

Star Gate 811

Chapter 811: Deliberate Misrepresentation (IV)

“Royal uncle, is... no one taking a stand?” the ninth prince transmitted to the Prince of Southern Conciliation. “The Tranquil Duke should be cohorts with the Martial Duke. I thought the Tranquil Duke was fully confident in his abilities, judging by how he was antagonizing Li Hao today. But he was beaten to death with one slap...”

The ninth prince had thought that the duke had quite the trump cards up his sleeve. How had he died so suddenly? It was... so perplexing!

The Prince of Southern Conciliation walked off without a flicker of change in expression. “He didn’t anticipate either that there would be such a difference between three and five elements,” he transmitted back. “Neither did I expect that Li Hao wouldn’t be an ordinary five element Arcanus. He’s on par with six elements! That palm strike didn’t even give the three element Tranquil Duke time to react!

“It’s not only him, but Hou Xiaochen, Hong Yitang, and Yao Si who are also incomparable. They locked onto a few powerhouses in the audience, including me. Their presences were finely honed in on me and I would’ve suffered an overwhelming reaction if I’d done anything...”

There hadn’t been any time to react or room to maneuver in! The duke was dead in the blink of an eye! Even if the Valiant Duke was of the mind to do something, would he have dared move?

No!

“Then... what do they mean by this?” The ninth prince didn’t understand. These two dukes hadn’t come to the capital just to provoke Li Hao, had they? They must have another goal in mind.

The Prince of Southern Conciliation glanced at him. Do you really not know, or are you pretending not to know?

“Royal uncle, the Tranquil Duke isn’t that dumb. What did he want?” transmitted the seventh princess as well.

The Prince of Southern Conciliation did not respond. It wasn’t until they were very far away that he transmitted, “Could the Valiant Duke have come to Skystar City without my permission? Would they have dared antagonize Li Hao if there wasn’t anyone who guaranteed their safety?”

“.....” The two royal children blinked and fell silent with incredulity. Their royal father was behind this? But... why?

The Prince of Southern Conciliation couldn’t be bothered to explain further. Why? Because even if there was some friction between the royal family and three founding dukes, they were of one whole in the end. It was a different concept compared to the nine ministries or Li Hao. The royal family and three dukes possessed the same goals and origins from two hundred years ago.

The nine ministries had tacitly given way to Li Hao’s desire to establish some authority on this occasion, but the royal family wasn’t willing to let the young man proceed so smoothly. However, they were simply going to be a small pest and somewhat keep the young man in check. The royal family would then discuss important matters with the two dukes.

But now look at the situation! One of the dukes was dead! Would the Valiant Duke be willing to converse with the royal family now?

Absolutely not!

That royal brother of his always thought so highly of himself and felt that Li Hao wouldn’t dare do anything. Reality proved otherwise! He beat the Tranquil Duke to death on the spot and asked if the royal family wanted to demote him. Look at what his royal brother had been forced into responding with!

This was simply just creating trouble for himself!

The Prince of Southern Conciliation heartily vented his feelings to himself. The Valiant Duke would now probably run off in the middle of the night and unease would rock the southern continent. That guy wouldn't stay in the royal capital, no matter what!

This had been a prime opportunity to discuss peace between them, but his royal brother had made a royal mess of it all! The old Tranquil Duke would certainly be dissatisfied with this turn of events and point his ire at Li Hao and the Skystar King. The western and southern continents would fully rage out of their control!

.....

At the same time.

Chen Yao was rather surprised and transmitted to his father, "Were those two dukes... from the royal family?"

"Most likely."

"The Skystar King... really is... There's really no other way to put it... has great ambition but scant ability. He's far worse than his father!"

The old inspector general nodded with a sigh and transmitted back, "That's what people also say about you!"

"....." Chen Yao almost vomited blood from anger!

His father didn't feel like he'd said anything wrong. This is how you evaluate the Skystar King and it is how others evaluate you as well. Great ambition, scant ability, and far worse than his father! But none of you think that of yourselves.

As expected, the second generation that grows up in a greenhouse is not up to scratch. Our generation was stronger and surged forward with great momentum. We beat the shit out of the Skystar King. Although we didn't fully attain all of our goals, it was already incredible in that age to overthrow the royal family.

Chen Zhongtian thought fondly of these past events—they were quite the accomplishment. But when it came to their sons, everything took a turn for the worse. The second generations took their places, but each was worse than the rest. They showed no signs of improvement after fighting for a couple of decades.

They used to not criticize each other since they were in similar conditions, but now there was a pack of wolves roaming the world. If these second generations were supposed to take a stand, they might not emerge victorious. Those wolves weren't old, but they were all from that blasted Silver Moon. People from that province all had a certain feral quality to them.

It looked like he and his old friends needed to take the stage soon to keep things under control, or the situation would soon grow out of hand.

Chen Yao cursed to himself before saying, "Hou Xiaochen... Did Hou Xiaochen use his mind intent to suppress the Tranquil Duke? Isn't he a supernatural now? Why is his mind intent still so strong, and how can he still use spear intent?"

Chen Zhongtian sank into deep thought. As the strongest present, his senses had captured a few hints. He transmitted after momentary thought, "I'm not sure, but what I can be certain of is that these guys... might have all hidden their strength. Be careful and don't needlessly aggravate them! Li Hao must be at least on par with a six element if he could kill the Tranquil Duke with one palm strike!

"He's improving so quickly that it's unbelievable. I also think that his Arcanus level is different from other people's Arcanus level!" The old inspector general frowned faintly. "You must be careful. Also, those old fellows took action without hesitation and went straight for the jugular. Li Hao might have promised them something. We might have to deal with a few more thorny opponents in the days to come..."

“Maybe he promised to help them ascend to the supernatural domain?”

“Possibly!”

“Silver Moon martial masters have always refused to ascend,” Chen Yao clucked his tongue. “Why have they lost those reservations now?”

“The Breathing Method of the Five Styles?” The old inspector general was just as baffled as he didn’t have more information. “It’s hard to say. Let’s wait and see. The Arcanus Ranking will be out in three days. I’d like to see if that pavilion has the ability to imitate the Daoist Wind and Cloud of old. It will be interesting if they do.”

“Aren’t you worried about being exposed?”

“Heh!” The old inspector general didn’t care. “What am I afraid of? I’m not interested in seizing power and my son is useless. You tell me, what am I afraid of being exposed for?”

Fuck you! Chen Yao cursed his useless git of a father. The old man loved insulting him, had he gained another daughter lately? I have no idea! I haven’t bothered to care if he’s sired a few more bastards lately. He already has so many that I can’t be bothered.

.....

The rear yard of the Skystar Commander Office.

Six old men scrambled up from the ground and took off their masks. They cast strange looks intermixed with curiosity at Li Hao. Moments later, someone stuck up their thumb.

“As expected of Yuan Shuo’s disciple... No, you should be Yuan Shuo’s master. That guy’s not as crazy as you!”

They hadn’t believed it when they received Li Hao’s transmission. The young man sent them only one sentence, “Have some fun killing the Tranquil Duke!”

“.....” Jubilation seized them seconds later as the old men flung themselves forward without another word. They’d thought it would be difficult to kill the duke, but Li Hao took the field himself and slammed through the man with one palm strike!

So violent, so brutal, we like that! This trip was worth it, alright!

The old men were highly excited. The years had been too boring and they’d all been despondent after the great loss they suffered in Skystar City. This trip was helping them shake off the gloom!

“It’s the seniors who are strong,” Li Hao laughed, the very picture of humility. “Deputy Zhou told me that all of you were well known throughout the land back in the day, that each of you could bring part of the world to heel by yourselves. I just couldn’t take it anymore and let my anger get the better of me. I hadn’t thought that the seniors would show me so much face. Li Hao has created trouble for everyone!”

“The lad is too humble.” An ethereal-looking old man stroked his beard with a smile. “But it’s good to be humble. Silver Moon martial masters have ever been humble. This is good! It speaks well for your future!”

“You lavish me with praise.” Li Hao smiled radiantly. “It has been a long day for you and I’ll have my people arrange residences for you. They’ll deliver Water of Life for you to brew some tea or take a bath with. It’s been a long journey, so please go rest first...”

The old men hadn’t wanted to live in government headquarters and reflexively wanted to decline when they heard Li Hao’s words. Water of Life, tea, bath...

Holy hell! Could they leave after that?

“What a good lad, what a promising talent!” Smiles wreathed the faces of the old men. “Yuan Shuo has done well to raise such a disciple with high potential. This is to the fortune of Silver Moon martial masters, so we shall avail ourselves of your hospitality!”

“As it should be!” Li Hao beamed merrily. “Please stay for a while. This place is big and I have so much Water of Life. I was worrying over how to use it all!”

“Then... we’ll have to stay for a while.” The group roared with laughter and grew even more enthusiastic. “Don’t stand on ceremony with us now, Little Li. Us old fiends are still a bag of tough bones. Call upon us anytime you need to kill someone!”

They walked toward the rear under Liu Long’s hearty guidance, exchanging transmitted conversation all the while with immense excitement. What a good place! This trip was so worth it!

Hou Xiaochen and the others didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. What were these old farts doing here? They were the old guard and a bunch of killing enthusiasts. And Li Hao was inviting them to stay? Did he feel that he didn’t have enough on his plate already?

Chapter 812: Li Hao’s Speed (I)

“Send advance notification to Seniors Northern Fist and Tyrant Blade!” Li Hao stroked his chin with a grin. “The Wind and Cloud Pavilion can determine our strength, is it? They’re publishing a ranking in three days, are they? Can they publish a ranking everyday?”

He smiled deviously. I can create powerhouses everyday! You wanna play? Publish a ranking today and I’ll convert a new batch of premier martial masters to Arcanus tomorrow! I wanted to keep a low profile, but since you guys want to play, let’s play!

I’d wanted to make a move on the ruins first and then take on the City of Supernaturals or three great organizations, but this is just as good. I’ll start with you!

.....

The inauguration ceremony of the Skystar Commander Office was also the start of a variety of unexpected developments. All sides had thought that the day would proceed smoothly. After all, Li Hao's people had just killed a large sum of powerhouses a few days before to deter the factions of the world.

Who would've thought that quiet Wind and Cloud Pavilion would emerge on inauguration day and kill the Tranquil Duke of the west? It gave rise to quite an uproar.

The Valiant Duke who'd come with him wasn't actually that courageous despite his rough-and-tumble appearance. He ran off with his men that very night. He exercised extreme caution the entire way, deathly afraid of his movements being known and someone coming from his head.

.....

Once they learned that Li Hao had killed large sums of powerhouses ahead of time, the silver Moon martial masters traveling to support the young man turned around on the spot to return home. They didn't participate in the inauguration ceremony.

Walking along the central coastline, Northern Fist took out his transmission pendant for a look when he sensed its vibration. He raised his eyebrows at the message.

Li Hao had almost never asked for help before, even when faced with pressure from the nine ministries. He'd handled it himself each time. It was always Silver Moon martial masters going to help him of their own accord.

It was the same this time, but the young man had eliminated his opponents beforehand. Silver Moon martial masters were familiar with Li Hao's character—he was eager to prove himself. But this time, he was the originator of this message for help!

Northern Fist was very surprised and read the message more closely. Some sort of Wind and Cloud Pavilion was prompting the young fellow to ask for help? This was his first time reaching out to the Silver Moon martial masters.

“Is the Wind and Cloud Pavilion... that strong?” Northern Fist was confused and taken aback. It was very rare that a situation would prompt him to send out requests for assistance.

“How interesting!” laughed Northern Fist. He’d thought that Li Hao wouldn’t encounter further trouble before the second awakening as he’d stabilized his footing in the world. To think that the unexpected would occur! He was already prepared to return to Silver Moon, cross Ash Mountain, and have some fun in Great Li. It looked like... there was more work to be done.

Northern Fist promptly turned around and flew toward the central region. This was the little guy’s first time bowing his head and asking for help. It would be not showing him face if Northern Fist didn’t answer the call.

.....

The coolly aloof Tyrant Blade also quickly turned around and rushed toward Skystar City.

.....

People were suddenly rushing toward the royal capital from all sides. Thunderleg had almost reached home when he received word. He grimaced with anguish. What... was going on with Li Hao to voluntarily ask for help? Did he think that he couldn’t take on the Wind and Cloud Pavilion, or did he think that he would be in a lot of trouble after the ranking was released?

“So much trouble!” A conflicted Thunderleg leered with yellow teeth. Why did little fellows always like to stir up trouble? What was so bad about finding a place, taking a few wives, and having a bunch of children?

Indecision warred within him for a while before he sighed and looked at the large house in front of him. He left without entering to see his children.

.....

White Moon City.

Director General Zhao was handling official matters as his days were busy after Ole Zhou left. Accepting a group of refugees lately was giving him the greatest headache. There was no end of duties to handle everyday.

The transmission pendant next to him buzzed as he busied himself. He frowned when he picked it up for a glance—the Wind and Cloud Pavilion, the organization behind the Divine Masters Ranking.

Strength unknown.

Since their strength was unknown... was Li Hao placing too much importance on them? The transmission pendant said that it hoped Silver Moon would send Huang Yu and Kong Jie to reinforce them at Skystar City.

“Ole Zhou’s gone, Little Hou’s gone, and even those old farts are gone.” The director general frowned. “And you want more people??”

He really was conflicted by the request. Was there a need for that? The province was going to be emptied at this rate!

As he grappled with the difficult request, the door to his office was kicked open.

“I’m going to Skystar City!” Kong Jie hollered excitedly.

“.....” Director General Zhao sighed. Li Hao throws a wrench into things after I finally calm this guy down. Why do things never stop around here? The second awakening is around the corner and Silver Moon is in dire straits. What is all this!

His head pounding, the director general looked at Kong Jie and was about to respond when Huang Yu strode in.

“Li Hao almost never asks for help. It looks like he’s discovered something and finds it hard to resolve by himself. I’ll go, Kong Jie should stay.”

An unpleasant look crept across Kong Jie’s face!

“Are you looking down on me?”

Huang Yu nodded. Soldiers were more frank individuals. It’s enough that you know it, why must you speak about it? You’re not even an Arcanus, what will you do there?

“.....” Kong Jie snorted. “My daughter is still there!”

“Your daughter and Berserk Blade’s disciple has been there the entire time. Don’t use this as an excuse.”

Li Hao hadn’t seen the two when he was in Skystar City either, but he didn’t pay it much heed. Hou Xiaochen had probably sent them on a mission or something. They weren’t dead, in any case.

Kong Jie boiled over with fury while Director General Zhao clutched his head. Damn it! All of you guys want to leave?? All of your ambitions are flaring up and there's nothing that can be done to pull you back!

But since it was Li Hao requesting help... Forget it.

"Go!" sighed the director general. These two had certainly made up their minds since they were in his office. What else could be said in that case? He rubbed his temples wearily. "Be careful and don't die in Skystar City. You guys know that it's hard for me to protect Silver Moon without the three of you. The four protectors were established to guard Silver Moon, but all of you keep running off to other locations. It's quite worrying."

"Don't worry, we'll eliminate the enemy outside our doorsteps!"

"....." Where did you learn that from? Director General Zhao glanced wordlessly at Kong Jie. "Go and cut the nonsense!"

"Alright!" Kong Jie was immediately gone.

"Don't tire yourself out, Ole Zhao," Huang Yu spoke some words of comfort. "Delegate whatever you can. The young need to be tempered more."

"Then you can stay. Li Hao's need shouldn't be that pressing..."

Huang Yu was gone before Director General Zhao could finish his sentence.

Okay, fuck you all. If it wasn't for consideration of my dignity, I'd curse you all to death. You guys are utterly ridiculous!

.....

Various powerhouses rushed to Skystar City. This was Demon Sword's first call for help. They were all very surprised and showed him a lot of face. Sky Sword chatted briefly with the heir of the Wind Thunder Sword before setting off from Sky Sword Mountain again and returning to Skystar City.

.....

Unrest rocked the outside world.

The City of Supernaturals.

The female city lord furrowed her brows in a long pause. "Has the Wind and Cloud Pavilion... obtained Daoist Wind and Cloud's heritage?"

Some didn't know the daoist and wanted to ask further when the city lord waved them off.

"You don't need to ask, just know that the daoist was very strong. Where does this Wind and Cloud Pavilion come from? I almost never heard of them and did investigate the one behind the Divine Masters Ranking before. They are very mysterious and there was no sign of a connection to Daoist Wind and Cloud."

An organization that dared publish a ranking would not go unnoticed by the various factions. People had looked into their background long ago, but didn't find anything. Each iteration of the Divine Masters Ranking was very unexpected.

"Then we..."

“Wait!” laughed the city lord. “I’d like to see on what basis they are so arrogant about their ranking to be published in three days!”

All sides were avoiding Li Hao these days, fearful that he would create trouble for them before the second awakening. This was fun, a new player appeared to provoke the young man.

.....

Skystar City.

Li Hao didn’t say anything else after making a series of arrangements. He swiftly walked to the main hall.

“Get me a copy of the Divine Masters Ranking... No, I want a copy of each publication!”

“Yes, sir!” A vice minister trotted off to carry out his orders and quickly returned with a stack of rankings. He was wreathed in smiles. “Commander, the ranking first appeared two years ago and was refreshed every three months at first, then once a month. It has been updated ten times thus far, and here are all ten.”

“Are these the originals?” asked Li Hao.

“Huh?”

“I said, are these the originals?”

“I’m... not sure!” the vice minister replied awkwardly.

“Then go ask! I want the originals, the first prints and not reproductions!”

Although the vice minister wanted to retort with an attitude, he quickly gave orders for someone to look into it. As one of the nine ministries, the Ministry of the Judiciary remained adept in executing its duties despite the lack of the Hu father and son.

Chapter 813: Li Hao's Speed (II)

Li Hao waited less than an hour for the profusely sweating vice minister to return with ten booklets.

“Commander, these are first edition Divine Master Rankings that we’ve collected from various sources. We can’t promise that these are the originals, but we can guarantee that these were the first versions to appear in the market!”

Li Hao took the ten booklets without further word and held them up for close inspection. The golden covers gave them a valuable air. A red light sparkled in his eyes as the young man scanned them.

He quickly threw out one of them—it was different from the other nine. Either that one was a fake, or the other nine were fake. He continued his observations before saying, “Get me some veteran craftsmen related to paper-making. I want those with a lot of experience!”

“Understood!” The vice minister could guess at Li Hao’s intentions and quickly found the right people for his superior.

.....

Li Hao questioned a lot of people throughout the day. Having served one year as an inspector, his powers of observation, deduction, and intelligence gathering were unmatched, despite his lack of big cases under his belt. He wouldn’t have identified the connection between the eight families otherwise.

He just didn't personally conduct any investigations after his strength grew. But today, he was thoroughly enraged. Not only did he personally conduct the investigation, he summoned some veteran inspectors from Silver City to jointly scrutinize the origins of the Divine Masters Ranking.

.....

Night.

A group of powerhouses broke through the void and headed straight for South Peak province. The Divine Masters Ranking first appeared in the central region, but according to Li Hao's information, the originals were printed on paper unique to South Peak. Therefore, their base was very likely in that particular province.

South Peak was the southern bulwark of Skystar City's southern belt of territories.

The South Peak Governor General's office.

The South Peak governor general was a hard working individual as he was still holding meetings late at night. His expression shifted drastically and he wanted to raise a warning when the conference room doors were thrown back. A group of people rushed in.

Eyes widened with alarm, the look in his eyes changed to surprise and slight fear when he recognized the visitors. He rose with bafflement. "I did not expect Commander Li to grace us with your presence... I have failed to properly welcome you!"

Li Hao inclined his head and ignored the greeting. A red light sparkled in his eyes as he looked at everyone in the conference room. His hand flashed out!

A middle-aged man's face slackened with dismay and he wanted to run, but spat out blood after a loud collision. In the next instant, he dangled from Li Hao's hand.

The governor general's eyes widened with horror!

"This has nothing to do with you!" Li Hao said coolly. "I am pursuing scum of the Wind and Cloud Pavilion. Who is this person?"

Why did you attack him if you don't know him?? cursed the governor general. He grit his teeth, but kept his temper in check considering the crowd of heavyweights at Li Hao's back.

"He is the first deputy director general of the provincial government... Commander Li, this is South Peak province and Deputy Wu is an important official..."

"He is a spy for evil supernaturals, are you sure you want to plead on his behalf?"

The governor general blinked. Is he a spy just because you say he is??

The middle-aged man continued coughing blood. "Save me, governor general... I... I don't know anything... about a Wind and Cloud Pavilion..."

Li Hao slammed his palm down and nearly burst the man's head open.

"None of you are leaving, you will assist in the investigation!" the young man announced to the room. "This person is hiding his strength. A mere deputy director general is an Arcanus and carries a treasure concealing his presence. No matter whether or not he is with the Wind and Cloud Pavilion, there is something very wrong with him!"

The South Peak governor general blinked, looked at Li Hao, and then at the man. That was truly an astonishing revelation. Arcanus?

South Peak was overseen by a Governor General's Office and he had just broken through to Arcanus. There were no other Arcanus in the province before him. He'd accomplished the ascension only through the twenty drops of Water of Life that the Ministry of Administration had sent him. Otherwise, no one in this age could individually make the advancement without a plant spirit backing them.

His expression started shifting again. An Arcanus!

The man was stunned after Li Hao's blow and finally collected his senses with another mouthful of blood. "Governor general... I am... innocent... The Ministry... of Armed Forces... sent me... to keep the governor general under surveillance... I am not... from the Wind and Cloud Pavilion..."

The governor general straightened and said no more. Perhaps Deputy Wu really was from the Ministry of Armed Forces, but arranging for an Arcanus to keep watch by his side was quite an investment.

Since Li Hao had fished out the man, he didn't want to say anything more. Although it was embarrassing, so did the young man also humiliate the nine ministries. A governor general of South Peak province was nothing.

Li Hao couldn't be bothered to explain more and walked out with the man. His people sealed off the conference room when he reached the door, and a ghastly scream echoed outside the door.

.....

Li Hao looked at the man in front of him and took out a book. "Do you recognize this?" he asked calmly.

Panic flashed through the man's eyes, but he quickly responded, "I do, the Divine Masters Ranking."

“Did you create it?”

“No... I’ve only seen it before... Commander Li, I...”

“The Divine Masters Ranking is swiftly disseminated to all parts of the dynasty whenever it is published,” Li Hao laughed softly. “There must be other factions involved. A group withdrawn from the world cannot conduct their affairs so efficiently. There must be someone else coordinating with them, and they certainly have a high status!

“Since the source of the paper is from South Peak, then there must be a South Peak powerhouse or executive coordinating with the Wind and Cloud Pavilion! This kind of paper can only be found in South Peak and all paper-making factories were taken over by the state five years ago.

“Civilians are not permitted to make paper in order to curtail the spread of culture. Thousands upon thousands of copies of the Divine Masters Ranking are disseminated when it is printed. My investigation would be difficult if education flourished throughout the land.

“Skystar Dynasty, however, controls the development of education and does not print more than ten thousand books a month in the entire central region! But there are thousands of copies of the Divine Masters Ranking each time it is updated! Are you going to force me to get down in the weeds and see which paper-making factories are printing it?”

In an age of proliferate education, a small workshop could easily print ten thousand books a day. But in this age, strict control was exercised over paper-making factories and print shops in order to control the spread of education. Printing more than one thousand books a year would attract official attention unless that shop was sheltered by an official, to say nothing of thousands upon thousands of products.

Li Hao had chosen to come tonight because he knew that the South Peak heavyweights were holding a meeting. He wanted to catch them off guard. And as he anticipated! He caught a hidden Arcanus!

He wasn't sure if this one was behind the ranking; it was sufficient that there was something wrong with the man. The man's powers of concealment were very strong, but nothing could stop Li Hao's eye that saw through falsehood.

Despair crept into the man's face.

Too fast!

Truly!

The Wind and Cloud Pavilion had just appeared in the day, and here he was, captured that night in South Peak. Everything had happened all too quickly and the concealment abilities that he was so proud of didn't prove useful in the slightest.

"Commander, it has nothing to do with me..." he admitted hopelessly. "I'm just... doing a job... in return for payment... They give me some cultivation resources and I give them protection... I haven't participated in anything..."

"So this means you admit you're a Wind and Cloud Pavilion member?"

"No!" Color drained from the man's face. "I'm just... one of their many partners..."

"You're an idiot and so are they!" Li Hao frowned. "Only South Peak has this kind of paper, yet they directly print the Divine Masters Ranking here! And you! You really dare print it! Skystar Dynasty prints more than one hundred thousand books a year. Do you know what that entails??"

The man smiled morbidly, who cared about that? As a powerhouse, they didn't really care about the details. Who would look into where the paper came from? It was just a few thousand booklets—that was very little in the grand scheme of things. The Divine Masters Ranking was quickly replicated whenever it was disseminated. Many more copies appeared in the blink of an eye, so a few thousand booklets were insignificant.

He'd underestimated the abilities of the nine ministries and Li Hao.

"Commander, I really... am just doing a job for pay. My crime should not deserve death... Please give me a chance to redeem myself..."

"An Arcanus accepting payment for a simple job?" Li Hao sneered. "Do you take me for a fool? I will consider not killing you if you give me important information!"

He was in a good mood at reeling in a big fish on his first stop. As for alerting his enemies ahead of time, what did he care about? They would've moved against him a long time ago if they had the ability to. Had they dared show themselves earlier today?

He would get to the bottom of their identity first; there would be plenty of ways to eliminate them then. They were just rats hidden in the shadows. It was best if they panicked—panicking meant mistakes.

I'll see how they publish a Divine Masters Ranking in three days! Are they going to write it by hand? Even if they're hidden in a ruin with printing machines, almost all of the ruins have fallen into silence these days, so the Wind and Cloud Pavilion couldn't use them. They wouldn't be looking for help in the outside world if that wasn't the case.

Li Hao was going to make them write their blasted ranking! If they wanted to disseminate their ranking in three days, they could write thousands of copies!

The man looked bleakly around him. Everything had happened too quickly; there were no words to describe the depths of his despondency. Those idiots at the Wind and Cloud Pavilion just had to antagonize this one! He'd arrived on their doorstep in less than a day!

Chapter 814: Li Hao's Speed (III)

"Commander, I will speak of everything I know," Deputy Wu nodded with a sigh. "Please spare me!"

“That’s more like it!” Li Hao smiled. “Talk!”

“The Wind and Cloud Pavilion appeared two years ago. I was a Solar then and in charge of South Peak’s unimportant industries such as education, technology, and research and development.

“A wealthy merchant sought me out two years ago and expressed a desire to print some advertising pamphlets. You know too, milord, that the dynasty strictly limits these types of actions. I didn’t think much of it and they sent me ten energy stones...”

Ten energy stones were a lot back in those days. They were a very precious resource.

“Ten energy stones for advertising pamphlets, and you were bold enough to accept them?” Li Hao sneered.

The man didn’t say a word. Any normal person would know that something was afoot, but he wouldn’t have minded even if they wanted him to print banned books. There were too many banned books in the dynasty these days—anything related to technology, civilian affairs, education, and others were all banned. Simply turning a blind eye would result in a large sum hitting one’s pockets. That was ten energy stones!

And so, the first edition of the Divine Masters Ranking was published. It was too late when he learned of what material he’d printed, the ranking was already widely available. As an important member of the province, he knew that producing something like a ranking required strength and confidence in one’s abilities. That wasn’t a task that just anyone could undertake.

“It was too late then... They paid me handsomely and threatened me with force. They already had Nova level heavyweights back in those times,” the man admitted with resignation. “Later on, they gave me a drop of Water of Life and persuaded me a while longer. It all got to my head and I... agreed.”

“That’s normal,” Li Hao laughed. There were plenty of people who colluded with the three great organizations these days, and they were deemed evil supernatural organizations by the authorities. Working with an unknown organization that paid him so much... even the governor general of South Peak might not withstand the temptation, to say nothing of a vice director general.

“Is the guy who transacted with you still around?”

“He only appeared three times before vanishing.” The man shook his head. “I’m in charge of everything now! It was just weaklings who contacted me toward the end. They gave me an original and told me to make copies, then distribute the products. I was in charge of very simple matters, but the payoff is great...”

Li Hao inclined his head with a smile. “Then has their Divine Masters Ranking arrived yet? The one that’s being distributed in three days. It takes time to print them, after all.”

Although the job could be completed in one day, wasn’t there preparatory work to be done before dissemination?

“Not yet... but... if it’s truly like before...” The man hesitated. “Then I should be getting an original tonight. But now...”

They must be on the alert now that I’ve been made. Will they still come? Although Li Hao’s group had arrived quickly and sealed off the area, that didn’t mean that everything had been perfectly contained.

“It’s fine, that doesn’t matter! I’ll give you an original if they don’t!” Li Hao laughed. “I’ll give you a ranking, print a couple tens of thousands for me, and distribute them all!”

“.....” The man blinked. What was going on?

“Of course, it’s best if you can get your hands on an original,” Li Hao chuckled. “If not, I’ll supply one to you!”

“Um...”

“What um?”

The man didn't dare complete his sentence.

“Is this all you know as an Aracnus?” Li Hao asked faintly.

The man hesitated, but flew into a panic when he saw Li Hao's palm coming for him. “No, no, I know a little more. They should have more than me—they should also be working with others elsewhere!”

“Do you know the specifics?”

“I might... know one or two of them. I had people follow them once—beggars on the streets and the like. They didn't notice their tails. I don't know about anything else, but I know that someone higher up should be connected to these guys.”

“Out with it!”

The man quickly said a name, resulting in a slap that nearly took his head off.

“I don't know them, speak of their identity!”

“The Night Watcher director of the Sagittarius province... I'm not sure!”

Li Hao nodded. The Sagittarius province. That reminded him of someone—Sun Moxian, disciple of the Qimei Staff King. Li Hao had killed him in Rift Canyon and collected the staff made of lingering will left by the Qimei Staff King. With his newfound knowledge, Li Hao now knew that the staff was a combination of aura and supernatural lock. It was likely the supernatural lock of the mind!

He'd taken it that day and wanted to return it to one of the Qimei Staff King's disciples. He'd become too busy after that and didn't have time to seek out the relevant people.

"That's it?"

"It's... all I know."

"Don't they have any other requests after paying you so much?"

"Yes!" blurted the man after momentary silence. "He said that they will emerge in the world after the second awakening and bring forth countless powerhouses and ancient heavyweights. All I have to do is follow their orders. They mentioned it only once and never again, just that the Wind and Cloud Pavilion would stay hidden from the world!"

But now, they had emerged ahead of time!

"And another point—I concealed my presence when I broke through to Arcanus, but they seemed to know regardless and sent someone to congratulate me not long after."

Can they detect the strength of life force? Li Hao wondered. If they keep a constant eye on their agents, then they might've known the second I showed up with my people...

It's fine!

Li Hao laughed and called out, “Deputy Zhou!” The man walked out from the group.

“Quick, draft a copy of the Divine Masters Ranking,” smiled the young man. “The old Skystar King will be ranked first, Ying Hongyue number two, put me down as number five. The two from Armed Forces and Administration will be slightly lower than that...”

Deputy Zhou glanced at him with surprise.

“On Silver Moon’s side, put Director General Zhao as number six, you as number seven. Put people from other factions after that, then Martial Uncle Hong and the rest around number twenty!”

“.....” Deputy Zhou stared dumbly at him.

“What?” Li Hao grinned.

“Ah...”

“It’s fine, and we’ll distribute them according to the previous channels. As for whether or not the Wind and Cloud Pavilion comes up with their own... who cares about them! If they still want to, they’ll have to use other methods, such as exposing their powerful treasure and directly reflecting the world,” Li Hao cackled. “I won’t have to seek them out at that point!”

Deputy Zhou took a sharp breath. The kid really knew how to play!

“Then this person...”

Li Hao sent a supernatural character into his mind without further word. “It’s fine, release him and say it’s a misunderstanding!” He looked at the man. “A misunderstanding means nothing happened. It’s one thing if someone on their side saw us, but if you tell them about us... You’ll blow up!”

The fire character agitated, prompting a muffled grunt and a mouthful of blood from the man. Horrified, he felt like his brain was going to explode!

Li Hao patted his head with a smile. “It’s best if they come to you with an original. But it’s alright if they don’t. I’ll reward you if you get an original, but if you can’t... Be careful of your head blowing up at any time!

“We retreat now!”

Li Hao entered the conference room and addressed the stricken group, “The guy’s alright, he’s from Armed Forces. But the matters of the night cannot be mentioned to anyone! If a hint of them are breathed, no one present will survive! You will all be executed in the name of fraternizing with the enemy! You can do whatever you wish after three days, but you better keep a lid on it during this time!”

“Commander Li, this...” protested the South Peak governor general.

“You will look after them,” laughed Li Hao. “Ah, that guy can move around freely, there’s no need to keep him under watch. You guys can just try and see if I can kill everyone here if word of tonight’s events leaks.”

“.....”

There was no response forthcoming. Some were terrified, others could barely keep a lid on their panic, and some others were furious.

Yet, there was nothing they could do in response. Li Hao’s group was too arrogant and too strong. They might really kill everyone in the conference room if tonight’s actions were leaked.

“Let’s go!” Li Hao’s group vanished just as quickly as they came. The man who’d almost died was still in a daze.

I’ve... been let go? But what’s that in my head?

He could sense that it might explode at any time—a horrifying technique! Everyone present looked at him; the governor general wore an arctic expression. They had all been dragged into this because of him.

There were roughly two dozen people present—who knew if Li Hao had spies among them? All of them would die if any word got out, who could endure such a price?

“All of you heard it for yourselves, I don’t need to say anything about keeping to the commander’s word,” the governor general said frostily. “You guys decide for yourselves if you want to live or not, or if you think there’s someone who can protect you. Stay quiet over the next three days!”

He glanced at the man who’d been identified as an Arcanus. “I don’t care who’s man you are or who you are, and I may not be able to kill you if you bring disaster down on South Peak. But we are part of the Ministry of Administration’s territory, so it’ll be easy for you to die in any case!”

The man didn’t respond.

“Let’s set that aside and pretend that nothing happened,” someone chuckled. “I have to say... he’s really efficient. The events took place this morning and here he is at night. Do you guys think that the Wind and Cloud Pavilion can defeat him?”

“I care more about the fact that an Arcanus is like a chicken in his hand!” muttered another. Li Hao identified the man as an Arcanus, but easily smacked him around all the same. What level was the young man’s cultivation? Why did he feel ridiculously strong?

The room quieted down.

Chapter 815: Why So Foolish (I)

“I was so caught off guard by his sudden appearance that I forgot to greet my highest supervisor...” someone abruptly laughed. “We fall under the southern commander of the Skystar Commander Office. Who’s in charge of the south?”

“Aha, Senior Southern Fist...” he chuckled.

The speaker was the province’s Night Watcher director. Everyone looked at him, he smiled back at them. “What?”

“You...”

“I am a Night Watcher and the Night Watchers answer to the Skystar Commander Office. I forgot to greet Commander Li when he arrived, I really shouldn’t have!” He turned to everyone and said quietly, “Everyone will keep your noses to yourselves over the next couple of days! Commander Li might not remember you all, but I do! I also know your families, subordinates, friends, bastard children...”

The group furiously cursed him out! Fuck you, you shameless bastard! He’d come back to his senses, hadn’t he? He’d been insulting Li Hao with the rest of them moments ago, but nearly wagged his tail as soon as he sensed how strong the young man was!

Li Hao might only remember their faces, but this one knew them all too well. Family, friends, subordinates, mistresses... He knew everyone related to them!

Pathetic henchman!

Some inwardly cursed up a storm while others regarded the development with resignation. The Night Watchers were under the command of the Skystar Commander Office to begin with; the office was previously just an authority established quite far away. Once Li Hao came in person and demonstrated such strength, would their Night Watcher director not immediately fawn over the young man?

.....

Li Hao frowned slightly as he quickly left with everyone. “Can the Wind and Cloud Pavilion monitor us at every second?”

“They shouldn’t be able to.” Deputy Zhou shook his head. “Even if they do have such a strong treasure, they’ll consume vast sums of resources every time they use it. The Divine Masters Ranking came out once a month before at most, which meant they utilized it once a month. They can’t possibly have it active at every second!”

All ancient weapons and treasures resided under a sealed status. The stronger they were, the greater the seal. Each instance of utilization required a price to be paid.

“That’s true!” Li Hao nodded. “We’ll publish the Divine Masters Ranking ourselves if they do not! What’s that bunch of rats got rattling around in their brains by setting themselves against the Skystar Commander Office?”

“I’m going to head back and provide some cultivation assistance to the seniors. Everyone, please remain nearby and spread out. Call me if there’s any trouble. All of you have a set of black armor, so you can reach me at anytime within fifteen hundred kilometers!”

“We’ll take down the Wind and Cloud Pavilion first.” Li Hao smiled beatifically. “Preferably in secret and seize their treasure. It’ll come in handy. I was just worrying that I didn’t know their exact strength. If they have a treasure like that... It’s mine!”

His people didn’t say anything upon seeing how confident he was. The young man had the right to be so confident as he did have some skill to his name. That year he’d spent as an inspector hadn’t been in vain—he’d identified the enemy in the blink of an eye. Deputy Zhou even felt that the kid could lead a squad of secret agents across the dynasty.

.....

At this moment, in a ruin.

A group of people bustled around and someone called out, “Pavilion master, the new ranking is complete. Shall I distribute it?”

“Mm... but whether Li Hao is number one or not, put him in that spot. Leave the rest according to the ranking. Ah, if there are any Silver Moon martial masters, move them closer to the front as well.

“Understood!” The speaker quickly walked outside with the new ranking. A person walked out of the shadows in the hall and looked at the mirror in the hall. He hesitated—should he activate it once more?

There was probably no need to.

He’d just used it the day before; it was because of this that he’d grown into a panic. Li Hao was improving too quickly. Not only that, but the young man had some special qualities to him.

Each instance of using the mirror consumed several million mysterious power stones. It was an incredible depletion of resources.

“Forget it, as fast as Li Hao improves, he can’t possibly change by the day,” laughed the man. He was mistaking the shadow of a bow in a glass for a living snake. It was just one day, and yet he couldn’t contain the urge to activate it again.

“What a pity that you can’t be fully unsealed. You’d pull your own energy from the environment then and outright reflect every place. I wouldn’t need to supply you with mysterious power stones...” The master of the Wind and Cloud Pavilion disappeared after some murmurings.

Li Hao, ah Li Hao! Your rate of improvement scares me. I’m truly worried that you might create a miracle and set foot into Apex before the second awakening. If that is the case, you’d eliminate some fellows ahead of time given your personality.

Then it would remain to be seen if there's any room to carve out space for the rest of us!

I hope... that all goes well! The pavilion master was slightly regretful that the restrictions levied by the world were too extreme at the moment. What had Li Hao discovered to induce some changes in the situation?

It must be the young man as he showed signs of improvement with every change.

.....

Li Hao did not stay long in South Peak. He'd only nabbed a fringe character, an inconsequential figure. The key to him was locating the source of the other's printing operations. If he suppressed the source, then there would be no way for them to print their little ranking.

Did they really fancy themselves as Daoist Wind and Cloud? That august personage had erected an obelisk in the Forbidden Sea that constantly changed. Premier heavyweights were unable to break it and could only let it change at will. Countless people waited beside it, ready to copy any changes and distribute them to the world.

Can you do that?

Try erecting a treasure somewhere beneath the heavens tonight. It'll be gone by the morning!

No, would it take till morning? It would be gone within an hour.

The restriction of the world was Li Hao's greatest asset. No matter how strong one was, they could not emerge unless they possessed the ability to stabilize the void. As for that kind of heavyweight... then resistance was futile. They could do what they wanted as they could kill people with a single exhale.

.....

The Skystar Commander Office.

Li Hao didn't make it back until sunrise.

The rear yard.

Several old men were running through practice routines. A constant adherence to their skill was the surest way to maintain their battle capabilities. It didn't matter to Li Hao since he was always either killing people or on the way to killing people. Hence, he didn't have a need for daily practice.

There was an additional face today—Sky Sword.

Sky Sword had arrived very quickly and traveled a great distance, so he was rather weary. He tossed a booklet at Li Hao as soon as he saw the young man.

Li Hao identified it as the Wind and Thunder Sword Art.

“Did you... seize it by force, senior?”

Sky Sword looked wordlessly at him and couldn't be bothered to say anything. That wasn't his style. Of course, he'd paid a certain price to obtain it, such as his own Sky Sword Art. He didn't speak of that, however, and couldn't be bothered to mention it.

Contrary to Southern Fist's incessant chatter, he rarely spoke. This was similar to Tyrant Blade's personality. Northern Fist liked to talk—he was a diminutive man, but he spoke of the rules and

seniority all the time. He Yong often came in for his share of beatings and there was nothing he could do about it since Northern Fist styled himself as He Yong's big brother.

Having come off worse for the wear on many occasions, He Yong always found it awkward when he saw Northern Fist.

"Is Little South here?" someone asked before another old man landed. He wore a smile that quickly froze when he saw the other old men present. Sky Sword looked remotely at him, but there seemed to be sarcastic hints in his expression.

Out of the six old men, one of them regarded the petite Northern Fist. The former's hair was white; Li Hao wasn't familiar with him. He only had time to identify himself as the old guard of Silver Moon before busying himself with other matters yesterday. Li Hao hadn't had time to learn more.

White Hair stared at Northern Fist. The latter had announced himself in a loud voice moments ago, but now shrank in on himself like a quail and wanted to cover his face and run.

"How have you gotten so old?" White Hair asked curiously after a while.

"....." A sheepish expression spread over Northern Fist's face and he lowered his head. "Martial uncle!"

Martial uncle!

"Why do you look older than me?" White Hair continued to stare at him.

"....." Northern Fist felt even more awkward. "That is... ah..."

"If I remember correctly, you're only in your fifties and not even sixties?"

“I just wanted... to appear more mature, martial uncle,” Northern Fist offered dryly.

“And why are you always bullying He Yong?” frowned White Hair. “The Northern and Southern Fists are from the same line. His father was your martial uncle as well, so why do you always hit him? I’ve heard about your doings many times, but haven’t been of the mind to intervene. Have you gotten addicted to bullying him?”

Northern Fist was a highly tyrannical and arrogant individual in ordinary times, but now he barely knew what to do with himself. He was almost sixty, so it was quite embarrassing to receive a dressing down in public like this. What was this one doing here?

Li Hao was also surprised. Northern Fist’s martial uncle? And the two Fists were from the same line? Southern Fist was domineering and fiery, whereas Northern Fist was regal and magnanimous. They didn’t seem to hail from the same discipline. It was only today that he learned there was a deeper connection between them.

“Martial uncle, I’m just... looking after junior brother He,” Northern Fist coughed. “His nature is more indolent and slippery. He would’ve been killed by the Silver Moon Guard a long time ago if I hadn’t knocked him down a peg or two.”

“Don’t go too far,” White Hair simply cautioned. “He Yong is an old enough person now as well. It’s inappropriate for you to always beat him like you’re hitting a grandson!”

Northern Fist was quite resigned. Who’s beating who? That brat had improved a lot the last time we fought. I can’t hit him like my grandson anymore, just my son, and not even that! How unlucky am I that you’re here!

Chapter 816: Why So Foolish (II)

Northern Fist looked at Li Hao; the young man hadn’t said anything about this one being here! Although there’d been news yesterday that the Wind and Cloud Pavilion had appeared and six Arcanus had been killed, he didn’t think much of it. Now he knew that the so-called six Arcanus were Silver Moon’s older generation martial masters.

“Seniors and Martial Uncles Northern Fist and Sky Sword,” Li Hao addressed the group. “Please rest for a while. I’ve also invited Tyrant Blade, Thunderleg, Commander Huang Yu, and Inspector General Kong Jie to join us. I’ll explain everything when they arrive.”

The crowd grew solemn; Sky Sword rumbled, “Is there a need for that? It’s just a Wind and Cloud Pavilion!”

“I have another goal in mind,” Li Hao chuckled. “And I’ll need quite some help from everyone.”

“Tyrant Blade is probably not too far away,” Sky Sword said after some thought. “It’ll take the rest three days at the quickest. The Wind and Cloud Pavilion will be publishing their ranking in three days, so they may not get here in time.”

“That’s of no matter, I’ve already sent word for the various provinces to speed their travel along.” Li Hao smiled. “Air transport and others will be utilized to bring all of the seniors here. If they’re fast enough, they’ll get here within a day.”

The group blinked, then muttered darkly to themselves. This guy was now one of the tyrants of Skystar! Who among the provinces weren’t afraid of him? Of course they would help with a minor matter like this. Who wouldn’t show him face in such a small matter? If they didn’t, Li Hao might find an excuse to take them out!

One day was sufficient to bring everyone here.

“Of the old heroes of thirty-six, I cannot get in touch with my master and Jadelight Sword is with him,” Li Hao continued. “Senior Berserk Blade seems to have been on a mission all this time and Senior Golden Spear is likewise unreachable. Is there anyone else alive out of them?”

Apart from those four and the rest that were dead, was there anyone else alive?

“The rest are probably dead,” Sky Sword said after some thought. “Some died a long time ago. Well, there might be some still alive, but they’re probably not in Skystar.”

Not in Skystar?

“Then... Great Li?”

“Do you only know Great Li?” Sky Sword laughed.

Li Hao blinked. That was... true?

“Great Li is just a savage dynasty closest to Silver Moon and located in the northern reaches,” Northern Fist also smiled. “Skystar is the center of the world and is a valley. It is surrounded by mountain ranges on all sides. There are other dynasties in the other three cardinal directions that used to harass us, but after Skystar Dynasty unified the center, the dynasties on the other four sides haven’t dared to enter since. That ended the era of struggle over the central dominion.

“We’ve fought the four sides since the dawn of our time. Silver Moon’s main opponents are the savages from Great Li. They’re fierce, skilled in warfare, and known for their sheer strength.

“At the end of the southern continent is the Watercloud Dynasty. Their territory is covered by bodies of water and they possess a fearsome navy that battled with the south for many years.

“A large expanse of desert can be found at the end of the eastern continent. The Barren Dynasty commands a great cavalry that is unmatched throughout the world.

“At the end of the western continent is the Divine Nation...”

Divine Nation? Li Hao started. Was that all they called themselves? It was his first time hearing of all these names.

“The Divine Nation is incredibly terrifying,” explained the highly experienced Northern Fist. “All of its citizens worship the Moon God. Their faith is the core of their culture and they’re more united than the other dynasties.”

“The Moon God?” Li Hao was growing ever more confused. Where did such a god come from?

“I know a thing or two about them,” Sky Sword said faintly. “There were apparently divine spirits that existed in Silver Moon in the primordial past. The Moon God was one of their most well known and many worshipped it. An ancient powerhouse eventually killed it, but that is a rumor as well.

“The Divine Nation started worshipping the Moon God after the demise of the ancient civilization. Gods were not revered in that civilization. Even the ancient Human King didn’t consider himself a god.”

A nation that centered on worshipping a god!

Li Hao quickly transmitted to the little tree when his thoughts traveled here, “Senior Tree, do you know the Moon God?”

“The Moon God?”

“It was apparently a god in the primordial past.”

“A god?” The little tree seemed to be rifling through its memories. “I know a detail or two. Silver Moon Territory was just one part of the ancient civilization. There were some local heavyweights that existed, but they were later killed. Have the divine spirits come back to life?”

That was a real possibility!

“But it doesn’t matter,” the little tree added. “These so-called divine spirits weren’t strong. Not to mention, the world has changed. Even if they have awakened, they will be the same as us and unable to bring their full strength to bear in this world. The Moon God... Moon God... Can it be the Moon Demon? Silver Moon Territory is indeed related to this demon.”

“So this means...” Li Hao raised an eyebrow. “That the ancient civilization... didn’t call this place home... but was an invader?”

“Not really!” the little tree tried explaining. “The main world of the ancient civilization once fell quiet for a while—that was also when the imperial majesty fell asleep too. Some of the world’s power seeped out and gave birth to a new world next to the main world.

“When the Human King awoke and saw the situation, he wanted to reclaim the world since it was formed of power that belonged to the main world. But for some reason, he decided to let it remain as a vassal territory. That was when the divine spirits were born. In reality, Silver Moon territory is almost completely projected from the main world...”

Li Hao frowned, but didn’t say anything. He left the storage ring and addressed the seniors again. “Does this mean to say that if there are more of the thirty-six alive, they may not be in Skystar?”

“Correct!” Northern Fist nodded. “I only recently returned to Skystar Dynasty myself, I’ve been in Great Li all this time. I have to say... we must be careful of them. There are many mountains and monster spirits there, so many more than Skystar. Great Li has been fighting the monster spirits all these years in endless battles, but it’s also forged their ferociousness in fire and brimstone. I think that once they settle the matter of the monster spirits... they’ll absolutely invade Skystar!”

The thirty-six of Silver Moon were avid travelers. Li Hao said nothing more and turned to the old men. “Seniors, are there many left of the previous generation of Silver Moon martial masters?”

“There were quite a few twenty years ago.” One of them shook his head. “When the supernatural domain first awoke, Silver Moon lacked energy because our supernaturals were essentially extinct. We thought to seize a few treasures from Skystar City—mainly mysterious power stones. But we suffered grave losses and nearly all withdrew from the martial world after that.

“We also heard that Skystar is where a massive mine is located. Only when we seize sufficient mysterious power stones could we ensure that Silver Moon’s martial world did not decline. We also wanted to prevent the nine ministries and royal family from growing strong enough to invade Silver Moon again...” The old man shook his head again and didn’t continue.

Large numbers of the old guard had died in that battle; they had been surrounded by the nine ministries and royal family at the Skystar Sea. So many had died that they’d turned the sea red!

Of course, there was nothing that the older generation would be regretful about, nor was there much about the outcome that they hated. Everyone simply served their own masters. They had come to suppress the nine ministries and royal family, and to seize the mines to facilitate Silver Moon’s development. Being met with the other’s counterattack and being killed in return was only normal. Their skill was less than their opponents’, so there was nothing that could be said about falling in battle here.

They’d thought that they were strong enough to wreak havoc through Skystar, but it wasn’t until they reached the royal capital that they realized they underestimated the heroes of the world. After that, the surviving older guard chose to withdraw to Silver Moon.

That was how Yuan Shuo’s generation became mainstream in the martial world. But it wasn’t long before they fell behind the times as well. The supernatural quickly became mainstream, which indirectly demonstrated how correct the old guard had been to go on the offensive. The supernaturals presented too great of a threat!

Silver Moon wouldn’t have declined so rapidly if the old martial masters had succeeded. But since they had, there was nothing to be done about it. Their choice was right, they’d simply lost in executing their plans.

“Apart from us six, there aren’t more than twenty left in Silver Moon these days,” said the old man.

Less than twenty... that... wasn't many, but it would do!

Seeing that Li Hao found that to be a good number, the old man laughed. "Don't think of us all as being that powerful. Don't overestimate us! Us six are probably the best of the bunch. The rest were crippled a long time ago and there's not more than three who are stronger than us."

Li Hao furrowed his brows. That wasn't much at all then. He'd thought all of them were very strong!

"Then why..."

"Do you want to ask why there are so few of us, and why we are so weak?" The old man laughed ruefully. "There aren't enough resources in Silver Moon and us martial masters easily decline at our stage if we don't have sufficient mysterious power stones or Water of Life. Our blood qi fades and martial masters have many hidden injuries to begin with. There were quite a few alive early on, but they died one by one. Their wounds were either too heavy to fully recover from, or their blood qi had declined to the point in which their life force withered away."

Li Hao sighed, what a pity that the counterattack twenty years ago had failed! The ancient ruins in Silver Moon had swallowed so much energy that it turned the province into a desolate place. It greatly accelerated Silver Moon's fall. After the dust settled, these were the only people who were left.

"Then where do you normally live, seniors?"

"In a ruin," answered another old man. "There is still some energy left in the ruins..."

"Then... why don't you leave Silver Moon?" Li Hao couldn't help but ask. There were plenty of places with more energy, or they could interact with others if it came down to it. Cultivating in secret would be better than cultivating in Silver Moon.

“It’s difficult to leave home, and do you think the province has always been at peace?”

“Over the years, many people have wanted to invade Silver Moon ahead of time. We beat them off on a couple of occasions. What will the province do if we leave too? With the younger generation gone, Silver Moon’s martial world will truly be beyond redemption if we leave too.”

Alright then!

Li Hao did not agree with their line of reasoning, but he understood it. To him, it was all the same if one left first and came back after growing stronger. But upon further thought, what if the province couldn’t be adequately defended after they all left?

Not to mention, they might have much to do with the fact that his teacher was fine and survived to the present day. Ying Hongyue might have killed Yuan Shuo a long time ago if they all left, then there would be no talk of Li Hao now.

Chapter 817: Why So Foolish (III)

Li Hao quietly worked out some information from the old men after the conversation. At the very least, he knew their individual names. The six were male. While there were female cultivators among the old guard, they’d either died or been crippled. There were fewer female martial masters to begin with. Those that survived to present day all remained in Silver Moon.

The six had some background to them. Northern Fist’s martial uncle was a wandering hero once hailed as Thunderbolt Fist. Berserk Blade’s master was once hailed as Crazy Demon Blade. Li Hao hadn’t thought that he’d run into masters of the thirty-six here. That was quite beyond his expectations.

The other four didn’t have much to do with the thirty-six, but one of them quite surprised Li Hao. He was the previous generation Iron Shirt. That wasn’t the important detail; the key was that he was the master of the dead Iron Shirt and the lord of Buddha Mountain... had been his disciple.

Li Hao stared at the hulking elder for a while before saying, “The lord of Buddha Mountain... was... senior’s disciple?”

“Disciple in name!” the old man laughed heartily. “He came from the west and was hung up for all to see after Yuan Shuo defeated him... I felt an urge to protect a promising talent since his potential was decent, his Golden Body art good enough, and his age young enough.”

He then shook his head and fell silent. Li Hao found the situation very dicey indeed. There was a grudge at play here!

Indeed, a grudge festered as he knew that Yuan Shuo had broken through the last Iron Shirt’s defenses and killed the man. That had been someone else’s disciple! A headache brewed at the young man’s temples. My teacher... seriously...

The old man laughed at seeing Li Hao remain silent. “What are you thinking of? That your teacher killed my disciple?”

“Well...”

“It was a sparring match in the martial world, life and death are quite common when we go about our business!” The old man didn’t mind at all. “My disciple has killed those from the Five Styles discipline as well. Granted, it wasn’t called the Five Styles back then. The person involved should’ve been your martial uncle, he was Yuan Shuo’s senior brother. Yuan Shuo’s master then died in the battle of Skystar Sea. Those of us who survived have all benefited from him at some point in time.”

“Benefited from... my martial ancestor?”

“Correct!” laughed the old man. “Do you think he’s been dead for many years? Not at all, just twenty years. He was part of the main forces at the Battle of Skystar Sea twenty years ago. Peak Dominator then was very strong, but it’s naturally nothing worth speaking of now. But back then, he was a preeminent heavyweight!

“Your teacher stirs up so much trouble, do you think it’s by his merits alone that he’s lived such a carefree life all these years?” The old man smiled. “Your martial ancestor was always protecting him from the shadows. Of course, your teacher was well aware of that too. It was a pity that Yuan Shuo was never able to advance to Dominator before he passed away twenty years ago. That was one thing that your martial ancestor found quite regretful when he died in that battle.”

Li Hao remained silent. That was indeed very regretful. The most important disciple with the greatest potential was still stuck at half step Dominator when he passed away. Although Yuan Shuo was on par with a Dominator with the melding of his five auras, being unable to take that final step was still immensely saddening.

These old men were rather willing to discuss past events with Li Hao. They did so from the perspective of simple conversation, one without too much bitterness. All such feuds and grudges had long dissipated twenty years ago. In the past, Silver Moon martial masters were highly adept at fighting among themselves. All internal conflict mostly ceased after the rise of the supernatural. It rarely happened after the battle of Skystar Sea broke many heritages. So many died that those who survived were less inclined for internal strife.

.....

After leaving Sky Sword and Northern Fist to keep the elders company, Li Hao returned to the depths of the Judiciary complex. He reached the entrance to the ruins located in the rear garden. The plant spirit extended a wisp of mental strength. “You seem to have encountered some trouble... I heard the names of Wind and Cloud Pavilion and the Ranking of Wind and Cloud...”

The plant spirit could hear a little of its surroundings when it extended its mental strength, so Li Hao didn’t normally discuss business inside the complex. It was all casual chit chat, with secrets being transmitted.

“That’s right!” Li Hao nodded. “Therefore... I need the senior’s help.”

“My help?”

“I need a core origin replica!” Li Hao declared. “The Wind and Cloud Pavilion wants to move against me and they might have premier powerhouses. I need the help of a core origin replica, one that cannot be too weak. It has to be at least seven elements or on par with an Apex...”

The big coconut tree inside the ruins nearly toppled over from shock.

“Ah...”

“There’s nothing good in it for you if I die!” Li Hao said solemnly, to which the tree completely ignored.

What does your death have to do with me? The next person will choose to partner with me as well. Plant spirits held a monopoly on human cultivation. The entire species needed Water of Life.

“Do you think none of the major factions have their own partnerships with plant spirits?” Li Hao explained. “They all do! Those with true wealth have long cemented a regular partnership. Do you think they’ll abandon the plant spirits that they’ve sunk endless resources into to ally with an unfamiliar one?”

The coconut tree swayed with surprise at the presentation of a new perspective.

“Your only choice is someone like me who’s risen too fast to already have an agreement with a plant spirit! Silver Moon’s plant spirits are strong, but they require too many resources. I can’t satisfy them, which makes us a perfect match for each other! Do you think the royal family or other factions will choose to partner with you if they take this place? Or is it more likely that their plant spirit will decide to eat you whole?”

The coconut tree swayed again.

“Which among the three great organizations doesn’t have a powerhouse standing behind them? Your only choice is me and the Silver Moon martial masters! As for local overlords... Hah, what a

joke! They have issues producing even an Arcanus. Do you think they can supply you with millions of mysterious power stones?"

The coconut tree sank into deep thought. Did the young man's words make sense? They did! It hadn't considered this much up to this point. Just as Li Hao said, those with the ability to form an agreement with a plant spirit would've done so twenty years ago. The coconut tree couldn't be bothered with weaklings—how much in benefits could they bring?

As for Li Hao... he'd risen so quickly. There were strong plant spirits in Silver Moon, but perhaps they wanted so much that they weren't a viable option.

"Therefore, once I'm dead, the most likely outcome for you is to be forgotten here and no longer continue to recover. You can only wait for the second awakening to take place and then... be carved up by others!

"Trust me when I say that the other plant spirits in Skystar Town's ruins will pounce on you at the first chance to do so! All of the various factions, nine ministries, and royal family are enhancing their strength as quickly as they can. They're consuming large quantities of stones everyday to produce Water of Life. All of the other plant spirits are improving, but only you will continue to decline!"

The coconut tree jerked with alarm! That was the truth! If Li Hao refused to supply it with mysterious power stones and it wasn't able to come in contact with other powerhouses, then it would continue to decline while other plant spirits grew stronger. Even if it didn't weaken, it wouldn't grow stronger either.

"Your demands are too high," the coconut tree said solemnly. "You must know that to me, cutting off an Apex level replica represents nearly one third of my core origin. I've already lost a lot before and wasn't replenished for it. Cutting off so much more again... I won't be able to recover without at least thirty million mysterious power stones..."

"I don't want to ask for that much either," Li Hao took a deep breath. "But I've encountered a lot of trouble. You should know Daoist Wind and Cloud. If the Wind and Cloud Pavilion has that sort of heritage, then they'll have more than one peak six element Arcanus. Of course, I'll try to fight them

in an empty ruin. Your replica will still exist if I win. If not... then we don't need to talk of anything else."

The big tree was quiet for a very long time before saying, "Then give me thirty million stones first. I won't be able to do it otherwise. Severing that much core origin will shake my main body."

And if it was destroyed, greater trouble would arise. It might even impact the foundation of its primary body.

"Thirty million..." Li Hao's head ached. "That's too much. I won't be able to come up with that much for a while!"

The big tree remained quiet. Then there was nothing to discuss. It wasn't a fool. Without sufficient treasures to pay me and consume my replenishment yourself... I'm not a fool. Won't I be in greater trouble if you die?

"In that case, I'll definitely give you the mysterious power stones, I just don't have that many on me at the moment." Li Hao set his jaw. "I'll substitute with some treasures and trade back for them when I have sufficient mysterious power stones!"

"What... kind of treasures?" The big tree was slightly curious.

Li Hao grit his teeth and very reluctantly brought out a large mallet. "The mallet of the Hongs! One of the eight guardian treasures! This item is worth more than thirty million mysterious power stones!"

"That's just three million energy stones. Do you think this... is worth that much?"

"Don't worry, what's a mere thirty million stones worth if we can take them done?" Li Hao said with tragic determination. "You'll lose nothing once your replica returns and you'll earn thirty

million stones for free. I won't relinquish the mallet of the Hong, I'm going to reclaim all eight heritage weapons!"

"....." The big tree was tempted. The divine mallet of the Hong! Li Hao was correct, it was worth more than thirty million stones. It could even be worth three hundred! But... it couldn't use it. Only the Hong could.

Perhaps Li Hao might be able to, and the young man wasn't going to give up on the treasure either. It was indeed precious beyond compare, but the tree would be stuck with a worthless hunk of metal if Li Hao died.

The young man grew irritated when the plant spirit didn't respond. "Is that not enough? You're too greedy!"

"It's not that I'm greedy... and the divine mallet is indeed more valuable than my core origin replica," the tree answered. "It's just that I'm unable to use it..."

"None of that is an issue if I win." Li Hao frowned. "If I die and someone else takes over this place, a weapon of the eight families is something that everyone wants. Have them trade for it with thirty million stones, they'll do it!"

"You can't put it that way..."

"Then I'll add more!" Li Hao glowed ominously. "I'll throw in another ten powerful origin weapons. You can devour them if I lose, but you can't touch them before that!"

"Origin weapons? What weapons?" This piqued the tree's interest.

Li Hao immediately took out a bunch of high-level origin weapons. The tree sensed them, surprised to find that they were all earth level. That was indeed not bad. If these weapons were devoured, they

were worth several million stones due to their level. It couldn't digest the mallet of the Hongs, but it could these ones.

"They... will do... but that's still not enough..." The coconut tree was tempted.

Chapter 818: Why So Foolish (IV)

"Then forget a partnership!" Li Hao said coldly. "I've already demonstrated my sincerity with a weapon of the eight families and ten earth level origin weapons! I only said that it's possible that I might lose, not that I will lose for certain! There's no point in working together if you're so greedy!"

"If I already have thirty million stones, why wouldn't I go back to Silver Moon with that and the origin weapons? I can go to those powerful plant spirits instead of you!"

"It's not that I'm greedy, just that..." came the tree's ripples after a while. "Forget it, I rather hope that you can win. If you defeat them and bring back thirty million stones for these..."

"You won't play dumb then, will you?" Li Hao frowned. "I'll be back with the mysterious power stones, but you won't turn greedy then and keep my mallet of the Hongs for yourself, will you?"

"How would I?" The big tree rustled. "It's not useful for me, the stones are much more useful. Why would I keep it?"

"That's good then!" Li Hao brought out the origin weapons without another word. "Sever your replica now and put it into the storage ring. You can take the weapons!"

The big tree was conflicted. This transaction was very worthwhile. Its price of thirty million was absolute nonsense. It only required ten million if it wanted to fully recover. Li Hao was a nice one as he hadn't haggled over it.

But... the tree would be much weaker after it severed its core origin.

Upon further thought, that was acceptable. The second awakening was yet to begin and there was no hope for any powerhouse to take it down since it was in the ruins. Any that dared visit it would just be a replica. Its primary body would still possess certain battle strength.

If Li Hao could supply more mysterious power stones for it prior to the second awakening... then a bit of loss was worth it! The key lay in the origin weapons and mallet of the Hongs that Li Hao had brought out. They sent the big tree down the road that, so long as the young man didn't die, it was impossible for him to welsh on his debt. These items were worth far more than thirty million stones!

It actually wanted the sword of the Lis as well, but considered it nearly impossible after some thought and had to give up the idea.

The tree's mental strength quickly vanished, replaced by undulating ripples. Moments later, the tree seemed weakened as it sent out a storage ring. "Don't summon it if you can help it... only do so when you have no other choice... Or do so in the ruins..."

Its replica would be absolutely churned to pieces by the void otherwise.

"Does it have Apex level strength?"

"Pretty much..."

"How much is it off by?"

"Don't worry, it can put up a fight even if it encounters an Apex. It might not be able to kill the other, but it'll hold them back!"

Li Hao understood—the replica was barely on par with an Apex. It might be a little stronger than the little tree, but it had its limits. The little tree might not be any weaker than this replica if it used the projection of the imperial palace.

The young man extended his consciousness into the ring and found a mini tree. He probed it slightly, finding it stronger than the little tree.

“My thanks!” Li Hao threw in the weapons without further word. “Do not absorb my weapons before I fail. Mysterious power stones are easy to obtain, but origin weapons are not. I lack sufficient origin weapons at present.”

“Don’t worry!” The excited big tree took stock of the mallet’s hidden power. This was a weapon of the eight families! It wouldn’t have any right to touch it back in the day, and it’d be for the best if the big tree could comprehend some things from it.

Li Hao turned on his heel; snappy and decisive were his style. The big tree waved its branches around, rather happy.

There were people inside the ruins and one of them stepped forward when he sensed something. “Revered One, you...”

“There’s nothing to it, I’m just having Li Hao supply a few stones for me,” the big tree answered calmly. “I’ll be able to leave when the second awakening begins and I’ll kill him at first light! I’ll avenge the Hus!”

There were still some Hu powerhouses in the ruins—the family’s foundation of power. Only those with lower ability and less potential were sent to the outside world. But at the moment, those inside the ruins didn’t dare set foot outside. They could only hope for the second awakening to begin and for the big tree to lead them out and revitalize the Hus.

Meanwhile, the big tree was thinking, if its partnership went well with Li Hao, should it discard the Hus?

At the same time, Li Hao was wrong in thinking that there would be no one to partner with the tree if he died. These remaining Hu members were strong and they might rebuild the Ministry of the Judiciary by themselves. The big tree had only agreed with the young man to keep him calm.

The coconut tree was completely at ease and toyed with the mallet of the Hong's again. What a treasure! Too bad it couldn't use it or it would never return the mallet to Li Hao!

.....

Li Hao walked out solemnly from the rear yard, an uncontrollable smile on his face. Hahaha! How sweet! Not only had he weakened the big tree, but if he found a place and let the little tree swallow the replica, then the little tree would certainly grow stronger. Weakening the enemy to strengthen his own people was the best!

And with the big tree weakened, it would be even easier to take it out.

Li Hao knew how strong seven element Arcanus was; he'd watched closely when the little tree utilized the projection of the imperial palace. The coconut tree was even an Immortal! Despite it not fully recovering, that was still a frightening prospect. But now, it would be much weaker after severing a replica that was of the Apex level.

"But since it can sever an Apex replica... then that means its primary body is exceedingly strong and won't be any weaker than its replica!" Li Hao stroked his chin. Could he trick the coconut tree into severing another replica?

Probably... not. The tree was no fool! It was one thing to sever a replica once, doing so again would be treating it as a complete idiot. He'd only succeeded this time because he put up the mallet of the Hong's as collateral.

Li Hao didn't mind that since the tree couldn't devour or use it. It was still his so long as he killed the tree. If he didn't... it really wouldn't be his anymore.

"Senior Little Tree..."

The little tree perked up curiously inside the ring. More questions?

“How much battle strength can an Immortal retain after severing an Apex replica?”

“If they haven’t fully awakened, then that makes the peak Apex at most. After a replica... they’re likely around mid or late Apex...”

“Can Senior Little Tree take care of an opponent like that?”

“Probably... not! Not unless my primary body is here...”

“Then what if the senior absorbs a replica that they cut off?”

“Do you mean...” The little tree shook.

“Can the senior tackle this kind of opponent after absorbing their replica?”

“I can... try! Because I’ll be able to comprehend their dao after I take in their core origin. I can even locate their weaknesses. Of course, I won’t be able to match up to them in a direct fight, but I should be able to fend them off for a bit.”

Li Hao understood. “Then if we attack together alongside multiple martial masters close to Apex, can we kill them?”

“Ah...” The little tree pondered. “Apex is actually a kind of metamorphosis in our cultivation system, but the times now are not what they were before. The Apexes back in the day were unparalleled in the battlefield due to the fortification of core origin dao and its feedback. Strength was unceasing and could be withdrawn or replenished at any time. That is not the case anymore!”

What they were discussing would be a dream in the ancient times, their opponent would be an undying existence as they could recover in a split second so long as death wasn't dealt in a single blow. But now, they would be in danger after expending too many resources.

"So there's still hope, it's just... very dangerous!"

Li Hao smiled. There was hope! He'd discussed this with the little tree before—the little tree's meaning had been that it was completely hopeless, that their target could smack them to death with a single blow. But now, there was hope! That was how big the change was after some time!

"Will it... sever itself for a replica?" the little tree asked hopefully. "But it'll recover if you give it sufficient mysterious power stones."

"I didn't give it any stones, but it still cut off a replica!"

"Is it that dumb?" swayed the little tree.

Li Hao wanted to ask, are you talking about yourself? I didn't give you any stones, but you still cut part of yourself off and came into the outside world with me. Whether it was humans or monster spirits, how did all have trouble seeing themselves clearly?

"Then... then... I... can..." The little tree grew agitated.

"Just as the senior thinks, but it will take time! There's no rush!" Li Hao smiled.

"Alright!" The little tree was beyond excited. As I thought, my choice was right! Will my replica grow stronger than my primary body? If so... things will be interesting the next time I see my primary body.

Of course, there would be no problems coming back together since they were of the same origin.

.....

Li Hao was in a fantastic mood after pulling the wool over the coconut tree's eyes. The despondency that he'd fallen into with the Wind and Cloud Pavilion's interference had greatly faded away. He spent the rest of the day sending his people out on various tasks. How it manifested to Skystar City was a steady stream of commands being issued from the Skystar Commander Office.

Various central region provinces soon received their orders. They were to thoroughly investigate the Wind and Cloud Pavilion! Anyone who seemed to be a member was to be arrested and taken to Skystar City. Once their identity was confirmed, the captor would be rewarded with ten drops of Water of Life!

Anyone of the Wind and Cloud Pavilion who turned themselves in would find their past crimes forgiven. Those who offered important information would be rewarded with anywhere between ten to one hundred drops.

Anyone who captured the leader of the Wind and Cloud Pavilion would be rewarded with five hundred drops!

The various factions of the world took sharp breaths when they read all of the information. This was crazy! Of all people the Pavilion had to irritate, it was Li Hao. To be honest, even they were tempted by the five hundred drops! That would take tens of millions of mysterious power stones if they traded with the plant spirits for that amount!

Granted, people weren't fools. This reward wouldn't be that easy to claim. Even so, some of the wandering cultivators, Heaven Favored, and local overlords of the central region began their investigations. Just grabbing a scout would result in ten drops, that was still a large sum.

Of course, the Skystar Commander Office said very clearly that there must be clear evidence. If innocents were dragged in to fill the numbers, then not only would the perpetrator be in great trouble, but so would a lot of other people.

In these years, ten drops of Water of Life was enough to make many put their lives on the line. Offering ten thousand mysterious power stones was enough to buy one's life sometimes. They might pretend to be from the Wind and Cloud Pavilion to leave riches for their family or other purposes. There would be takers even though death was the sure outcome. Price was the only motivator.

Chapter 819: All in Readiness (I)

The Inspectorate.

Chen Yao was also perusing the Skystar Commander Office's orders. They were no secret since they were being publicly issued.

"Damn, he's willing to spend!" Chen Yao breathed out after he took in everything. To be honest, regular people weren't able to pay this price. On the other hand, he was equally pained by Li Hao setting three thousand pieces for one drop. The plant spirit that backed his family didn't charge too high at fifty thousand pieces a drop. Some more expensive prices were sixty thousand pieces a drop—more than ten times Li Hao's price!

Li Hao could trade one hundred thousand pieces for more than thirty drops, whereas everyone else could only manage two. Could this even be a competition?

Chen Yao walked to the rear yard when his thoughts traveled here. His father wasn't reading this time, but holding a one year old child in his arms.

Chen Yao rolled his eyes. I really can't take this humiliation anymore! This is my umpteenth younger sister. At my age, my granddaughter would be older than this younger sister. This is ridiculous!

His old man seemed to know his thoughts and remarked faintly, "What are you looking at? In the ancient civilization, powerhouses were so long-lived and had children even at ten thousand years old. Wouldn't you die of apoplexy if you lived in that age?"

That was the ancient logic, but it was also because they had such long lives. Are you going to live to ten thousand years old?

Chen Yao couldn't be bothered to say anything else and looked to the depths of the yard. "Have you spoken to that one?"

The price for Water of Life had weighed on him like a lump in his throat ever since Li Hao spoke of it. What they had to pay was too expensive!

"I did," the old man said faintly. "It said... not one less stone!"

A violent light flashed through Chen Yao's eyes, one that quickly dimmed. He cursed to himself. I hadn't known that you bastards were skimming so much off the top before. All of us are faced with the same price. In the beginning, one hundred thousand pieces a drop was normal and everyone was happy when it was slightly lowered.

Now that they knew about Li Hao's price, however, they were in a mood to kill!

"It's a fish trapped in a swamp!" Chen Yao grit his teeth and transmitted, "Taking a bit less means we'll be able to raise more powerhouses and expand our influence. That will result in more opportunities and chances to give it more benefits. Does it not understand that?"

"It makes forty-seven thousand stones per drop," the old inspector general said leisurely. "If it charged ten thousand, it would make seven thousand stones per drop. It would take seven drops to make what it does with one current drop. Will your need for Water of Life be seven times what it is now?"

If it could, why wouldn't it charge more? Seven times more... of course Chen Yao could. There was always a need for Water of Life. But upon closer thought, all of the ruins that could be excavated

had already been excavated. The ones that couldn't were unable to be explored for the moment. All factions were wary of the Skystar Mine and didn't dare easily venture into it.

Therefore, the sum of mysterious power stones in the world was fixed and most of it would go to the plant spirits in the end. Why should they offer more Water of Life then? It was far better for them to absorb it themselves.

As irritated as Chen Yao was, he also knew that everyone's hopes for ascension lay with the plant spirits. He was quite resigned and had to change the subject. "Forget it, let's not talk about this." He then switched to transmission, "How about we talk to Li Hao and have him supply us with some cheap Water of Life? I already sent two Arcanus over to help him—he probably needs people. This will be the basis for our partnership, so he should be able to supply some for his allies, right?"

"You can go try!"

Chen Yao cursed to himself. If I try, I'll be thrown out! I'm coming to you naturally because I want you to try. You command more respect!

"My thoughts are that Li Hao looks like he wants to move against the Wind and Cloud Pavilion. He seems to have truly made up his mind as he's summoned all of the Silver Moon martial masters. I'm thinking... why don't you keep a low profile, change your name, and join the group? You can bring back some resources and won't raise attention with your disappearance since you normally aren't in the public eye. You should do it for my thirty-seven or eight or nine younger siblings, even if you don't do it for me."

Chen Zhongtian started and raised his head, as if looking at his son for the first time. Was he even listening to what he was saying?

"You're very strong," Chen Yao ignored his father's look and continued transmitting, "He'll certainly be happy to have your help. I can't, I'm just a three element Arcanus. He doesn't lack those. You're four or five elements, right? Qi Pingjiang is peak six elements, so I'd believe it if you're six elements too. He'll definitely pay a high price if you go!"

“Not to mention, I can’t just vanish from the public eye. You can, though. You can be a mercenary for him. Honestly, you should earn more money while you can still fight. We can’t always depend on this unreliable plant spirit, can we?”

“I also have so many younger siblings that need to advance to Arcanus in the future. Have you calculated how much Water of Life they’ll need? You might have more children right now than Ying Hongyue!

“Ying Hongyue is cruel and ruthless, so he doesn’t care if his children die. Can you say the same?”

“.....” Chen Zhongtian stared at his son. As flighty as his son was, there were indeed some points in his words that the man had never considered before.

Indeed, having too many children was also a problem. His children had been too young to prompt these worries before, but now he had a dozen who were adults. Outsiders were unreliable, his own children were best. Therefore, instead of outsiders, the Chens invested quite a great deal of resources into his children. They were quite strong as adults and some were close to Arcanus.

Roughly fifty drops of Water of Life were required to enter Arcanus and stabilize the two element level. Based on current prices, that would require 2.5 million stones to produce a two element Arcanus. Ten meant twenty-five million...

Meanwhile, Chen Zhongtian needed to cultivate, as did his son and other members of the family. The powerhouses of the Inspectorate that followed by their side also needed to cultivate. The benefits that the Inspectorate had skimmed over the years had almost all gone back into their people.

Chen Zhongtian sank into deep thought.

“You say to build a strong relationship with him, isn’t this the best timing to do so?” Chen Yao continued. “He won’t think much of me if I go, but he’ll definitely treat you like a treasure. Our

demands won't be high. Well pay ten thousand stones for a drop. If we can purchase one hundred drops with that price, it will only cost us one million stones.

"That's an immediate savings of four million stones, just think about how much we can do with that! Where can you get a gig that makes you four million stones in one go?"

"....." Chen Zhongtian stared at his son and breathed out after a long moment, "You've grown!"

You've grown to the point where you plot against your own father! This is a very dangerous endeavor!

Granted, with the restrictions in the world these days, the strongest anyone could be was peak six element. The danger wouldn't be that extreme. Unfortunately, his son made sense.

"Then, fine... ai, I'm old, but still need to go out and earn my own money. I built the family enterprises for you when I was young, but they're still not enough for you!"

Chen Yao couldn't be bothered to say anything. It was all fine so long as his old man was willing to go. They were truly in a financial crisis! Li Hao inspired so much competition that the nine ministries, royal family, and other factions were furiously adding to their military capabilities. Otherwise, there wouldn't be such a rush to reach the Arcanus level. No one had been in a hurry before and could proceed at their own pace.

Cultivating day by day and absorbing mysterious power stones could strengthen the five organs all the same. The consumption of resources involved in that route wasn't as great.

But now?

That was not feasible anymore!

One had to progress, and immediately! Two elements was insufficient, it had to be three, then it had to be four! The barometer moved by the day and their physical bodies couldn't handle the strain, so then even more resources had to be consumed!

The fact that these plant spirits weren't willing to lower their prices also had much to do with Li Hao. They knew that these people had a very pressing and high need for Water of Life. In that case, it was nice enough of them to not raise prices. Lower them?? Impossible!

Since the Inspectorate faced a financial crisis, Chen Yao felt that the other factions would be in similar straits. Water of Life had suddenly become the most important strategic resource.

.....

Before the sun rose on the second day.

Li Hao waited for people throughout the night. Tyrant Blade had already arrived, Thunderleg and the others were on the way and almost here. They would arrive before the sun rose.

The young man was considering whether to handle the big tree first after his breakthrough or the Wind and Cloud Pavilion? He had a copy of the Arcanus and Divine Masters Rankings in hand—not his fakes, but the real ones!

So those of the Pavilion hadn't detected his presence and the word of his visit really hadn't leaked. Well, he couldn't be entirely sure of its veracity, but the vice director general of South Peak really had gotten his hands on an original. The messenger had instructed him to print ten thousand copies of each for distribution the day after tomorrow.

Li Hao was scanning it, the look in his eyes changing rapidly. Footsteps sounded outside the door.

“Commander!”

“Come in!”

Liu Long swiftly pushed the door open and whispered, “The Inspectorate has sent someone who wants to see the commander. He says his name is Chen Zhongtian!”

Li Hao’s eyebrows raised and he looked at the Arcanus Ranking in his hand. Chen Zhongtian, first generation minister of the Ministry of the Inspectorate. Peak six elements Arcanus, ranked number nine.

Indeed, number nine.

Chen Zhongtian... six elements!

The look danced in Li Hao’s eyes for a bit before he said, “Show him in!”

Chapter 820: All in Readiness (II)

Chen Zhongtian pushed through the door. An old man with an ethereal appearance, he carried himself with a refined demeanor.

“Commander Li, we just saw each other yesterday, but here I am disturbing you again.” He smiled affably.

“Old Minister Chen is too polite, have a seat!” Li Hao pointed at a chair. Chen Zhongtian smiled and sat right down. The young man glanced at him, hesitated, then spoke frankly, “Old Minister Chen, I have a question that I hope you can answer for me. I happen to be uncertain...”

“A question? Please speak frankly, Commander Li!”

“Are you guys...” Li Hao thought for a bit. “Are you and Qi Pingjiang martial masters or supernaturals?”

Indeed, this was his question! Could martial masters attain the equivalent of six element Arcanus? The young man would be able to see it if they were supernaturals—they would be glittering with golden light. These people did not impart that sensation. They were too piercing to look at, but it wasn't the supernatural sensation of hurting the eye.

Chen Zhongtian laughed at the question and looked deeply at Li Hao. “We were martial masters at first, then became supernaturals, but we're not pure supernaturals.”

Li Hao blinked. Not pure supernaturals? What did that mean?

Seeing that Li Hao's interest was piqued, Chen Zhongtian contemplated for a while and decided to tell the young man. There was someone in Silver Moon who knew the particulars anyhow, so there was no need to specifically hide it.

“The difference between supernaturals and martial masters lies in that one has broken their supernatural locks, the other hasn't. One has released their potential and the other hasn't. Then is there a way for a martial master to release their potential without having to snap their locks? They would be more powerful, yet still retain their identity as a martial master.”

Maintaining the identity of a martial master was important for holding onto Silver Moon's legacies and treasures. However, one could not sustain that indefinitely as that would lead to eventual obsolescence in terms of battle strength. It was a common problem for many martial masters until Li Hao developed the supernatural characters.

Did this mean that Chen Zhongtian and the others had found another way? Then why didn't they make it widely available?

“How?” Li Hao frowned.

“Regular people can’t use this method.” Chen Zhongtian smiled. “On Silver Moon’s side... your Director General Zhao might know it.”

“Please speak frankly, Director Chen!” What was the point in beating around the bush and leaving him hanging?

“It’s really hard—it’s the nurturing of weapons to act as a medium!”

“What do you mean by that?” Li Hao blinked.

“Regular weapons won’t do, you need a powerful one. Typically, a sky level one is required!” the old inspector general answered frankly. “That means to say, we nurture our supernatural locks through the origin weapons, confining the supernatural locks within. The origin weapons are used to release strength from the locks while keeping them intact.

“However, the demands are high as each lock requires its own weapon!” sighed the man. “That’s why this technique isn’t available to everyone. It necessitates at least six sky level weapons to reach Arcanus, seven for three elements, nine for five elements...

“It’s very difficult, so this technique hasn’t been able to be popularized. Only the leaders of the most premier factions that explored ruins early on can utilize this method. It’s no secret—a lot of people know of it. This is likely how Ying Hongyue increased his strength as well...

“But you tell me, what use is there for this method to be popularized? Creating one Arcanus requires six sky level origin weapons. How is that possible? Only people like us collected some back in the day. There are many origin weapons that are earth level and below, but how many sky level ones are there?”

Li Hao raised a brow. The nurturing of weapons to protect one’s meridians! So such a technique existed in the world! Granted, it was an endless pit that consumed too many resources.

“What are the benefits and drawbacks to this technique?” Li Hao furrowed his brows.

“The benefit is that it permits you to retain your martial master identity. Martial masters have bright prospects ahead of them. Supernaturals... are fine too, but their biggest problem is that their strength resides outside of them.

“The drawbacks are that firstly, the technique requires so many resources that no one can withstand this level of depletion. Each additional element requires another sky level organ weapon. Secondly, we still cannot bring our full strength to bear. Snapping the supernatural locks, for instance, fully releases the strength of that lock. We cannot reach the same level—but the gap is that big.

“Thirdly, origin weapons are hard to come by, particularly when you take into account that affinity also needs to be considered. It’s best if the origin weapon is a match for the element. For example, the lock of the heart should utilize a fire element weapon. The appropriate affinity between weapon and lock will lead to greater power!”

Li Hao nodded. Laying hands on several sky-level origin weapons was already hard enough. Needing ones of different elements was even harder, and for those to be a good fit for one’s needs? The difficulty level was astronomical!

To be honest, this technique... was pretty awful. One might as well directly ascend as a supernatural. But this was what they’d chosen to do in order to retain their identity as a martial master. It was because they were so wealthy that they could do so. The poor didn’t have the right to attempt such a technique!

Not even Li Hao could do so as he lacked sky-level origin weapons.

“Then why didn’t I get any when I killed Hu Xiao and Qian Wanhao...” he frowned.

“That’s why I say it has to be the leaders of the most premier factions,” Chen Zhongtian chuckled. “Those two... are slightly off the mark. They would do in the early years, but you need six origin

weapons to make it to Arcanus and seven for three elements. Eight for four elements... do you think they can afford that?

“Over on the nine ministries side, less than half of them can do so.”

That meant only three or four of them could. It went without saying that Li Hao’s visitor was one of them, so that left only one more at most. The other two spots surely had to go to Minister Zhao from Administration and Qi Pingjiang.

A Zhao surname... Li Hao suddenly realized. Is he possibly related to Director General Zhao in Silver Moon?

“Nurturing weapons to protect the meridians... If the supernatural locks fully erupt while they’re in the origin weapons, does that mean they will not break completely?”

“Correct!” Chen Zhongtian nodded. “But the level of resource consumption is too great. Origin weapons need a vast sum of energy every time they are deployed. Requiring a pile of mysterious power stones each time they are used is also a drawback.”

“Origin weapons can hold the supernatural locks...” Li Hao thought of his supernatural characters. Wasn’t this also a form of them? His way was just slightly less finicky and didn’t require origin weapons.

The young man turned over various ideas in his mind, apologizing after a long while. “My apologies, I have shown inadequate hospitality to the old minister due to my preoccupation with certain matters. You came to me for a certain reason. I wonder...?”

“What I have on my mind is the Wind and Cloud Pavilion throwing the world into chaos. I see that Commander Li is determined to eliminate them. Although I am advanced in age, I am willing to put forth my efforts for the commander. The Inspectorate is meant to uphold peace, so we can never coexist with evil supernatural organizations!”

“.....” Keep bullshitting, why don’t you!

“Such was our mission statement when we were established eighty years ago,” Chen Zhongtian laughed as if he knew what Li Hao was thinking. “I personally wrote the oaths we had to take upon joining the Inspectorate.”

“It’s alright,” Li Hao laughed noncommittally. “We don’t need the old minister to worry about that...”

“There’s no need to stand on ceremony with me,” coughed Chen Zhongtian. “I come with utmost sincerity. And... to be honest, there are some matters developing at home that I cannot resolve. I am too embarrassed to speak of them, but I cannot set them aside! My thoughts are that if Commander Li is willing to sell me five hundred drops of Water of Life at a low price...”

“Have a nice day, sir!”

“.....” Chen Zhongtian coughed. “Four hundred drops will do as well. I have too many children and as a father... although I am old... I must think of my children. Four hundred drops means that each child is getting less than ten drops. It’s not even enough for them to ascend to Arcanus...”

Less than ten drops each? Doesn’t that make for more than forty children? But I remember Chen Yao saying he only had thirty-something siblings. Why are there more now? How many children do you have?

Li Hao finally understood the connotations beneath Chen Zhongtian’s words. So the man was here to... take on a temporary gig?

That was incredible! A right and proper inspector general of the Inspectorate, the one who’d establish the ministry at that, was here to say that he wanted work to feed his kids? It was very strange!

Li Hao shook his head. Even if the inspector general was outright offering to buy four hundred drops at a low price, it was still too much. It took fifty drops for a two element Arcanus, one hundred for a three element, one hundred and fifty for a four element... Four hundred drops might create a five element Arcanus!

Why create trouble for himself? He could handle the Wind and Cloud Pavilion.

"I... still have some strength to my name and am skilled when it comes to defense and speed..."

Defense... speed...

A new thought struck Li Hao and he suddenly said, "That's too much! And I don't think I need help in that regard... But if the old minister is willing to bring your full force to bear for a single occasion and disregard the possibility of death, then... we might have something to talk about."

"Full force? Of course!" Chen Zhongtian declared solemnly. "Does Commander Li think I'll purposefully hold back on strength?"

"Peak six elements?"

"Commander Li overestimates me," the man said without skipping a beat. "I only have the strength of five elements, which is quite impressive already."

"Peak six elements!" repeated Li Hao. "I can sell at ten thousand pieces a drop for strength of that level and supply you with five hundred drops. If you are five elements... then twenty thousand pieces a drop and two hundred drops. That is my first and final offer."

The first proposal was five million stones for five hundred drops, which made for profits of twenty million stones. The second was four million stones for two hundred drops, which made for profits of six million stones. The difference was fourteen million stones!

Chen Zhongtian clucked his tongue when he calculated the difference. Damn, the difference was huge!

“Also, you must obey all of my commands,” Li Hao continued as the man pondered his decision. “You attack in whatever direction I point at. You may not run off or do as you see fit! I’ll arrange an opponent stronger than you even if you say you’re a five element Arcanus. In the end, you’ll be bringing the strength of six elements to bear but getting paid as five elements...”

Chen Zhongtian cursed to himself. It was hard earning money these days! However, Li Hao’s price was also tempting enough, so he said probingly, “Then... five thousand pieces a drop...”