

Star Gate 351

Chapter 351: The Flaming Phoenix Spear (II)

Li Hao paged through the books in his memory. Ancient army formations were not limited by numbers and some were decentralized. He knew of one array that was five people to a formation, making for twenty small formations that combined to a larger one of a hundred people.

A formation like this held the advantage of easy coordination and adjustment. If one hundred people were to participate in one large-scale formation, that required all one hundred to practice at the same time. Synchronized coordination and adjustment would be much more difficult.

A decentralized formation also held the advantage that, even if ninety-five people were dead, the remaining five would be unaffected and could assemble their formation all the same.

It looked like Hou Xiaochen did not possess such a formation, so he could only set up the smallest version of one hundred to a formation. In that case, supernaturals were indeed not suited for the Silver Moon Guards. Li Hao, however, happened to know several decentralized formations. He said nothing after thinking about it further.

Let's wait and see.

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The car continued driving, dropping Li Hao off at his accommodations when the sky was dark.

Downstairs.

Manager Yu left with the driver after depositing the young man at the foot of the building. She politely declined Li Hao's invitation to dinner; she just wanted to curse out the boy. Li Hao had invited her to the cafeteria at the Inspectorate's family accommodations!

Did he even know what he was saying??

Li Hao spoke about the Flaming Phoenix Spear at length again. Manager Yu promised to bring it to him in the morning.

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Upstairs.

Li Hao had just opened his front door when the one across the way also opened. Hao Lianchuan had returned before him tonight. He looked around furtively and apprehensively addressed the young man, “Li Hao, when I cultivated tonight... I felt... I felt what could be a supernatural lock on my kidneys!”

“That’s good, that means the blood pearls do work,” Li Hao chuckled.

Hao Lianchuan hastily bobbed his head. His eyes reddened and he clenched his jaw, muttering, “I’m prepared to exterminate Red Moon!”

He was about to engage in a wholesale slaughter!

“Wasn’t that what was said all along?”

“That’s different, we were just paying lip service to it before. We wouldn’t have fought them elsewhere if they didn’t come to White Moon City. A place like Flare City shows signs of Red Moon activity as well, we just never made up our minds to completely eliminate them.

“This time, I want the Guards to coordinate with us and I’ll be inviting the Inspectorate and army too. We’ll get rid of Red Moon once and for all!”

He'd well and truly made up his mind. Scarlet shadows! Since blood pearls were so effective, killing Red Moon members meant strengthening himself.

"Do as you see fit, director." Li Hao didn't say anything else. The various parties involved had long come to a decision; Hao Lianchuan's resolve was just being affirmed today.

"Have you visited the Guards?"

"Mmhm." Li Hao opened the door and waved Hao Lianchuan in.

"I know a thing or two about them," Hao Lianchuan said after some thought. "What do you think about the Guards?"

"They're strong!" Li Hao smiled. "In terms of individual strength, though, likely only two are stronger than you, deputy director. But if you went alone... you'd die ten times over!"

"....." These words weren't pleasant to the ear, but Hao Lianchuan didn't seem to mind. He nodded upon further thought. "That's to be expected. The Guards' foundations are very likely the ones that belonged to the Skystar Guards. They were already formidable martial masters then, but they might not all be after so many years. A portion of them should still be."

"Were the Skystar Guards all stationed in Silver Moon?" asked Li Hao.

"Just the majority." Hao Lianchuan shook his head. "Another portion was in Skystar City. Their three commanders were active in Silver Moon, but the commander-in-chief of the Guards was based in Skystar City."

"The commander-in-chief?"

“Did you think that the three commanders were the only senior officers in the Skystar Guards? It’d make for an organizational mess as they wouldn’t take orders from each other. The royal family established the Guards, so they naturally had their people supervising. When the Skystar Guards were founded, the three commanders’ identities were shrouded in mystery as they were the actual executors of plans. The commander-in-chief was known by name—a duke of the royal family.

“Current Skystar royalty,” Hao Lianchuan further explained for Li Hao, “has an abundance of royal children and grandchildren apart from the emperor. There are also numerous royal relatives, but they’re all leeches that you don’t need to pay attention to. The nine princes and thirty-six dukes that the royal family conferred titles onto are more worthy of a second look. Some of them guard territories beyond the capital—several of the ninety-nine provinces are under royal control. Otherwise, the nine ministries would’ve wanted to eliminate the royal family altogether.”

Li Hao nodded. Nine princes, thirty-six dukes... He’d heard about this before, but hadn’t known that there’d be so many of them.

Skystar royalty had ruled the world for one hundred and twenty years. Although they’d abdicated eighty years ago, a starving camel was still bigger than a horse. Their foundations were immense. The young man didn’t care—the duke in residence of the Guards had just been a formality. Li Hao didn’t say anything.

Hao Lianchuan hadn’t been able to help himself and ran over to chat up Li Hao. When he was done, he ran off again without mentioning treating Li Hao to dinner. The young man inwardly cursed the deputy director for being so cheap!

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The second day.

Li Hao reported to work on time, as usual.

The Night Watcher headquarters.

Li Hao glanced upstairs; Hou Xiaochen was gone. Who knew where he'd gone to? The young man couldn't be bothered. It was normal for these powerhouses to be mysterious and away from their posts day and night.

The fourth floor.

Li Hao made straight for Manager Yu's office. The woman didn't seem to want to talk to him after he entered. She waved a flaming red spear into the air; the little sword hidden in Li Hao's army boots seemed to stir in response.

The young man knew that the little sword possibly wanted to eat the origin weapon! The Flaming Phoenix Spear was very powerful—the Shadow Snake Sword that the little sword had eaten last time was just a gold level weapon. It was said that the spear was a sky rank, or was it an earth rank origin weapon?

Who knew?

Manager Yu's brows furrowed when she sensed the spear vibrate in her hand. She quickly put it out of her mind and introduced, "This is the Flaming Phoenix Spear! It has recognized a master, so it is the director's origin weapon. It is durable and quite beyond the reach of ordinary people.

"Hao Lianchuan was able to use it before because of the director's command and the fact that some consciousness has blossomed in the spear. The director is now lending you the weapon, but hasn't bestowed upon you the right to use it. Therefore, you're unable to deploy it. Even if you try, you can only use it as a particularly durable weapon."

In other words, one wasn't able to summon the weapon's spirit if they lacked the special ability to. Li Hao understood, but wasn't familiar with origin weapons overall.

"Manager Yu, I hear that origin weapons can create supernaturals and produce mysterious power? How do they do that?"

It wasn't a major secret, so the manager said coldly, "Once an origin weapon's soul revitalizes, it can absorb energy from the world. Mysterious power exuded from origin weapons lacks a bit of the violent impact that it normally would. It's most suited for rookies to ascend.

"Mysterious power that is not purposefully produced in an object permeates the world. Regular people are unable to discover or extract it. You've seen mysterious power dissipate into nothing once it spreads in the air—it hasn't vanished from existence, just spread out so much that you cannot detect it. Origin weapons can."

"Then don't you have access to limitless energy if you own an origin weapon?" Li Hao asked curiously.

"There's an efficiency part to this equation," Manager Yu continued. "Gold level weapons can produce half a cube at most in a day. that's an insignificant amount! The Flaming Phoenix Spear is much stronger and can produce roughly ten cubes a day, but that's still not worth mentioning! Do you think three thousand cubes a year is a lot?"

Not at all! A disappointed Li Hao shook his head. That was all there was to it? That was too little! Then the Night Watchers couldn't rely on the mysterious power from origin weapons to cultivate. Li Hao's salary alone was one cube a month as a low level commissioner inspector. There were plenty of supernaturals in the Night Watchers. The agency would've closed up shop long ago if they relied on just three thousand cubes a year from a single origin weapon.

"This is what applies to an offensive sort of origin weapon," Manager Yu continued. "Some origin weapons specialize in converting mysterious power—those can produce vast quantities of energy. The three great organizations and central headquarters might possess some of that kind, but we only have the Flaming Phoenix Spear.

"The mysterious power we use now was either gathered in our missions, produced by the Flaming Phoenix Spear, or from the ruins!

“Origin weapons have another function in that they can devour some items in ancient ruins and turn them into mysterious power. Some objects in the ruins contain energy, but we’re unable to use them. This is when origin weapons should devour them...”

“Doesn’t upstairs give us any funds?” wondered Li Hao. Even if Hou Xiaochen wanted to declare independence, he hadn’t so yet. Was the central region really preemptively cutting them off?

“Self-sufficiency! The entire border region and the other four regions are thus. Neither do we need to offer up anything to the central region, though.”

Li Hao nodded. I see. But in that case... the central region’s control over the four will decrease. Why should I listen to you when you don’t give me anything? I wonder what the central region is thinking.

The young man looked at the Flaming Phoenix Spear. It was very quiet with no sign of its soul to be seen. It seemed to be asleep.

“Can we activate it?” Li Hao thought for a bit.

“You’d better not try it, accidents will easily occur!” Manager Yu frowned slightly. The director is out and didn’t give you the right to use it. Once it’s activated, it can easily turn into a weapon attacking you.

“Although you’re not weak, the spear is very strong. It can bring forth the power of a Solar even without someone wielding it.”

So that meant it could be activated.

“How is it activated? Through swallowing mysterious power stones?” Li Hao asked curiously.

“.....” Is this guy listening to me or not? Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to have any stones. Manager Yu nodded. “Yes, you can activate the origin weapon if you have fire mysterious power stones, but there’s no need for that, so don’t try to. I recommend you just look at the Flaming Phoenix Spear. The director has used it for many years, so you might be able to comprehend certain things from it and gain something. Don’t try anything else!”

“Understood!” Li Hao chuckled and reached for the weapon. It trembled before he could touch it, as if not wanting to come near the young man.

Manager Yu started. This was the first time the weapon was acting like this! She looked at the young man with a frown. “You...”

“I what?” Li Hao looked blankly back at her, knowing full well that perhaps the spear was sensing Stellaris. Although the little sword was still sealed, the seal seemed to have loosened. That snake from last time had been terrified.

The Flaming Phoenix Spear was asleep, but its spirit had revitalized. Perhaps it could sense what stood in front of it.

Manager Yu couldn’t understand it, why was the weapon acting like this?

Chapter 352: Compensation Package (I)

But... forget it, the director’s already agreed. With that, Manager Yu handed the Flaming Phoenix Spear to Li Hao.

“Origin weapons can be stored within the body, even if they’re not yours! The Flaming Phoenix Spear is unsealed, so all you need to do is drip one drop of blood onto it to store it inside your body. That drop of blood doesn’t put your ownership mark on it. It just helps the spear sense your presence so that you can make it part of yourself.”

Li Hao looked askance at the spear—a drop of blood? Nothing’s going to happen to this if my blood gets on it, right? It’s not that I think highly of myself, but that the two characters of Battle Heaven were affected when I last spilled my blood...

But I'm just using regular blood this time, so it should be fine? It's not like I can just walk out waving the Flaming Phoenix Spear around.

Li Hao squeezed a single drop of blood out of his fingertip and dropped it onto the origin weapon. It seemed to shudder when the blood hit it and a fiery phoenix manifested over the weapon. The young man looked at it curiously; the phoenix seemed to open its eyes as well.

It vanished the second it sensed Li Hao's presence, taking all of the fiery light of the weapon with it. The origin weapon's true form was revealed! The Flaming Phoenix Spear looked no different from a regular metal spear. Suddenly, it was much uglier without its flames. Its previous appearance left no doubt that it was a formidable weapon. Now... it was so ordinary!

Startled, Manager Yu looked at Li Hao. "The phoenix has withdrawn, that's strange... Is there something wrong with your blood or something different about the bloodline of the eight families?"

"The phoenix withdrawing means that the weapon has sealed itself away. It further means that you have no chance of activating it. All you can do now is use it as a regular weapon. It's canceled even your right to activate it!"

"....." Li Hao was speechless. Was there a need for such a response? The heck did the weapon mean by this?? "Can we unseal it?"

"Yes, the director can do that!"

Forget I said anything. The young man was quite sullen. What the heck is this?? Does it think I mean it harm and therefore sealed itself as soon as it sensed my blood?

The spear darted into his body with a quick thought; it shrank to a very small size upon entering the body—a needle. It entered his organs in the blink of an eye and ceased to move.

How convenient!

Li Hao was rather envious. What a pity that his own little sword couldn't do the same. But this thing was being very unruly. It'd sealed itself away! How was he supposed to use it then?

"Give it back to me after three days!" Manager Yu reminded. "Don't think about running off with it, that's impossible. The director will sense it if it's too far away from him, so don't even consider the possibility!"

Li Hao blinked, finally understanding something. "Manager Yu," he began, the very picture of aggrieved innocence. "Even if you wouldn't lend it to me, why would you think I would take it and run?"

Why would you ever think that? I've never considered doing so!

The woman waved her hand and indicated for him to leave; she wasn't interested in explaining herself. You know better than anyone if you would've done it or not. The Five Styles discipline is known for brazen impulses. It wouldn't be the first time that the discipline's done something like that!

It wasn't out of the question that Li Hao would abscond with the Flaming Phoenix Spear and seek out Yuan Shuo. In fact, it was highly likely. This was why she hadn't wanted to lend it to the boy. Meanwhile, someone like Hao Lianchuan had been granted the right to use it because Hou Xiaochen hadn't been worried of him running off.

Plainly, even Hou Xiaochen was mulling over the possibility, so he decided not to let the boy use it! If Li Hao could use the Flaming Phoenix Spear and truly ran off with it, they would have a difficult time retrieving it.

A dejected expression hung on the young man's face. He'd truly never thought about doing that, why were they all pointing fingers at him for a crime he hadn't committed? If you think that about me, I might as well really take the Flaming Phoenix Spear!

Seeing that the manager wasn't engaging with him anymore, Li Hao had to bring up, "Then I'll be heading to the Guards now..."

"Go downstairs and get in the car. Also, you need your own car in the future. Regular cars can't go there, they'll be destroyed. Buy a car and register it..."

"What, aren't we assigned cars by the agency?" Li Hao asked with surprise. I'm a government employee! Besides, I don't have money to buy a car.

Manager Yu frowned impatiently, she didn't want to hear the young man talk. This guy was sometimes very irritating and constantly thought about taking advantage of others...

"Buy it yourself!"

"I don't have any money!"

"You..." The manager narrowed her eyes as she thought he was joking.

"I really don't!" Li Hao explained seriously. "I checked my bank account yesterday and there's a balance of ten thousand in it. My salary didn't come in last month, I don't have enough money to buy a car!"

Oh... my... heavens. How is this guy so poor?! He's a Dominator—no, a Summoner—so how is he this poor and finding it so proper to be so poor?! Manager Yu sighed after a long moment. "Alright! I'll assign a car to you!"

Li Hao grinned from ear to ear, finally able to leave in a good mood.

The resigned secretary stared for a while after he left and picked up a communicator to make a call. She was silent for a while longer after it was picked up. “Hao Lianchuan, bump up Li Hao’s monthly salary to... a million coins a month!”

“Huh?” Hao Lianchuan blinked. “Isn’t he paid in cubes of mysterious power?”

“Give him money!” Manager Yu suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. It’s my first time seeing such a poor martial master in all my years of living. He’s an embarrassment to talk about! The kid probably doesn’t care about mysterious power, but he’d be delighted with a million coins. No wonder he’s so stingy all the time, he really doesn’t have any money.

“Is he that poor?” Hao Lianchuan seemed to grasp the implications as well. “No wonder he eats at the cafeteria everyday and simply buys a few buns at most. I thought this was a habit of his!”

Both of them suddenly wanted to laugh, but also felt a prickle of fear as they did so. They wouldn’t bat an eye if a young man of his age and strength was boastful and full of himself. It would be normal for him to take a different woman to bed every night, to say nothing of luxurious manors and flashy cars. Decadent food and wine went without saying.

However, the reality was that the young man didn’t seem to entertain these thoughts. An exceedingly self-regulated powerhouse of his young age was the most frightening of all.

A new thought struck the secretary. Does this guy want a promotion only because he wants a raise? If that’s the case... he’s crazy! Who wants a promotion for a little extra money?

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Li Hao reached the first floor in a wonderful mood. That was another free car under his belt! Ah, the public rice bowl is the most delicious. I wonder when I can get a house? I still don’t have one under my name in White Moon City.

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The car once more threaded through White Moon, past the jungle, into the vicinity of the Silver Moon Guards. Li Hao straightened his attire when he alighted, the car drove off as he did so. This was Hou Xiaochen's car and it wouldn't have brought him here if Li Hao didn't have one himself.

Someone was already waiting at the door—the layabout Mu Lin was the best greeter. None of the other centurions were present as they had their own duties to attend to. They were all drilling troops in the distance and, well, could make time to welcome a new colleague if they wished. But having been beaten up just yesterday, they couldn't bring themselves to step forward in welcome today.

“Welcome!” Mu Lin was just as polite and merry as yesterday.

Li Hao had discovered that fatties like to smile. Smiling made them appear honest and trustworthy. The fat Deputy Director Hao also liked to smile. Mu Lin's younger brother, Mu Sen, was also a tiger that liked to smile. I wonder if there's a Mu Mu in their family? Mu Lin and Mu Sen's names are written solely with the “wood” radical, why not throw a few more woods in there?

“Hello to Deputy Mu!”

“Don't call me that!” Mu Lin smiled. “Just call me second brother Mu. I'm still young in my early forties, don't plonk such a heavy title on my head. The Guards usually call my name or second brother Mu if they're showing me face!”

He was the second brother because the boss was Golden Spear. He couldn't claim a higher honorific.

“You didn't bring any luggage with you?” Mu Lin asked merrily. “That's just as fine, everything you can possibly need is here. Apart from lacking all the people we want, we have everything else in abundance!”

He tugged Li Hao inside as he spoke; the young man surreptitiously took his hand back. What he meant by “surreptitious” was staring straight ahead and forcefully yanking his hand back, then pretending like nothing had happened. So long as he wasn’t awkward about it, the awkward one would be Mu Lin.

Mu Lin didn’t mind at all; he remained smiling happily.

“Ole brother Li, you’re unfamiliar with this place since you’ve just arrived. Let me show you around so you can get to know everything.”

“Thank you, Brother Second Mu!”

“.....” Mu Lin blinked. Brother Second Mu? I said second brother Mu, did you mishear? But it didn’t matter upon further thought, it was all the same.

He took Li Hao through the gates and arrived at the massive plaza. It was so enormous that it would take a while to cross. Mu Lin took the young man down the right-hand side. “This is the sparring grounds, most of us usually train here. If you’re practicing a secret art that you find unsuited for the public eye, you can also train in a room. There are several cultivation rooms in the back that you can use.”

Li Hao inclined his head. There were a lot of people in the plaza—at least four hundred. Many of them were sneaking glances this way as they practiced, but swiftly retracted their gazes when they saw Li Hao turn in their direction.

“The entire base is split into three areas, this is one of them. The living quarters are in the back and the cultivation area in another section. Everyone has their own room in the living quarters. The centurions have a standalone section.”

Li Hao was quite satisfied with what he heard. So this means I’m being assigned a large house? Houses in the outskirts aren’t worth much, alright.

“The cultivation area exists because some of our special training methods are greatly useful when it comes to improving martial masters.”

“What kind of special cultivation methods?” Li Hao’s interest was piqued.

Mu Lin grinned broadly. “It was very difficult for martial masters to train before the supernatural domain rose. They often trained for seven, eight, or more than ten years and were still stuck at Slayer.

“With the rise of the supernatural, martial masters found that unattributed mysterious power could strengthen the body. This gave them another option. We later discovered that mysterious power stones offer comprehensive improvement, making them even better than unattributed power!”

Li Hao nodded continuously.

Chapter 353: Compensation Package (II)

“We’ve built an unattributed energy room over the years,” Mu Lin continued his tour. “And one of mysterious power stones. They’re both incredible sites that help martial masters swiftly improve. Enhancing the body is still a top-class choice before Dominator!

“Those below Dominator can go to the cultivation room of unattributed mysterious power. Those above Dominator can go to the one of mysterious power stones.”

“Are the Silver Moon Guards this lavish?” Li Hao raised an eyebrow. “You guys don’t have that many stones, do you?”

“True, we don’t have many, but they can be replenished by mysterious power. Having the stones as a conduit for the martial master leads to very decent effects.”

Li Hao nodded. “Is this all?” All this was fine and dandy, but he felt that they hadn’t touched upon the key point!

What was the key point?

Aura!

Indeed. Over one hundred out of a thousand people in the Guards had comprehended the aura, there must be something here that facilitated martial masters grasping it!

A light shone from Mu Lin's eyes as he looked at Li Hao. "Is ole brother Li not satisfied?"

"What about the aura?" Li Hao cut straight to the chase, uninterested in talking about things in a roundabout way. "One tenth of your people are half step Dominators. Are they all geniuses to so easily grasp the aura? My teacher said that comprehending the aura is the hardest step in martial dao. Martial masters would not have declined if it could've been done easily. If we were all Dominators when the supernatural domain rose, there would've been no need to fear supernaturals."

Mu Lin nodded. As he expected, this fellow identified the heart of things with a single look. "We do indeed have treasures that help martial masters sense the aura, but... they're rare opportunities."

Li Hao laughed and pointed at the martial masters. "There's a hundred here who know the aura and possibly several hundred more who made the attempt. How rare are these opportunities?"

Not at all!

Mu Lin had no appropriate response and had to pretend he didn't hear anything. "What do you think the aura is?"

It was Li Hao's turn to hesitate. "There are many kinds of aura," he said after a long moment.

No shit! However, Mu Lin quickly realized that the young man wasn't spouting bullshit.

“Based on my experience, there are three kinds of aura! The first is an eruption of one’s own emotions, mood, and feelings. This kind of aura is closest to the self and comes from the inner heart. I call that the self’s aura!

“The second type of aura results from cultivating martial dao to its extreme. For instance, training a secret art to its utmost means I can follow the steps of seniors that came before me and try to fathom their path. If I’d continued to train the Five Styles, I might have eventually grasped the aura of the Five Styles. This is the aura that a secret art inherently possesses. I call that martial aura!

“The third kind is very rare... You might witness an incredible sword slash, blade stroke, or spear jab when powerhouses fight. You might sense some aura or intent left behind by predecessors and seek to imitate or copy it. That process gives rise to your own aura, the kind I call heaven aura!

“It’s hard to say which of the three is the strongest, but I think there’s least potential in the second. The first has great potential, but not necessarily great strength. The third might have greater strength, but it’s hard to discuss its potential...”

Mu Lin stopped still in his tracks and stared at the young man.

“I thought you were just strong,” he finally sighed after a long while. “But your description of the aura makes me feel that the Five Styles discipline is truly extraordinary! The division of the auras into three types... Even I might not be able to delineate them so clearly.”

Very few people would go to the effort of drawing such conclusions. Martial masters comprehended one type of aura, so what was the point of such detailed categorization?

Yet, Li Hao had outlined three types because he’d experienced all of them. The fire tiger aura was a self aura—it was an eruption of his own emotions. The earth sword aura had come from his own reflections and imitation after witnessing Liu Long’s Nine Forged Force and his teacher’s actions. It was a heaven aura, but it wasn’t as strong as the other one he grasped—the sword stroke he’d seen. He’d intuited the sword aura from that move. The overview of the sword outline was stronger!

These were the auras that Li Hao had grasped at the moment. What he wanted to comprehend next—the water aura—was a martial aura. He wanted to reach the best he could in the Nine Forged Force and then try to fathom its aura through a secret art. Such was the martial aura.

The aura of invincibility that ancient tomes spoke of counted as a self aura. It was an explosion of one's emotions and accumulation of momentum. One was undefeated after countless battles and an internal blossoming of confidence made one impossible to defeat.

Yuan Shuo hadn't taught Li Hao these concepts; the young man summarized them by himself. Perhaps he hadn't seen too much of the world due to his young age, but others may not have encountered what he'd already seen.

He Yong said that every three and blade of grass in Silver Moon might contain the auras of premier powerhouses. In that case, Li Hao guessed that the Silver Moon Guards might have some treasures that contained the auras of ancient powerhouses!

The young man had seen such things before as well. The two characters of Battle Heaven were a kind of treasure, but they were too sophisticated for Li Hao to glean anything. The one who'd written them all those years ago was too strong.

He'd also felt some things from his ancestor's sword stroke. While it wasn't a tangible treasure, other people might be able to grasp some sword aura from it if they saw it. They wouldn't necessarily sense the same as Li Hao either.

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Mu Lin's emotions were a bit complicated at the moment. I'm not worried about you being strong, but of you having a clear understanding of martial dao while being strong. It won't be easy to keep you down then.

“I wasn’t at liberty to explain before.” The man decided to come clean. “But based on your depiction... You’re right, the Guards do have some treasures that contain heaven auras. It’s some traces resulting from the fights of ancient powerhouses—some sword marks, blade traces, and others. They endure through the passage of time and help us more easily understand the aura.

“There are also some broken weapons found in the ruins that contain bits of will. Those help us comprehend the aura as well.”

“What about origin weapons?” Li Hao thought rapidly. If broken weapons could do the deed, why didn’t anyone try utilizing origin weapons to grasp the aura? Even He Yong had only told him to try and sense Hou Xiaochen’s aura. Well, he’d also said that some origin weapons might have aura lingering in them after they were unsealed.

This time, Mu Lin laughed. It’s good that there’s certain things you don’t know.

“Origin weapons are also left behind by ancient powerhouses, but they tend to be whole and complete. It’s been so long that most of them have lost the traces of their former owners.

“When a blade breaks, we can still observe the point of breakage countless years later to determine how it was broken. The same traits do not exist in origin weapons. How are we to glean anything from a complete blade that looks brand new?”

What he said made sense and also didn’t make sense to the young man.

“Doesn’t that make origin weapons less than broken weapons?” Li Hao frowned.

“No!” Mu Lin refuted. “Origin weapons are divided into two as well. The first is the situation I just mentioned—reawakening after falling inert. The second is a sealed origin weapon! They’re not inert, but sealed away. Once this kind is unsealed, it might immediately erupt with the will and aura of its past owner. It’s best to give this kind a wide berth and not try to comprehend anything from it. You’ll probably die!

“It’s what some powerhouses seek out though, and even try to unseal, because they wish to sense that momentary explosion of ancient powerhouse strength. This kind is exceedingly rare as there aren’t many sealed weapons in the world.”

Li Hao thought of Stellaris, the weapons of the eight families, and the sword that he’d given the Night Watchers in return for a Nova level blood pearl—the one he’d passed off as the sword of the Lis.

“Do the Guards have a lot of these treasures?” Multiple thoughts flew through Li Hao’s mind.

“Not that many, and there’s another problem associated with them—storage is very difficult!” Mu Lin said with a sigh. “Some treasures perform adequately when you use them the first time, but the will inside mostly dissipates after the second use. They can be used a third or fourth time, but are ineffective beyond that! There are very few treasures who are continuously effective. We only have two or three of those, the boss looks after them himself. I don’t have the right to handle them.”

Li Hao nodded, finally understanding why there were so many people who knew the aura here.

“And these treasures are all from the ruins?”

“Yes.” Mu Lin nodded. “Almost all of them are, but some were also seized from pirates. There are many pirates in the North Sea and these guys sometimes dredge up treasures from the sea. Though these items aren’t from ruins, they also contain special effects.”

“Are the pirates strong?”

“There’s strong and weak ones. They’re not one faction and there’s a lot of them. The North Sea cuts through the central north and flows past more than a dozen provinces. Groups on a smaller scale only have a couple dozen people, ones on a larger scale are much bigger. There’s a very strong one comprised of tens of thousands, and more than half are supernaturals!”

Li Hao jerked with surprise. So many? How was that possible??

“Where do they get so many supernaturals from?”

“The war in the central region has made it impossible for many supernaturals to continue their livelihoods, or they may have enemies, or their families are broken, or they’re wanted for their crimes... The three great organizations were previously strict on who they accepted. They didn’t want the weak or those with poor potential. The mid-sized organizations have limited ability and can’t support so many supernaturals. That forced these people to become bandits, either in the mountains or the sea!”

Li Hao frowned. Pirates...

“So what do they do to survive?”

“Banditry! There are many merchant companies that cross the sea. These pirates have also once targeted a city, come ashore, swiftly ambushed it, or even razed the city to the ground. They come and go like the wind and it’s very difficult to capture them once they return to sea. Thus, pirates are a huge headache for the northern and central provinces along the coast.

“The Silver Moon Guards are tasked with cleaning up the pirates near the Moon Sea. There aren’t that many of them as we aren’t a prosperous province and the bigger pirate factions don’t think much of us.

“Additionally, there’s a lot of mysterious power in the deep blue and treasures, so there are plenty of powerhouses on the open waters.”

Li Hao nodded. He’d never heard of nautical threats before. The Guards must be quite strong as they’d eliminated all of the pirates that came ashore. That made sense as if the Guards couldn’t even handle pirates, then Hou Xiaochen’s efforts all these years were wasted. It wasn’t the entire North Sea, just the bay that was the Moon Sea.

Chapter 354: Compensation Package (III)

After some conversation, Mu Lin and Li Hao made their way past the plaza and entered the living quarters to the rear. There were some mundanes here—not martial masters or supernaturals, just regular people in charge of support, cleaning, and other tasks. There were people who cooked and washed clothes. Martial masters were a busy bunch and didn't have time for these chores. If they were tasked with living quarter upkeep, the place would soon stink like a pig sty.

Li Hao was never in a poor state since he always changed into a new uniform whenever his clothes were dirty. The Night Watchers had their own changing rooms and plenty of fresh uniforms to choose from. The young man was in the habit of randomly choosing one off the rack.

There was also personnel at the Inspectorate's family accommodations unit in charge of handling these affairs. The Silver Moon Guards had a fair number of minor buildings requiring upkeep. They weren't tall, most of them topping out at three floors.

"There are one hundred of these small buildings," Mu Lin introduced. "With six rooms on each floor, each building holds a capacity of eighteen. We can house eighteen hundred martial masters at most in a building. The rooms are spacious at nearly one hundred square meters—we can also bunk six to eight people if there's a need for it. That means more than ten thousand can squeeze into the living quarters if we have to!

"But martial masters all require some privacy, not to mention that our accommodations aren't full. The officers live further back, each person has one building to themselves."

Every one of the buildings occupied a large lot as they all possessed large yards, resulting in each building claiming nearly one thousand square meters of space. One hundred buildings meant one hundred thousand square meters of space. When empty space factored in, that meant the entire living quarters area was at least two hundred thousand square meters. It amounted to only three acres of land, which wasn't much at all.

"There's a cafeteria and shops over there, and another big building up front that's a hotel for family. Families can visit, but only veteran soldiers with over three years of experience. The background check for visiting family is very strict. We normally don't recommend families to visit. You can go back home yourself as you get a month off every year."

Li Hao nodded and looked around as he followed Mu Lin. When others saw the deputy coming their way, they avoided him like the plague. Those who couldn't evade in time snapped off crisp salutes. Mundanes were no different; this second-in-command was more like the boss around here as Golden Spear was often absent.

Although the centurions didn't like him and called him by his given name, they obediently followed his orders in critical moments.

.....

The two reached another patch of small buildings after walking for a bit. Li Hao counted roughly thirty buildings in a quick sweep. They were placed further apart from each other and appeared nicer than the buildings up front. This was a quieter area.

"We live here!" Mu Lin pointed inwards. "There's fourteen people in residence at the moment and sixteen empty buildings. You can pick whichever one you want."

"Fourteen people?"

Nine centurions plus Mu Lin and Golden Spear only made for eleven!

"Boss Golden Spear has a disciple who's also a Dominator." Mu Lin smiled at Li Hao's confusion. "So he has a building to himself. The captain of the boss' bodyguards is another Dominator, so he has one too."

Li Hao raised a brow. So there were two more Dominators present! That was true, how could Golden Spear's bodyguards not be strong?

"What about the fourteenth one?"

"That one belongs to Director Hou, but he doesn't come often."

Li Hao understood. He looked around again and wasn't in a hurry to choose his residence. He could take his time. "What should I do now?"

"Build your team!" Mu Lin answered swiftly. "Additionally, give your team an impressive name! The Chen Jin that you beat in two punches, for example, calls his team the Mountain Openers!"

"....." How is one hundred people opening any mountains?? And he's the heir of Mountain Ax, is this supposed to be an outstanding name? How about I make a Five Styles Army? The heck?

"I have to prepare all of this myself?" Li Hao frowned. "Apart from the ones here, the martial masters that I know don't even amount to one hundred!"

"It's not all up to you, of course. The boss said before he left that if Liu Long—we thought Liu Long was coming to us then—came, he could take ten people from his bodyguards to form his team.

"It's best not to transfer anyone from the other teams because they're used to their training regime and working with each other. However, you can if you really want to. You can choose three from each team at most, and centurions are not counted among this number. You can select anyone you want, they cannot refuse!

"If you utilize all those slots, that gives you thirty-seven personnel. The rest is up to you!"

More than one-third could come from preexisting teams and the rest was up to him. That significantly lowered the level of difficulty and made it easier to assimilate into his new surroundings.

Li Hao nodded, that was more like it.

“What about the Silver Moon Guards compensation package? I need to talk about pay and benefits if I’m to recruit people, right?”

“The compensation is great.” Mu Lin grinned. “It goes without saying that money is on the table. Dominators receive one mysterious power stone a month! They can choose one treasure every three months and study it for a day—perceiving the aura, in other words. Although Dominators have grasped the aura, perceiving the same kind of aura again is still extremely helpful!”

Mysterious power stones!

Holy fuck! Damn these guys are swimming in money, one of these things is worth hundreds, if not a thousand cubes! A direct faction under Hou Xiaochen is a direct faction alright!

Li Hao and the others earned one cube of mysterious power a month in Silver City. It was just a thousandth of Guard pay—it couldn’t compare at all. The young man was green-eyed with envy. The Night Watchers were so poorly off!

Deputy Director Hao earned a couple dozen cubes a month, but here, Dominators were paid one entire stone! Of course, that was just Hao Lianchuan’s salary. If he needed to, he could also utilize mysterious power stones in emergencies. Just that stone alone was enough to tempt a Dominator, to say nothing of that chance every three months to perceive the aura.

“What about Sunderers?”

“Mid Sunderers receive ten cubes of unattributed mysterious power a month. Late Sunderers receive the same, but they can perceive the aura once every six months. Initial Sunderers have no need for this treatment. Half step Dominators can perceive the aura once every four months. Their compensation is second only to Dominators, but they don’t receive mysterious power stones.”

Li Hao nodded. This meant that the greatest allure of the Guards was the chance to comprehend and improve the aura! Therefore, the treasures that contained lingering aura and will were the Guards’ most precious objects. As for mysterious power stones, there weren’t that many Dominators in the

Guards. It was roughly a dozen stones a month at most and a hundred a year. These guys had explored so many ruins that they could afford to spare this sum of stones.

“How are the gains from the expeditions divvied up?” This was another point that the young man highly cared about.

“I knew you’d ask about that,” Mu Lin chuckled. “It depends on the situation! For instance, discovering the ruins and exploring them by yourself is one type. Exploring ruins that we give you is another. Seizing ruins first discovered by the enemy is a third.

“The rules as set by Director Hou are that for ruins supplied by upstairs, it’s a fifty-fifty split. Ones that you discover and explore yourself are seventy to you and thirty percent to upstairs. If you seize a ruin from the enemy, it’s all yours!”

“We still need to give thirty percent to upstairs for ones we discover ourselves?” Li Hao raised a brow. He had no objection to a fifty-fifty split for ruins supplied by above. Ruins taken from the enemy meant risking one’s life for, so it was normal that the martial master took all of the gains as well. But still having to offer thirty percent from ruins that he’d discovered and explored himself...

“Ole brother, to put it frankly, there’s a lot of people here that wield their current strength only because Director Hou threw his support behind them,” Mu Lin explained. “Would you be able to claim so many goods if you didn’t have that strength? Not to mention, upstairs needs money too. They pay us a salary in return for Director Hou compensating them. Can he continuously compensate us out of his own pocket? Ancestors plant trees so that their descendants can enjoy the cool shade. The Silver Moon Guards are an army unit, after all. Striking out too much on our own as individuals makes it hard to operate sometimes!”

Li Hao considered the notion, then nodded without further word. Perhaps! The key thing was that he’d never experienced any of this before. He’d taken everything he found when he explored the ruins with Hao Lianchuan and the others, so he wasn’t familiar with this mentality. When he was in the Demon Hunters, it was Liu Long dividing all of the goods.

“These are the official guidelines from upstairs, but you can decide what you do with your share. Do you want to split it with those beneath you? If they helped you, you should. You don’t have to,

but they won't work for you if time goes on. They can't be blamed for running off to another team then, that's all because of your incompetence!"

"I see!" Li Hao nodded. "So this means that the Guards can also headhunt from the other teams?"

"Of course!" Mu Lin chuckled merrily. "But that normally doesn't happen because the centurions keep themselves in check. The Guards are more like a private army. Your troops are your brothers. This is what the royal family used to do and there are many drawbacks to this system, but martial masters and supernaturals are not suited for too many restrictions. Director Hou is willing to give everyone the greatest degree of freedom possible!

"But remember, there is only one rule that must be followed in the Guards. When the director gives his order, it must be executed no matter how dangerous it is! If you defy orders, you will be executed!"

Li Hao arched a brow. That was more like it! It was too lax otherwise, with benefits to be had as soon as one joined. That was too comfortable for martial masters. Hou Xiaochen was plainly a man who only cared about results and not much about the process. So long as everyone was willing to listen, he didn't care how they got there.

Having familiarized himself with the compensation package, received a full tour, and understood the particulars, Li Hao asked a final question. "How often do we go out on a mission, typically speaking?"

"Not that often, about once a month! Once every three months is also normal if it's slow. Ruins aren't everywhere, after all, and pirates don't attack everyday."

"I understand!" Li Hao breathed out. "The benefits are good, the mission schedule is appropriate, the split is acceptable... I accept this role!"

"These are irresistible terms under ordinary circumstances!" Mu Lin roared with laughter. He lowered his voice with secrecy, "There's another benefit that seems ordinary, but it's actually quite

good. There's a library here, built by Director Hou, that contains a lot of books on secret arts and methods. There's even breathing methods!

"It's left over from when the Skystar Guards cleared out the remnants of scoundrel martial types. Your teacher dug up a lot of graves back in the day, but he also destroyed most of what he found. The director managed to save some, as well as some of the later findings from working with your teacher. We've also collected a bit ourselves too."

Li Hao's eyes widened, now this was real treasure! It seemed worthless, but knowledge was priceless!

Chapter 355: Compensation Package (IV)

"That's enough for now. Ole brother Li, you should go choose your house and move in. There's nothing worth staying for in the southern quadrant. It's quiet here and more suited for cultivation!"

"You can recruit any of your friends. Don't you know Liu Long? Dominators will absolutely take a step forward in progress if they come. I wanted him to be the team captain of my bodyguards and sent word through my younger brother. What a pity he didn't accept my offer."

So this was what Mu Sen had been so mysterious about last time—Liu Long had been put forward to be this one's bodyguard captain. Li Hao was at a loss for words!

"Would Captain Liu be a centurion if he came?" asked Li Hao.

"He can if you aren't! He can't if you are." Mu Lin shook his head. "We don't have the quota for so many. One hundred more is fine enough, but two hundred is too much to feed. The Silver Moon Guards can't handle it. We've maintained a steady one thousand over the years and that's the crux of the problem—our consumption is too great!"

"If you find it inappropriate, Liu Long can be a centurion and you can be his second-in-command. No one's stopping you!"

Li Hao twisted his lip. I'm not doing that! I get more of a cut if I'm a boss. When it comes to the chief... I'll ask for him later.

"Oh, don't forget to collect a special communicator," Mu Lin said. "It covers a thousand kilometers and can contact anything within that range. There's also a location device in it so we can maintain a grasp of your whereabouts. We won't look for you in normal times, but if something happens and we can't find you, or if you run into danger, we'll be able to quickly lock onto you. I'm letting you know beforehand so you don't think we're keeping you under surveillance."

Li Hao nodded. It was a good feeling. As for his location being known to the Guards... He was a living, breathing person with countless pairs of eyes on him. What did it matter if the Guards also knew where he was?

Was he supposed to start recruiting now and accomplish a big deed or two after he had his people? As for what that deed would be, it was to kill Red Moon's people and seize scarlet shadows, of course! That was just a convenient byproduct of Li Hao's own plans. If he really could bring some people with him to the Guards and help them secure benefits to enhance their strength, he might be able to explore some more ruins next. That was his true goal as he'd gained a great deal from Battle Heaven on the last expedition.

.....

Li Hao went to the area in the back and chose a building off to the side. The man-made forest stood behind the building, the shoreline accessible beyond it. Being close to the shore, it invited Li Hao to look at the sea.

He wasn't much interested in the house since it wasn't under his name. It was just a place to live, no matter where it was. He had a mansion in Silver City—a pity that wasn't under his name either. It might become someone else's if he didn't return for a long period of time.

The only thing that really belonged to him was his childhood home, but that was a condemned building now. It'd been cordoned off and awaited demolition. Li Hao would reject any proposal that came through. That was his only real estate and he'd have nothing left if it was dismantled.

.....

As Li Hao busied himself, several Novas gathered outside the city.

“That wuss Hu Qingfeng says he doesn’t want to do it anymore.” Blue Moon frowned at a piece of paper he was shaking. “He says Hou Xiaochen is willing to follow orders, and that idiot believes it!”

It’d been Hu Qingfeng who contacted them first, saying that Night Watcher superiors supported the decision to eliminate Hou Xiaochen. Now the fellow was getting cold feet?? This was because Hou Xiaochen had agreed to be redeployed and Hu Qingfeng was claiming it as his credit. He’d made the report to central headquarters that he’d given Hou Xiaochen so much pressure that the man had to agree.

Director General Zhao and the others wouldn’t fight him for this merit, in any case. Since he had his deed of accomplishment and two of his men were dead, Hu Qingfeng was afraid to further provoke the intimidating Hou Xiaochen. Therefore, he sounded the retreat and wasn’t willing to work with the three great organizations anymore.

“It’s normal that Hu Qingfeng isn’t willing.” Half Mountain’s voice traveled coolly from his hood. “He’s afraid. Yu Xiao and Huang Jie’s deaths were probably a warning. This guy is known for being timid in the central region. He puts himself forward if there’s something good to be had and runs if there isn’t...”

Blue Moon said nothing and reassessed their situation in light of this development. “Is there a need to continue testing Hou Xiaochen if we don’t have Hu Qingfeng on our side? Do you folks have any other thoughts?”

“Why don’t we wait?” suggested the Parity King. “We can wait to test him in the ruins. Hou Xiaochen seems to be preparing to enter the ancient city. We can avoid some unnecessary trouble if we wait until then.”

The ruins!

“My only concern is that the guy won’t be open to us entering,” Blue Moon raised.

“It won’t be up to him!” the Parity King said coldly. “We must enter Battle Heaven! The three great organizations have the same request this time. If Hou Xiaochen thinks he can stop us... that’s his death wish!”

An incredible number of people wished to share the spoils of an ancient ruin that was yet to be fully explored, one with a premier puppet in residence in its city. Now that the central region knew about the particulars, it was no longer Hou Xiaochen calling the shots.

“Not to mention, it’s not just us!” snorted the Parity King. “He Yong’s come from the royal family and stayed ever since. Is he here just for fun? It’ll be us monopolizing the ruins next time.

“Only Hu Qingfeng has come from the nine ministries, but does that mean the other eight really haven’t made any movement?

“Also, do none of the nearby provinces have any ideas? There are nineteen provinces in the north. Apart from the three that are disorderly, the rest have their fair share of powerhouses. Is no one tempted after hearing the news?

“Hou Xiaochen will have no way of stopping everyone.”

Blue Moon nodded. The Night Watcher director wouldn’t be able to stop anyone. Refusing access might ultimately lead to grave trouble for Silver Moon. “So all we need to do now is wait. The Night Watchers, army, and Inspectorate have recently teamed up to wipe out our three factions...”

Half Mountain opened his mouth just as Blue Moon brought up something new. “I have business elsewhere, I take my leave!”

The Parity King instantly vanished as well. They weren't interested in discussing this! The Night Watchers were targeting Red Moon and hunting its members all over the place, investigating their strongholds. They weren't bringing such pressure to bear against Celestial or Yama.

The three great organizations weren't really one large family. They didn't care whether Red Moon's people lived or died.

Blue Moon sneered coldly in the direction the two had left in. Those two wanted nothing more than for Red Moon to lose more people!

It wasn't until the two were gone that Violet Moon spoke from her position off to the side, "So are we giving up moving against Hou Xiaochen?"

Blue Moon inclined his head. Hu Qingfeng's lack of participation only meant that they were down a Nova; action was still possible if they wished for it. But more importantly, Hu Qingfeng's absence represented certain changes. The guy might flip on them and sell them out, then ally with Silver Moon against the three great organizations.

It was certainly a course of action feasible by that guy. He would betray even Hou Xiaochen, not to mention the three great organizations. He had absolutely no principles and turned in whichever way the wind was blowing. His fair-weather behavior meant a difference of two Novas on either side.

"Since Hou Xiaochen has said he's going to explore the ruins... that's our chance!" Blue Moon heaved a soft sigh, slightly irritated. "We can avoid certain unexpected factors in the ruins, such as reinforcements! Silver Moon is more than meets the eye and too much can go wrong if we try to kill Hou Xiaochen inside the province."

"But... the same goes for us!" Violet Moon raised. "Entering the ruins means we lose the chance to be reinforced by headquarters. It's not just Hou Xiaochen..."

Blue Moon remained silent. It was dangerous to be on the same expedition as Hou Xiaochen, but what choice did they have?

“Was Hou Xiaochen really one of the three Skystar Guards commanders before?” asked Violet Moon.

“We’re not sure. He might be and he might not be...”

Bullshit! Violet Moon regarded his reply wordlessly, then asked slowly, “Is that Manager Yu the Yu Luochoa of legend?”

“She might be!” Blue Moon laughed after some thought.

“You don’t know?” Violet Moon was highly surprised. How do you not know the first generation Violet Moon?

“What are you looking at me for?” Blue Moon broke out in a grin. “When the Seven Moons convened, the first generation Blue Moon was my master, not me. All of them are very mysterious, including your mother. How am I supposed to know the first generation Violet Moon if you don’t?”

Violet Moon nodded. The Seven Moons were a group shrouded in mystery, including the first generation Violet Moon. Was she Yu Luochoa? It was just rumors, Ying Hongyue never spoke of the matter. Her mother rarely did as well, opting to be silent whenever the topic was raised.

“Be careful lately.” Blue Moon rose, unwilling to say anything else. “We are in significant danger now that Silver Moon has decided to mobilize en masse against us. Don’t be caught by them. I’ll be in some trouble if you die.”

Violet Moon frowned without a word.

“And don’t get in contact with that Manager Yu.” Blue Moon’s voice floated back upon the air as he drifted out of the room. “Even if she is Yu Luochoa, the first generation Violet Moon and your mother’s best friend, she is the grand secretary for the Night Watchers now! Women do not care about friendships when they feel the rush of love. All of that becomes a joke to them and she really will kill people. You might learn then how she got the name Luochoa!” [1]

“I’m not that idiotic! Violet Moon snorted, how was that possible! She wasn’t going to look for Manager Yu alright, she didn’t want to die! Not to mention, she’d been scared out of her wits by Hou Xiaochen’s spear jab. Although he hadn’t killed her, she didn’t dare show herself around the Night Watchers all the same.

“I hope so!” Blue Moon’s laughter lingered upon the air. He was gone.

Chapter 356: Birdshot, Earthturner Sword (I)

Within Li Hao’s new lodgings.

Having an entire building to himself was such a fine arrangement. The closest neighboring structure was several hundred meters away. No one had chosen the buildings around him. The young man took out a sewing needle—the Flaming Phoenix Spear.

It quickly reverted back to its spear form, but remained dull and inert. Li Hao frowned at the lifeless origin weapon. It’d really sealed itself off! The Flaming Phoenix Spear continued to be unmoving when he took out a mysterious power stone. Manager Yu had said that Hou Xiaochen was the only one who could activate it again after it sealed itself away.

Now this was troublesome. Was he supposed to tell the man that I want to comprehend and fight your will and aura, so can you activate it for me?

Hou Xiaochen would probably kill him on the spot!

“Why did you seal yourself away?” Li Hao murmured to himself. He fished out a sword from his boots, one that wasn’t too long. When he knocked it on the spear, the latter seemed to tremble.

“It’s not like I’m going to hack you into two,” sighed the young man. “You’re Director Hou’s weapon, would I dare? I just want to activate you to take a look at the phoenix. What’d you go and do this for?”

Clank clank clank!

The little sword tapped on the spear with sounds of metallic impact. The Flaming Phoenix Spear was still dull and inert.

Li Hao pulled a long face and mumbled, “I hear that the Flaming Phoenix Spear is an exceedingly high level origin weapon. My Stellaris slashed through the Shadow Snake Sword and ate its soul. I wonder if it can break the Flaming Phoenix Spear? Probably not, right? This is supposed to be a sky level origin weapon and extremely terrifying.”

The Flaming Phoenix Spear seemed to shudder.

“Forget it,” Li Hao sighed once more. “If I can’t activate it, I’ll hack at it a few times for fun and then return it. No one will believe I did it if it’s broken. I don’t have the strength to break the Flaming Phoenix Spear, so it must’ve been a fake!”

“.....” A streak of fiery-red appeared on the spear when Li Hao raised the little sword!

The young man’s eyes brightened and he laughed, “Impressive!”

This really was impressive! The Flaming Phoenix Spear understood human speech—or rather, it could decipher the intent behind the words.

The soul of an origin weapon! When Li Hao saw the Shadow Snake Sword, there’d been a shadow of a snake within the sword. The shadow seemed to have understood Li Hao’s actions when he raised his sword to cut it down. In that moment, at least, the young man had seen fear.

Since the Flaming Phoenix Spear had sealed itself away when he dripped blood onto it, Li Hao guessed that the weapon might be aware! It could listen and perceive.

His little experiment demonstrated that it did indeed understand, but the results still shocked the young man. A weapon could understand humans? What was he supposed to make of that? If the souls of weapons were the souls that he was familiar with... then were weapons alive?

Incredible!

And why were there shadows of monster spirits in all of them? The fiery phoenix, the shadow snake, and a thunder monster in Violet Moon's Armor of the Thunder God... What was all that?

A kind of aura? Or will?

Li Hao didn't understand. Or had monster spirits been used to create these weapons? He suddenly thought of the possibly dead Panther. If he'd refined the little black dog into a weapon, would that impart a dog shadow to the weapon?

My poor Panth. You ate so many good things from me and died, just like that! Li Hao sighed. But that dog was smart, so it was possible that it was still alive. Perhaps it'd just run away. After all, Yuan Shuo had wanted to eat it all the time when it was with Li Hao. Maybe the dog had been scared off.

How had he suddenly thought of Panther when he was working with the Flaming Phoenix Spear?

The young man looked at the fiery origin weapon. He picked it up and suddenly stabbed forward with an explosive sound. Just the spear itself was made of such durable materials that one jab broke the void.

Fire energy dissipated through the air and brought with it a searing sensation. This was a powerful weapon stronger than the little sword! Granted, the little sword was in a sealed state. It should still be stronger—why else would the Flaming Phoenix Spear be afraid of it?

The young man stood silently with a spear in hand. He seemed to turn into Hou Xiaochen as he emulated the man, trying to sense certain things. However, he shook his head after a while and put down the spear. There was nothing to be gleaned if it wasn't activated. The only thing he could play with was a vague sense of killing intent.

Southern Fist said that activating the weapon may let me sense Hou Xiaochen's will and aura... At the very least, some of it should linger from when he killed Red Hair a while ago...

What kind of aura would the director's aura be? Was he still a martial master? If he wasn't and was just a supernatural above Nova, would he still be able to deploy his aura?

A spear aura? Mysterious power stones were highly valuable. It would be quite a loss if he obtained nothing after feeding one to the Flaming Phoenix Spear.

Li Hao looked at the floor after gently stomping his foot. He nodded with satisfaction at what he found. The houses here were more than they seemed. Hou Xiaochen must have used public resources for his own purposes and built this base with supernatural abilities. The young man had discovered yesterday that the floor tiles here were much more durable than ones he'd encountered anywhere else.

He'd smashed a Dominator into the ground during his fights yesterday. If it'd been ordinary tiles, he would've driven the man more than ten meters deep. Here, he'd only managed one meter. The same went for this house, it looked to have been built by a wood supernatural.

It was very durable, nice.

"Can you demonstrate Hou Xiaochen's will and aura?" Li Hao looked at the spear in his hand again. "How about letting me see a thing or two?"

The Flaming Phoenix Spear remained quiet.

Sighing, the young man raised Stellaris. “Then let’s try hacking at you. Maybe I can bring it out of you!”

The weapon still remained quiet.

Li Hao raised a brow, summoned his sword aura, and swung his sword...

The spear vanished before his blow could connect and reappeared several meters out, floating in the air.

“Is it a good thing for a weapon to have a soul?” a merry Li Hao chortled with appreciation. A weapon with a soul could protect its master, but it could also turn on its master! This wasn’t necessarily a good trait!

“So it looks like you can’t run off. Is this all you can manage? Will you fight me if I feed you a mysterious power stone? I’ll feed you more if it’s a good fight, or I’ll smash you with Stellaris if it’s not!

“Ordinary sword auras may not be able to break you, but I know a special one. The Sever Self Stroke, or should it be called the Eternal Sword?”

His sword aura erupted! Li Hao called upon the stroke of his memories, the one that would pierce through the firmament!

The Flaming Phoenix Spear had just been hovering in the air—it trembled violently and vanished without a trace. Li Hao’s eyes widened with dismay. Had it run off? Fuck! I’m doomed if it’s run away, Hou Xiaochen’s gonna kill me!

The young man rushed out of the room and jerked with surprise to see the spear clatter to the ground. It couldn't seem to stray too far from Li Hao, possibly restrained by the drop of blood from earlier. That limited its range of movement.

How interesting!

The Flaming Phoenix Spear was still trembling when Li Hao picked it up. His last move had truly frightened the phoenix. The combination of the Eternal Sword and Stellaris terrified it.

“Keep running!” Li Hao laughed. “It looks like you’ve got quite a bit of knowledge for an antique. You know my ancestor’s move—do you think I can smash you to pieces?”

The spear trembled once, as if replying to Li Hao. It did think so!

“Flaming Phoenix Spear, were you really a phoenix before?” The young man looked intently at it. “Did phoenixes really exist? Did all of those monsters exist in the ancient civilization, the dragons, phoenixes, and others?”

The spear trembled a single time once more, as if responding that yes, they had existed.

“Then, were you strong before?” Li Hao stroked his chin.

A single tremble.

Li Hao surmised that one tremble meant yes. So the weapon thought itself as very strong?

“Are you stronger than my Stellaris?”

“.....” The Flaming Phoenix Spear shook twice.

Li Hao was overjoyed! Hot damn, this thing really can reply to people and it thinks that Stellaris is stronger! Does this mean... that it can reactivate if I don't feed it? I don't have to waste a mysterious power stone?

This was all that was on the young man's mind at the moment. He didn't think he needed to doubt that Stellaris was stronger than the origin weapon, his ancestor must have been incredibly strong! Just the sword aura alone was terrifying. The Flaming Phoenix Spear didn't give him the same feeling.

“Who is stronger—me or Director Hou?” Li Hao didn't receive a response to this answer. It likely didn't know how to answer.

“Am I stronger than Director Hou?”

The spear shook twice—negative. There was no hesitation, an obvious sign that it thought Li Hao was thinking too much.

“Is Director Hou a martial master?”

The Flaming Phoenix Spear didn't move. Li Hao frowned, what did that mean?

“Does the director walk the path of energy?”

One shake, two shake...

Negative!

The path of energy was the path of the supernatural, Li Hao had learned of this from the Silver Armor. This might've been what the supernatural domain was called in the ancient civilization. The Flaming Phoenix Spear might not understand the term of 'supernatural'.

This wasn't a surety, either.

Li Hao's frown deepened. Not a supernatural? Then the director really was a martial master. A supernatural turned martial master! As for the possibility of purely martial dao... Li Hao dismissed the idea after some consideration. If the director had taken that path, he shouldn't be so blinding that it hurt to look at.

Martial masters were self-contained! They would never be blinding to the eye. Director Hou might not have completed his conversion, so he gave off a supernatural feeling. That was why he and the others in the conference room were so uncomfortable to be near. Martial masters would not exude this kind of sensation.

Chapter 357: Birdshot, Earthturner Sword (II)

Caught up in the questioning, Li Hao asked excitedly, "Do you command an aura? Don't tell me you don't understand what that is! I've seen ancient tomes that talk about auras. Shake once if you have one."

One shake.

The Flaming Phoenix Spear possessed an aura!

"A fire aura?" Li Hao lit up. "Forget it, it's all the same. Elements stem from one's personal comprehension, the aura is not so..."

He thought back to what Hong Yitang shared with him, suddenly finding the man to have an exceedingly unique perspective of the aura. Li Hao ceased his questions—there was no point in

making the spear shake once or twice. Experiencing the origin weapon's aura was the more important task at hand!

“Let's fight, Flaming Phoenix Spear!” Li Hao tossed the spear into the air with a flourish. It flew upward... and clattered to the ground.

Is it playing dead?

A wordless Li Hao walked over and picked up the weapon with a frown. “We fight, or I smash you into two!”

The spear shook. It shook many times. Li Hao regarded it with a raised eyebrow. What's it mean? These weapon souls don't seem that smart at times.

“You're not activated? You want mysterious power stones? Can't you activate yourself?” The young man wanted to save resources where he could.

The spear continued trembling violently.

Fine, fine, I get it. You want a damned stone and won't do anything without it. That might not be the truth either. It could also be that these origin weapons had been inert for so long that they didn't have enough energy to support themselves if they lacked a master. Plainly, Hou Xiaochen had infused the Flaming Phoenix Spear with some internal force or mysterious power when he gave it to Hao Lianchuan. He hadn't done the same when he lent it to Li Hao—this was the truth behind the so-called activation!

Li Hao took out a fire stone from his storage ring. He'd reaped thirteen stones when he killed Yu Xiao and the others, adding it to the ones that he already had. He hadn't had use for them lately, so they were all present and accounted for. There weren't that many fire attributed ones, however. He counted only three among his storage.

One piece will last for a long time, right? Li Hao looked at the Flaming Phoenix Spear again and was unable to withstand temptation. Let's give it a try!

As precious as mysterious power stones were, there would be chances to obtain more later. Meanwhile, he only had three days with the origin weapon.

Li Hao set his jaw and crushed the mysterious power stone. Fire energy surged out—Stellaris couldn't be bothered with it. Under ordinary circumstances, the young man had to operate the Breathing Method of the Five Styles to force the little sword to absorb some. It was picky.

The Flaming Phoenix Spear was not; it furiously took in energy the moment the stone shattered. It was apparent from this point alone that the little sword was a higher class than the spear. Stellaris must have feasted only on the good stuff before; the Flaming Phoenix Spear was supplied with lower level energy.

A fiery phoenix shimmered in and out of sight when the origin weapon absorbed a vast quantity of fire energy! Scorching heat filled the living room.

Li Hao brightened. Was the origin weapon active? What was this that'd come out? Would the soul of the weapon attack, or was it the weapon itself that would take the field? He didn't know as it was his first time manipulating an origin weapon. He'd chosen to make his attempt at the Guards because he was worried about an overly large disturbance at the family accommodations building. He might demolish Hao Lianchuan's home.

A modest-sized phoenix appeared over the Flaming Phoenix Spear. Just as Li Hao thought that it was about to make a move and excitedly settled into his starter position... The phoenix vanished!

It was gone!

Li Hao blinked and waited for a while, but there was no further movement. He walked up to take a look at the weapon—it seemed brighter than before. But... there was nothing coming from it?

"Let's fight!" Li Hao called out, but the Flaming Phoenix Spear trembled, as if saying it lacked strength because it hadn't eaten enough.

The young man blinked, understanding the origin weapon's meaning after a while. His face darkened, "Damn, I've been tricked by a weapon!"

Do you really take me for a fool?? Li Hao gnashed his teeth and suddenly raised his longsword, bringing it down on the phoenix! Eat some more, why don't you?? This is bullshit! There was a lot of fire energy in that stone, so how can't it activate you?? You're playing me! Imma cut you down and see if you still just lay there!

The Flaming Phoenix Spear abruptly shifted just as he was about to connect. It was an extremely sudden movement that launched itself at Li Hao's throat. The spear was incredibly fast, like the action was premeditated and just waiting for Li Hao to draw near. The young man's heart skipped a beat—a strong sense of danger dawned on him.

This thing knows how to ambush people?

The Flaming Phoenix Spear disappeared before the sword stroke and reappeared near Li Hao's throat. The young man rapidly backed away, deploying the deer style to the utmost and floating backward through the air like a feather.

BOOM!

Fire ignited around the spear! It threatened to consume heaven and earth, making Li Hao feel that he was in the middle of a sea of fire. The furniture around him was undamaged, but he sensed that his mind was burning!

What kind of attack was this?

Immensely taken aback, he suddenly understood how Red Hair had died! This spear attacked the will! It didn't destroy the physical body first, but the mind. The body was dead if the mind was dead, so Red Hair didn't have sufficient time to evade. His will was constrained the moment the spear stabbed into his body, or it might've already been burned to death!

“Hup!” Li Hao roared. A caged tiger was breaking free and a ferocious tiger appeared in his heart! Being bolstered by the tiger, the young man deployed his sword. It didn’t seem to be rooted in reality, but was rather a battle of wills!

A phoenix appeared in his mind’s eye—the phoenix immolated the heavens! Sharp claws accompanied by fire grabbed for the tiger. The spear also stabbed toward Li Hao’s throat. The young man waved his sword around, slashing and hacking as the tiger of his mind leapt out to the cage with a snarl!

BOOM!

An explosion rang in the mind as Stellaris slashed forward. It knocked the Flaming Phoenix Spear slightly off center, but the spear didn’t break as it was durable beyond compare.

Li Hao immediately came to his senses—the tiger seemed to match the phoenix. He looked at the origin weapon close at hand and then at the sword in his grip. The Flaming Phoenix Spear... was fine? Then what were you afraid of before?

He quickly understood certain things—the little sword might only be able to cut down souls, so the origin weapon’s soul refused to materialize. Was it the case that origin weapons could be smashed after their soul was obliterated?

The young man didn’t quite understand, but he was worried about truly ruining the Flaming Phoenix Spear. He shoved the little spear into his boot with a grin. “I won’t use this, so there’s no need to be afraid. That was impressive just now! Show me the true Flaming Phoenix Spear, come at me with everything you got!”

He had the benefit of experience this time. A phoenix image hovered in the air as soon as he put the little sword away. As deduced, the Flaming Phoenix Spear was indeed afraid of the little sword. The spear itself wasn’t, the soul was.

The phoenix morphed into a spear that swept through the air! A living spear!

The weapon was incredibly agile; Li Hao was forced into a rapid retreat, he didn't immediately strike back. The Flaming Phoenix Spear shook out numerous copies of itself—the young man couldn't immediately tell which one was real, or if they were all real. The spear was so quick that he only saw afterimages.

Transforming into a ferocious tiger, he punched with a snarl. A vicious tiger pounced on its prey, but the punch connected with empty air!

The spear vanished, reappearing near his head. Li Hao shot backward and tilted his head, yet proved unable to stop the attack. It grazed past his ear in the blink of an eye, scraping his right ear lobe with its aura despite his hasty head turn. Blood splattered the ground as a piece of flesh fell off. Keen spear qi abraded his cheek, covering his face and neck with blood and burn marks!

The young man sucked in a sharp breath and bounded up from the ground, frantically evading the spear's second move. The Flaming Phoenix Spear was more nimble than a human! This ran far outside expectations—it was so fast that Li Hao couldn't catch up to its tempo.

The spear flew into the sky like a bird as soon as he launched himself, arching through the void and aiming for Li Hao's crotch. It wanted to run him through!

Li Hao broke out in a cold sweat. He hadn't felt this way even when fighting peak Solars. There wasn't much he could take into account at the moment, he roared and kicked with his foot. The spear trembled from the loud impact and transformed into a small snake, seeking to entwine itself around the young man's legs.

This was one of Li Hao's preferred moves. With his knowledge of the Five Styles, he sometimes likes to utilize his agility to wrap around the enemy's weapons and follow them to defeat their wielder. Who would've thought that the Flaming Phoenix Spear would teach him the same lesson today? What you know, I know too!

Li Hao shook his legs and opened his fists, curving his fingers into claws and shooting for the phoenix!

The spearhead abruptly transformed into a beak of wind and fire. Glinting with sharpness, it pecked at Li Hao's hand.

Is this the tip of the weapon? The young man thought dazedly. Was he fighting a phoenix instead of a spear? It was hard for him to articulate what he faced, but it reminded him of his teacher's Five Styles!

His teacher gave enemies this kind of feeling when they fought. Although the opponent thought they were battling a human, Yuan Shuo seemed more like a real tiger, bear, or bird...

The bird style... flashed through Li Hao's mind. His hands also imitated bird beaks and pecked the phoenix in return!

Clang!

Fiery sparks sprayed in all directions as pain flared in the palm of Li Hao's hand. His palm had been run through and a bloody hole was in it!

The young man cursed to himself. It's too sharp! This isn't Hou Xiaochen's aura, it's the phoenix's own skill! He was such a fool to try poking the spear with his fingers! There was no effect at all. His palm was strong, but a physical body was of the mortal world. The phoenix he looked at wasn't alive. This was a spear, an incomparably durable spear. He'd used his hand to smack a spearhead, of course he was injured!

He couldn't be faulted for his actions, however. The phoenix was too realistic!

Li Hao came back to his senses and put everything out of his mind. He grasped certain things in this moment—don't treat this thing as a weapon or a phoenix. It's a Yuan Shuo that knows the bird style!

Correct, the young man saw to the heart of things! This was a powerhouse that knew Birdshot. If he couldn't handle it, that would mean that he wouldn't be able to stand against a Yuan Shuo who only knew Birdshot.

Birdshot eh... That's interesting! An image of a tiger pouncing on a bird rose in his mind. It didn't matter what Hou Xiaochen's aura was, tigers could still catch birds!

The tiger and phoenix truly seemed to exist in this moment. They furiously exchanged blows in the tiny room. Tiger Roar Through Mountain and Woods, Phoenix Call Through the Nine Heavens!

Chapter 358: Birdshot, Earthturner Sword (III)

At the same time.

Mu Lin swiftly rushed to the officers' living quarters and looked at a building in the distance with a foreboding expression. What in the blazes?? Had an expert trespassed into their territory to assassinate Li Hao?

He'd drawn near because he sensed two incomparably strong auras clashing with each other. Martial masters were very sensitive to aura. One of them was Li Hao's tiger aura and the other seemed like a fire aura, or more like a bird aura...

It gave him the perception that Yuan Shuo had come. Was this an internal conflict between the Five Styles discipline? The bird style against the tiger style? The deputy hesitated because of this. Had Yuan Shuo come back and was instructing his disciple?

It was quite a thorny issue for Mu Lin. After momentary dithering, he decided to rush in. Even if Yuan Shuo had come back, it wouldn't do to start a fight here without notifying them first! Would the Guards have any shred of dignity left if he misjudged and accidentally killed his disciple?

A figure landed from the sky just as he was about to rush into the building! A towering man stood in front of him and grabbed Mu Lin. The newcomer stood ramrod straight, like he was a spear. He looked to be in his fifties and possessed a particularly sharp glint in his eyes. He gave one the feeling of a spear ready to strike at any time.

“Boss!” Mu Lin blinked. What was the boss doing back?

It was Golden Spear!

The man’s eyes blazed with an intent look as he stared at the little building hundreds of meters out. He seemed to see right through it. It wasn’t the building’s reflection in his eyes, but a tiger and a phoenix tangled in battle!

Golden Spear’s gaze was intensely keen; he thought for a moment. “Li Hao?”

“Yes, boss, he seems to be under attack...”

“He’s not!” Golden Spear stood unmoving, the sharp look in his eyes slowly fading away. “It’s an origin weapon!”

“What?”

“You don’t get it.” Golden Spear didn’t explain too much. It wasn’t that Mu Lin didn’t understand, but that he hadn’t experienced it before. It was Director Hou’s weapon, the Flaming Phoenix Spear!

Li Hao... He’d heard Hou Xiaochen mention this person before, this was Yuan Shuo’s disciple. The lad was very bold! And very strong, of course. He was very adept with the tiger style. Director Hou was also a ruthless sort to truly lend out the Flaming Phoenix Spear. Wasn’t he concerned about the weapon revitalizing and killing Li Hao?

Golden Spear watched silently, as if seeing the Yuan Shuo of years past. Tiger Roar Through Mountain and Woods... Dominating the four corners of the land... Can this disciple of yours suppress the Flaming Phoenix Spear?

“It’s not Yuan Shuo, boss?” Mu Lin asked nervously.

“No shit, of course not!” Golden Spear barked out coldly. “It’s a phoenix. Li Hao is very daring as to use the Flaming Phoenix Spear to temper himself. I wonder if he’s trying to deepen his understanding of the Five Styles or to probe Director Hou’s will... This is only the beginning. Let’s see how he handles this as the will of the phoenix is only the first stage!”

Li Hao was either idiotic, crazy, or supremely confident to use the director’s weapon as his whetstone. When you defeat the phoenix, that’s when you’ll access the true beginning! It’s up to your skill as to whether or not you can see Director Hou’s will in the second stage.

Apart from Golden Spear, only Mu Lin had a slight chance of succeeding. The caveat was that Mu Lin had to avoid being reduced to ashes by the phoenix first.

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Inside the room.

Li Hao wasn’t thinking of killing the phoenix. After employing the tiger aura for a while, he suddenly jerked with realization. I’m not doing this to kill the phoenix, I’m doing this to learn! The phoenix... The bird style! I didn’t spend a mysterious power stone to kill the beast.

The tiger returned to the mountain with this change in mentality. A mountainous armor materialized around the young man as he abruptly imitated the phoenix, swaying in the wind and spreading his wings to soar through the sky. The scene suddenly morphed into one of a phoenix flapping after an indistinct little bird.

The bird was buffeted by the wind and rain! It couldn't fly—or, at least, didn't seem to be able to fly. It didn't reach too high in the sky and appeared more like a chick harried by an eagle!

Yes, that was precisely the feeling. Li Hao found himself a chicken in the grass while the phoenix was an eagle overhead. He fled for his life instead of clashing against the origin weapon!

He used Birdshot to escape, discovering that imitation might help him enhance the skill. Birdshot needed to witness a real bird soaring and hunting from the air. What kind of bird was more powerful than a phoenix? It would have to be more ferocious than an eagle!

Li Hao twisted his body and extended his arms, evading the phoenix's sharp claws and pointed beak. His movements were ugly and ungainly.

The phoenix beak fractured Li Hao's mountain armor with a loud bam. The armor immediately recovered—armor of the earth! He didn't dare really be pecked. That was the equivalent of being run through by the Flaming Phoenix Spear. He'd be gravely injured, if not outright dead.

The phoenix continuously gave chase in the tiny room while Li Hao ducked and dodged for all his worth. After a while, he set his jaw and barreled outside. When the place was too small, it wasn't conducive for him to evade.

He seemed to transform into a bird, one that flew proudly through the sky. A phoenix followed behind him in hot pursuit.

Mu Lin soon saw this scene as well. His jaw dropped at the sight of a phoenix chasing after a very, very small bird. Golden Spear saw it too. There were some mundanes around them—what they saw was entirely different. They saw a person walking through the air in a crooked pattern while being chased by a flaming-red spear.

Others in the distance saw it too. Those who had comprehended the aura saw the animal manifestations. Those who hadn't saw a spear in pursuit. The differences in vision separated the Silver Moon Guards into two levels.

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Within the air.

Li Hao circled around as the phoenix pursued him doggedly. He suddenly imitated the beast and stretched his arms out, reaching ahead of him and rising into the air like an arrow.

Upon the ground, Golden Spear's eyes widened when he raised his head for a look. The kid was a fast learner. He was imitating the phoenix! Instead of fighting head-on with it, he wanted to copy it. Those of the Five Styles were full of surprises, alright. But... would imitation result in one's own path?

Yuan Shuo had also imitated the five animals, but ultimately found his own path. Outright copying the phoenix may not result in a bird aura. What was the core of the bird aura? Golden Spear knew a little about it. It wasn't speed or flight, but freedom!

At the very least, that was what Yuan Shuo's bird aura felt like. It wasn't offense or defense, but a free and comfortable state of bliss. Like a small bird, one could fly wherever they wished and go wherever they wished without constraint.

Meanwhile, Li Hao seemed to be only pursuing speed. The look in Golden Spear's eyes changed rapidly.

In the air, the young man wasn't thinking that much. His only thought at the moment was to be faster, a little faster! Be faster than the phoenix! If he deployed his sword fast enough, that would be a kind of aura as well.

He cut through the void like an arrow and shot into the sky. The spear chased him relentlessly. Human and weapon disappeared within the complex. Golden Spear pushed off his feet and bounded upward when he saw this, launching himself like a cannonball and vanishing on the spot.

Mu Lin's eyes shone and he threw himself forward as well, his speed as fast as lightning as he also followed the weapons! He, too, wanted to see what the final result was.

Several centurions swiftly arrived on the premises, confusion and expectation in their eyes. They wanted to see the results. What was that? Li Hao was being chased around by a spear. It... seemed to be the Flaming Phoenix Spear!

Over the jungle.

The spear turned when Li Hao turned. The spear flew in a straight path when the young man flew in a straight path. An occasional wave of fire roiled over as well.

The beak descended!

Li Hao's heel ached—the spear had caught up to him and pecked him. He turned into an ape the next second and darted into the jungle, swinging from one tree to another.

Bam!

The spear ran through a large tree with a massive boom. Li Hao was still debating, what was the core of the bird style? Was it to be fast? The height of speed? He looked at the phoenix—it was fast, but also immensely powerful. Was that the bird style and the key to the bird aura?

“No... not necessarily... Not to mention that everyone's aura is different. Whether it's speed or enormous offensive power, the extremity of speed is an advantage!” Li Hao suddenly thought of water. When a droplet of water was accelerated to the utmost, it was keen without end. The phoenix's beak was so ferocious and instantly pierced through his body and defenses because it was too quick! It was the same case for its claws.

Eagles dove from the sky to hunt their prey because that gave them speed. A quick descent provided a stronger destructive force... The Five Styles was a secret art of destruction, the bird style was no exception!

“Therefore, the core of the bird style isn’t to flee or speed, but that moment of eruption resulting from the extremity of speed!”

A droplet of water could break through steel if it was fast enough. Then, did the bird style mean that any part of the body could be a vicious weapon at high enough speeds?

Li Hao looked back again and abruptly slowed down. The phoenix grasped the chance and pecked once more. Li Hao moved slowly enough that his arm was run clean through. Blood didn’t even have time to drip because it’d been so fast! The beak had gone right through the body!

Golden Spear’s eyes widened with dismay. What’d just happened?

Li Hao’s movements had suddenly slowed down, allowing the Flaming Phoenix Spear to injure him substantially. His arm had been drilled through—which was the spear piercing the young man’s body!

Mu Lin’s expression changed below as well. Why had Li Hao suddenly slowed down? Was his store of internal force not deep enough?

Chapter 359: Birdshot, Earthturner Sword (IV)

Extreme anguish racked Li Hao! He reached out with his uninjured left hand at the same time to grab at the Flaming Phoenix Spear. The phoenix pecked him again when he did so!

Pfft!

His defenses were pierced through as the beak sank into his left arm, but this time, it didn’t go all the way through! The young man smiled as he sensed the two kinds of pain.

That was right! It was different! His right arm was wracked by pain after being run through, but the intact nature of his left arm meant that the spear's power had weakened!

I see... so the bird style focuses on speed, but its core is that momentary explosion of ultimate speed...

The young man's comprehension was vastly different from Yuan Shuo's, but the paths of martial masters all differed from one another. Li Hao didn't find anything amiss with his conclusion. He took to the air as he suddenly thought of something. He was fast, much faster than before.

The Flaming Phoenix Spear kept up the pursuit!

Li Hao accelerated and accelerated, and continued to accelerate... He sped up until he could go no faster and suddenly turned back. He punched, transforming all of his speed into an eruption of spontaneous sharpness!

It was a process of eruption, retraction, and eruption again!

Boom!

A massive collision rang out. The Flaming Phoenix Spear fell back from the punch, leaving the young man's hand covered in blood. He didn't care! He smiled as he thought of something and bared his teeth at the origin weapon. "Run! Run as fast as you can or I'll hack you into two!"

The spear erupted reflexively and fled! The young man followed it with every bit of strength!

Faster! He thought back to the process he'd gone through for acceleration and erupted with all of his power, relentlessly giving pursuit. His speed picked up until he transformed into a bird that continuously pecked at the void!

Humm!

A sound echoed in the air as Li Hao ripped through the void, his right hand curved in a claw. He grabbed the handle of the Flaming Phoenix Spear and yanked on it!

The young man's fingers broke with a loud crack, but a few claw marks also appeared on the durable origin weapon. They instantly vanished, returning the spear to a pristine condition, but the phoenix manifested from it bore a hole in its body!

Joy deepened in Li Hao's eyes. However, the phoenix promptly disappeared and left the spear clattering to the ground. The young man blinked at it, then realized that it'd been depleted of energy! The power from the mysterious power stone was gone!

There might have been a bit left, but the phoenix absorbed it when his last attack injured the weapon. That was the end of the energy reserve.

Li Hao grabbed the Flaming Phoenix Spear and wanted to vomit blood as he stared at it. "That fast??"

That was an entire mysterious power stone! You consumed it in the blink of an eye?! What the hell?!

Irate, the young man frowned ferociously. He ignored his wounds, despite both arms being pierced through, his palm and foot run through as well. Li Hao had suffered quite a few injuries in a short amount of time. His ear lobe was even more of a bloody mess.

He really didn't mind the state of his body—he didn't even feel pain. All he felt was despondence, but his eyes were bright.

"I see..." murmured the young man as he thought through something. "Birds... fly exceedingly fast and can transform into a keenness that kills... The metal attribute?"

Golden Spear paused in the process of drawing near the young man. What was that? He knew full well that the bird style was used for escape. It was a very unique body method that was employed in defense. What was Li Hao talking about?

The height of speed and a keenness that killed? The bird style could kill?

Although the young man was still putting his thoughts together, Golden Spear interrupted, “The bird style is one of unfettered freedom and carefree ease. That is what it means to be a bird!”

He didn’t want the old demon’s disciple to comprehend a wrong concept or for a martial dao genius to take a wrong turn.

“Nonsense!” Li Hao blurted out. “No matter what kind of bird it is, even a lofty eagle, they are living creatures and need to hunt. The Five Styles is a method that kills and injures. What is this talk of unfettered freedom and carefree ease? There is only slaughter. The root of the secret method is to kill!”

What did this random voice know? The Five Styles imitated the hunting styles of different animals and so, the five kinds of secret arts were all used to kill people. What was this ridiculous talk of being free and easy?

Complete bullshit!

The young man jerked to his senses after responding and observed a figure that rose like a spear in the distance. He realized who it might be and coughed, “Greetings to the ranking officer. I thought it was Brother Second Mu and cracked a joke!”

Golden Spear, however, didn’t respond. A confused trace appeared in his eye. The Five Styles... are all for killing? He frowned, this differed from Yuan Shuo’s Five Styles.

The Five Styles was a comprehensive secret art that wasn't employed offensively, but Li Hao's instinctive answer was a completely different concept. Or rather, it was different from Yuan Shuo's interpretation. But Yuan Shuo was the creator!

Who was right and who was wrong? And did Li Hao truly possess such a bloodthirsty attitude? A secret method used for fleeing was one of immense violence to him! To comprehend the bird style as an ultimate move for killing...

One had to say, it was hard for a veteran martial master like Golden Spear to suddenly turn his thinking around. Yuan Shuo's impact on them was too profound and they weren't able to walk out of the shadow that he cast over the Five Styles.

Li Hao once more studied the old man in front of him. Golden Spear should be roughly the same age as his teacher, but appeared to be in his fifties. In actuality, he should be in his seventies. As for what the man had just said, the young man mulled it over and took in the meaning behind the words. Golden Spear was likely referring to his teacher's mind intent!

However, his teacher's path wasn't the only path. Golden Spear was heavily influenced by his teacher! Yuan Shuo himself had once said that Li Hao didn't need to walk the same Five Styles as he did. Hong Yitang also noted that auras differed according to person. Liu Long's father manifested a fire dragon spear, but Liu Long's was a water wave ax. The same secret art absolutely could lead to different results.

In this moment, Li Hao suddenly felt that Golden Spear might not measure up to Hong Yitang! Indeed, that was his perception. Not in terms of strength, but understanding of martial dao and aura.

Golden Spear was undoubtedly very strong, the young man knew that without needing to probe the man. He just needed to stand there to give Li Hao an unbeatable feeling. But as strong as he was, Golden Spear didn't project a sense of wisdom.

Indeed, wisdom! Hong Yitang exuded that most out of all the martial masters Li Hao had met. He Yong... partially. Yuan Shuo definitely did. Due to prolonged exposure to Yuan Shuo, Li Hao hadn't thought much when he first met Hong Yitang. But right now, he blinked dazedly after being acquainted with Golden Spear and others like He Yong.

Although Hong Yitang was no longer a martial master, he seemed to have a very deep understanding of martial dao! Even if Manager Yu was Yu Luochoa, she didn't give him the same feeling. Hou Xiaochen slightly did, but he exuded more mysteriousness and not the clarity of seeing through all things.

Li Hao grew lost in his thoughts. Was Hong Yitang... the cowardly martial master of the thirty-size heroes and the second among the Seven Swords... really that bad? He blinked, suddenly seized by an impulse to see the man and witness his sword aura! Not even Golden Spear's presence could quench his desire.

Why did Hong Yitang walk the path of the supernatural? Was it just to be stronger? Li Hao was more curious about Hong Yitang than Golden Spear. The Earthturner Sword was more interesting and Golden Spear plainly just an old stuck-in-the-mud martial master. That was Li Hao's only conclusion. No matter how strong the ranking officer was, there wasn't the feeling of having learned something from him.

"Sir and Brother Second Mu, I'm injured and need to make a trip back to town..." Li Hao abruptly ran off. Having just made it to the scene, Mu Lin started with astonishment. What are you running away for? What is this?

Golden Spear also blinked. What... had happened to Li Hao? As a notable figure in the martial world, Golden Spear commanded reverence and respect from many martial masters that he met. He didn't demand the same from Li Hao, but wasn't it inappropriate to leave them here and run off by himself?

Does the old demon often speak ill of me in front of his disciple? Golden Spear couldn't help the turn of his thoughts. A small smile appeared on his stern face. This would be interesting. He refrained from commenting on Li Hao's earlier comprehension of the bird style. Perhaps the young man was right. It wasn't like Golden Spear was his teacher, so there was no need for the man to say anything further.

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Li Hao traveled at full speed. He didn't let anyone give him a ride—instead, he launched himself into the air like a bird and covered one hundred meters with one stride. He shot out with lightning speed because he suddenly had the thought of going to see Hong Yitang. Even though Golden Spear was close at hand... he had no desire to discuss martial dao with the man.

A thousand cups was too few when drinking with a good friend.

The young man hadn't had much interaction with Golden Spear and, in fact, exchanged only one sentence. Yet, this sentence alone let Li Hao know that they were not the same type of person. Golden Spear might be a good person, a good teacher, a good general, and a good martial master...

But none of that was important. All Li Hao wanted was someone with a unique perspective on martial dao. The renowned Golden Spear had given Li Hao a particular impression in that split second. The young man thought of certain people he knew before, some classmates that hadn't come to mind for a very long period of time.

They followed the prescribed order, gave the standard answers, and vied for the position of valedictorian. They always received full marks on tests!

Li Hao's grades were fine—he wouldn't have been accepted to Silver City's Veteris Institute otherwise. But good grades didn't mean that he aced tests with full scores. He was actually a problematic student in some teachers' eyes as he often voiced strange thoughts. The answers were fixed on tests, but he wanted to make a large circle and ignore the proper formula, taking a few twists and turns before returning to the proper destination.

Only Yuan Shuo thought that it was wonderful that the young man didn't walk the conventional path. Not everyone was Yuan Shuo. Thus, when Li Hao heard Golden Spear say that the bird style was one of unfettered freedom, he understood that the martial master was a prim and proper, old-fashioned man. He didn't know what true freedom was.

Chapter 360: Such Marvelous Luck (I)

No wonder Golden Spear didn't break teacher's will by himself. He can't do it! The thought came to Li Hao as he ran. At the same time, certain pressure formed about his future in the Silver Moon Guards. Someone as stern as Golden Spear might not approve of his style. Li Hao suddenly thought

of Mu Lin. Mu Lin was another person who seemed off the cuff. Perhaps Golden Spear didn't like him much either.

Someone like the ranking officer liked those who were quiet and biddable. Li Hao quickly forgot about him; he moved speedily through the air. Having just partially comprehended what sharpness to the extreme meant, he ran as if an arrow streaking through the sky.

Li Hao set foot into the northern quadrant of the city before long. This was Inspectorate territory. Someone was on patrol as soon as he entered the area; they were a bit nervous on account of his speed. A medallion appeared in Li Hao's hand, "Night Watcher on duty!"

The inspectors breathed sighs of relief to hear the self-identification.

"Where is the Sword Sect branch office in White Moon City?" the young man asked hastily.

There were three inspectors in front of them, one of them older than the other two. He drew a quick conclusion after looking at Li Hao and answered, "Close to the southern quadrant, near the watchtower..."

"Thanks!" Li Hao vanished with a leap, leaving behind inspectors staring with admiration. Was that a Night Watcher?

They knew about the secret agency and had met some Night Watchers before, but that was under normal conditions. When Li Hao approached from a distance, they saw him move as fast as lightning!

"Man, are guns even useful anymore with people like that?" sighed one of the inspectors. It was hard to see the target when it moved at that speed, much less aim and hit them with a gun. The notion was a complete daydream!

The other two sighed with envy over superhumans while the veteran inspector calmly spoke into a communicator.

“An ordinary life is the real existence,” he said after finishing his report. “The stronger one is, the greater the danger. There are many dangers in the world of superhumans.”

With that task complete, he continued his patrols. Youngsters liked pursuing thrills and stimulation. They would know at his age that no excitement was worth a commonplace routine. Being superhuman was nice, but that came with a constant risk of imminent death.

.....

The branch office of the Sword Sect.

The sect occupied a building of six floors in White Moon City. As a local supernatural organization, it wasn't one of the evil organizations. It occasionally assisted the Night Watchers. Neither did the government label the Sword Sect as an evil supernatural organization, mainly because the Sword Sect resembled a sect of the martial world.

The Sword Sect retained some martial world culture and mannerisms. Whether it was their supernaturals or martial masters, they participated in the world of martial dao and not that of mundanes. Therefore, supernaturals of the Sword Sect rarely disturbed ordinary people.

Supernatural organizations that did not plague mundanes were typically not deemed as evil by the authorities.

There weren't many people at the branch. Establishing a branch in the capital city was just to prove to the Night Watchers that the Sword Sect was a legitimate, aboveboard organization. They were an upright existence that could take their place in the light.

On the first floor of the branch.

Hong Yitang shared a meal with his family in a large private room; he ate with his daughter and second wife. He'd staunchly remained in White Moon City over the past couple of days. The Sword Sect could not be headquartered in White Moon, but Hong Yitang lingered at the capital due to the large number of people gathered here. He stayed in order to swiftly respond to potential developments and sought to remain until the ruins next opened, or until Hou Xiaochen left Silver Moon.

The family of three chatted throughout the meal. Hong Qing had much to say as she wasn't subject to the old martial rule of not talking while eating or before sleeping. Hong Yitang doted on his daughter, so he didn't enforce that many rules.

"Dad, are we going to keep staying here? When can we go home?"

"Let's wait a bit longer."

Hong Qing wasn't dissatisfied with their present circumstances as the sect's headquarters was stationed in a remote location. She rather liked living in White Moon City. It was bustling with a lot of restaurants, shops, and entertainment. However, her father often seemed distracted these days. Perhaps he missed home.

Deep in thought, Hong Yitang picked up some food with his chopsticks and abstained from drinking. His wife added some more food to his bowl when she saw his state.

"Focus on eating when we're eating, don't think of anything else," she said softly.

"Mmhhh, you guys eat too." Hong Yitang smiled.

"Dad, are the Night Watchers going to make trouble for us?" Hong Qing asked curiously. "If it can't be helped, we can offer all of the Black Amors we took. Wealth stirs up feelings, they must be after us for the one hundred suits of armor we collected!"

Nine hundred Black Armors had been settled last time, with over eight hundred being claimed. The wandering supernaturals all died, making the three great organizations, Night Watchers, and Sword Sect the biggest winners.

Many died from the three great organizations, leaving the Sword Sect to take home numerous sets of armor due to having two Solars on the scene. If it wasn't for the sect voluntarily taking a step back, they could've claimed two hundred sets with the strength they had left.

"Let's trade some of the Black Armors for mysterious power," his wife suggested. "While we have many members, we don't have that many martial masters. We don't need so many sets and it brings us to people's attention instead."

"I'd love to give some away, but it's hard to!" Hong Yitang smiled. He didn't really care about the armor and also wanted to give them away. But certain things couldn't be gifted just because one wanted to. He'd been in communication with the Night Watchers and their response was simple—they couldn't seize and take from another! They would accept a gift of this caliber only from one of their own people!

Hou Xiaochen's meaning was very clear. Either join his side, whereupon these items would naturally belong to the Night Watchers. Otherwise... hold onto it yourself!

Holding onto the suits of armor wasn't a good thing. The three great organizations knew of the Sword Sect's riches, how would they not be tempted? So what of a mere two Solars in residence?

Hou Xiaochen was trying to recruit the Sword Sect without dirtying a single blade! His method was so sophisticated that nothing could be said about it. Could the Night Watchers be blamed for not wanting the treasure under these circumstances?

Should the Sword Sect offer it to the three great organizations instead?

Very well, then that was collusion with evil organizations, which would make the Sword Sect an evil organization. Thus, even Hong Yitang sighed over his next steps these days. Hou Xiaochen was killing without shedding a single drop of blood!

It was one thing to openly attack someone, it was another and the peak of shrewdness to stand atop the clouds, looking down at his target and having said target offer allegiance without lifting a finger.

The Sword Sect was a powerful faction in the province, standing at two Solars, a dozen Sunflares, a dozen Sunderers, and hundreds of Slayers and Starlight. The Night Watchers would be immensely bolstered if they brought such a faction to their side.

The key thing was, the Sword Sect also had decent foundations and was self sufficient. It didn't need to be nurtured from scratch.

The last expedition to Battle Heaven had resulted in the obliteration of Light Island, heavy losses to the three great organizations, and clearing out the incredibly bold wandering cultivators. By now, Hong Yitang long realized that perhaps news of the ruins had been purposefully leaked and the joint expedition a calculated move.

Hou Xiaochen's true goal had been to clean house of the province's supernatural domain! Every step had been within his calculations and extremely sophisticated methods, yet there was nothing for people to do but obediently set foot into the trap.

The center of his forehead jumped as he considered these irritating affairs. His wife sensed it moments later and frowned. "Is someone coming?"

The sensation wasn't too apparent, so it shouldn't be a supernatural. A martial master?

A laugh traveled through the door after a while. "Li Hao of the Five Styles is here to visit martial uncle Hong!"

The three in the private room blinked. Li Hao? Hong Yitang found it odd. What was the lad doing here?

“Come in, you’re too polite!” Hong Yitang stood up to welcome his visitor when the room door opened with a gust of wind. Li Hao stood in the doorway.

Some Sword Sect disciples gaped behind the young man. So fast!

“Master!”

“Sect leader!”

“.....” All of them opened their mouths, some extremely fearful that they’d let someone barge in.

“It’s fine!” Hong Yitang waved them off and looked at Li Hao with a smile. “Li Hao’s here, have you eaten yet?”

It was lunchtime.

“Not yet.” Li Hao raised a cupped fist salute to the lady. “Greetings to Madame Hong!” He then nodded in a friendly manner to Hong Qing. “Thanks for the sword last time!”

The girl said nothing and just looked curiously at Li Hao. What was he doing here? Madame Hong smiled, but shock roiled within her heart. This Li Hao was very fast!

“Then let’s eat together, martial uncle?” Li Hao casually dropped into a seat and rubbed his stomach when he looked at the table full of dishes. “I really am a bit hungry...”

Hong Yitang's look shifted slightly and he laughed. "Then let's have some together, but we've already dug into the dishes. I'll have someone bring hot ones out..."

"There's no need to go through that hassle!" Li Hao picked up an unused bowl and set of chopsticks, digging in with relish. He was so at ease that Hong Qing and Madame Hong stared. This was something that only very intimate disciples or brothers would do; his actions represented their closeness! But coming from an outsider, it was impoliteness.

They looked at Hong Yitang, who didn't seem to mind. He sat down with a smile and watched the young man eat. "Don't you usually go to the cafeteria at noon? What brings you to my sect's branch office today?"

"I miss the martial uncle!"

"....." Hong Yitang had no response. Is our... relationship to this point?

"And I mean to apologize. I'm terribly sorry about breaking martial uncle's Earthturner Sword. I didn't cherish it properly."

"It's fine," Hong Yitang chuckled. "I gave it to you, so it was yours."

"It's broken?" Hong Qing gasped. "The Earthturner Sword is very durable and mighty! How did it break?"

"It shattered when I hacked at someone two days ago." Li Hao grinned. "They wanted to kill me, so I struck back and accidentally broke it."

"But... that sword is really very strong. Did someone switch it out on you?" Hong Qing was in disbelief.