. A transaction of equal value is what Director Hou often says and what the ancient civilization often refers to as necessary competition in martial dao. You must fight for your own benefits. Only with effort expended is there reward obtained. There will be plenty of skirmishes ahead of us!”

It was a given! No matter what, he needed to seize the ruins, take care of the City of Supernaturals, nine ministries, three great organizations, and seven divine mountains... How could he do that without sufficient powerhouses? Supernaturals could easily ascend as Arcanus now without thought of anything else. His side could not fall behind.

“Let’s set this aside first and focus on the cultivation of supernatural ability characters,” Li Hao changed the subject. “After that, I need to see how many elements each of you can endure. Don’t be afraid of using resources, it’s best if you can train to the utmost. I’m of the mind to attack a plant spirit inside the ruin next and test our strength! It goes without saying how great the gains there will be, and I’ll also be confident of handling the various factions after that!”

Chapter 800: A Massive Leap Forward in Strength (III)

“We’re going against the plant spirits first?” Deputy Zhou couldn’t help but ask. Why are you choosing such a strong target?

“For no reason other than the plant spirits have yet to recover to their peak strength.” Li Hao nodded. “The longer we wait, the more they recover! They’re easier to take down right now!”

People were alive and highly on guard against Li Hao. But plant spirits did not enjoy the same flow of information as humans did. They only knew that humans in the outside world were very weak. Their first thought would likely be that Li Hao was here to ask for a partnership, since the nine ministries had already set such a precedent.

“Then... are you sure you want to go against these ancient plant spirits? I’d thought you’d choose to cooperate with them...”

“That depends on the situation!” Li Hao sneered. “These seven chose to kill me, to say nothing of anything else. There’s no possibility of working together with them! If you’ll kill me for a few mysterious power stones, then I’ll naturally hit back at you!”

He bore no enmity toward the ancient civilization, even with his teacher’s multiple reminders that the ancient civilization was different from modern society. Yuan Shuo wanted him to be careful against the ancients.

Meanwhile, Li Hao was kindly disposed toward Battle Heaven, but he really hated those seven plant spirits. If you want to kill me, then I want to kill you!

“Deputy Zhou, you...”

“Don’t worry about me.” The deputy shook his head with a smile. “I don’t have supernatural locks, so I can’t cultivate the same way you guys do for now. I’m doing quite well at the moment, but you can let me absorb some core origin power after you kill the plant spirit. That’s a good resource for me!”

That was true! Those who walked the path of ancient martial dao would benefit from absorbing some core origin power. Although that wouldn’t put them on the path of core origin dao, it would still help.

It was more surprising that he didn’t have any supernatural locks. But upon further thought, that was right. He was an ancient martial cultivator, so how would he have any supernatural locks in his body?

“I’ll take care of some matters while you cultivate,” Deputy Zhou announced. “I can be of help if you’re going to fight a plant spirit. We’ll also have to draft some official documents, and don’t forget that the inauguration ceremony is the day after tomorrow! Don’t miss it! It doesn’t really matter anymore, but we need to let everyone see that we’re the state and government officials, not a private martial dojo!”

Heads bobbed up and down in the group. They really had forgotten about that occasion.

“Do you want to bring Yao Si into this?” asked Hou Xiaochen. “He’s strong enough and quite ferocious. If he can coalesce characters too, he’ll be at least a four element Arcanus!”

Yao Si’s martial master strength exceeded that of even Hou Xiaochen and Hong Yitang’s. If he was willing to unseal himself, he would absolutely be premier battle strength.

“He probably won’t be willing to,” Li Hao laughed. “I demonstrated the characters to him before, but he didn’t say anything about walking this path...”

Hou Xiaochen burst out laughing, as did the rest.

“Ai, you’re too young.” Deputy Zhou didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Someone like Yao Si isn’t as thick-skinned as He Yong. Since he’s chosen to cast his lot in your camp, that means he thinks well of this path. As he does, would he not be willing? It’s just that he isn’t familiar with you yet. He won’t raise the matter like He Yong would if you don’t speak of it. All he can do is just sit there. If you don’t bring it up, he won’t either until the day he dies or when he feels close enough to you.”

“Is that so?” Li Hao was surprised, but found that this made sense. He really had thought that Yao Si wasn’t willing to. “Then I’ll go ask him and be right back. Additionally, since there’s so many of us cultivating... we should find a quiet place to coalesce our characters. The disturbance will be too great otherwise.”

He needed to find an appropriate place. This area was not one, and traveling too far for one was not good either.

“I’ll go to the western outskirts for a look,” said the young man after some thought. “And see if we can go inside again. If we can... it might be a good idea to cultivate inside the ruins...”

Hou Xiaochen and the rest stared at him, stunned. Are you crazy? You know how strong that Black Armor is, and you still want to go back? You want to present your head on a silver platter to him?

“We’re official students now,” Li Hao smiled. “He said so himself that we can come and go anytime. This will just be bringing a few friends in with us, we aren’t breaking things. Will he kill us for it? It’s safe there and no one can interfere. There’s only a bunch of puppets and that Black Armor. I think that place is impregnable at this point in time!”

The group could only shake their heads at Li Hao’s audacity. As He Yong had entered the ruins before but hadn’t experienced the ensuing chaotic melee, he was confused and curious. “Are there powerhouses inside?”

“Of course!” Li Hao laughed. “Four hundred puppets and a Black Armor general or teacher?”

“Are they strong?”

“Yep, any puppet can easily swat you to death!”

He Yong’s jaw dropped. Hot damn! That dangerous? Why do you still want to go? What a crazy kid!

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The Night Watchers.

Yao Si was face down in official business when Li Hao came striding through the air. He had so much to take care of lately since the Night Watchers were to join the Skystar Commander Office. All of the various departments beneath him were giving him trouble. Some had outright decided to defect and join local overlords—it was a thorny affair.

Yao Si swept an annoyed glance at the young man when he arrived. Look who's all nice and relaxed! All you know is to fight and kill people—you don't give a shit about anything else!

"Do you want something?"

"Cultivating a new dao, are you interested?"

"The kind having to do with characters?" Yao Si asked faintly.

"Yes."

"What level of strength will I be if I cultivate it?" Yao Si stroked his mustache.

"At least four elements!"

"Let's go!"

"....." Li Hao regarded him wordlessly. The man frowned at him.

"What? Let's go and find a place to cultivate and keep the disturbance to a minimum. We need to be more decisive as martial masters. You also need to be more decisive as the tyrant of a locality!"

"....." Li Hao shook his head with helpless laughter. It was just as the others said, the director was waiting for him to raise the subject. So if I hadn't, you wouldn't have said anything?

"It will consume a lot of resources to convert your strength like this..."

“Have you given me anything after I sold my life to you?” Yao Si snapped impatiently. “Did you give me a signing bonus, a moving fee? Do you think none of that exists just because I haven’t mentioned it? Have you demonstrated anything of your sentiments after a premier martial master has joined your side with a massive faction?”

He’d demonstrated nothing at all! And you dare talk to me about expending a lot of resources for my breakthrough? Did you not get anything from the expedition? You have to make it worth my while to put my life on the line for you!

Li Hao blinked and found that Yao Si made a lot of sense. Even those sentenced to death received one last meal before they were beheaded. He abruptly slapped himself on the forehead. “When I executed those nobles... I forgot to give them their final meal, didn’t I?”

“.....” Yao Si had no idea what to say. What do you mean by that?? Are you treating me as if I’m on death row?! I don’t like the sound of that!

“Let’s go!” Li Hao smiled.

“Is the commander leaving?” Little Ye hastily asked when the two exited the office.

“Yep.”

“I brewed tea...” she said regretfully. “I’ll brew it again when you come next time, commander.”

Li Hao nodded with a smile. Yao Si followed the young man out; Little Ye escorted both of them downstairs. She was slightly saddened to see Li Hao leave, but grew frantic when she saw that her superior was going to follow the young man. “Where are you going, director?”

“Out on business!” Yao Si snapped expressionlessly. So you only just noticed that I’m leaving? Are you my secretary or Li Hao’s secretary? I can’t keep someone like you around anymore!

“Oh I see. Watch your step then, director!” Little Ye responded offhandedly. The director would be safe enough at Commander Li’s side.

Yao Si nearly vomited blood. He looked at Li Hao, who looked back innocently at him. What are you looking at me for? Are you going to be jealous over something like this at your age? You’re so weird!

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There was another addition to the group when Li Hao rejoined the group—Manager Yu. Ole Hou had not forgotten his secretary. However, she was indeed qualified to make the conversion. Li Hao chose only the martial masters who’d reached the stage of saturating their supernatural locks. They would be Arcanus after grasping his method.

There was no rush for those like Liu Long. They wouldn’t be Arcanus even if they succeeded in converting their power. They would be on par with a Solar or Nova at most, so this was an inconsequential step for them.

The group headed straight for the western outskirts, raising attention from vast sums of powerhouses. They frowned upon seeing Li Hao’s heading. Was he going to enter Evenround Martial again? Was it for treasures or something else? They’d tried sending in their own teams made of people who weren’t afraid to die, but entrance had been impossible. Had Li Hao claimed the ruins for himself?

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Within the Ministry of Finance.

“He’s going again...” Liu Yunqing frowned. “It’s a very dangerous place. Has he reached an agreement with the powerhouses inside the university? Have other heavyweights or intelligent plant spirits awoken apart from those puppets?”

If that was the case, Li Hao would become ever more difficult to handle.

He said nothing after further thought. His ministry was among the ones that’d lost the least these days. All of their Arcanus were alive. With Li Hao openly running off like this, no one dared plot against the people he left behind.

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Evenround Martial.

A Black Armor was sleeping in a massive hole beneath the center of the field. It suddenly opened its eyes and looked into the distance.

“Student Li Hao has returned to cultivate and brought along a few friends to join me. Are we granted permission to comprehend dao together?”

“.....” The Black Armor didn’t know what to say. The kid was entirely too bold! He’d thought that Li Hao wouldn’t dare set foot in the ruins for the rest of his life, but here he was again, less than a day later! He really had incredible courage!