

Resonance 231

Chapter 0231: Ancestral Elder

"Mo Cheng..." Li Luo whispered in disbelief. House Luolan's great ancestral elder was the last person he expected to defend Pei Hao.

These three ancestral elders were highly placed within House Luolan. Although they remained apart from House Luolan's daily operations, they held heavy responsibilities nonetheless.

The three ancestral elders did not even reside at Xia City usually, and Li Luo had not even seen them since he came to headquarters half a year ago.

"Elder Mo Cheng," Li Luo said flatly. "I would love to know why a sworn protector of House Luolan is defending Pei Hao.

"Or were you perhaps bought by him? As I understand, the three elders have special status, and answer only to the House Lords."

Mo Cheng's wizened face creased in a small smile. "Young Lord, I am not subject to Pei Hao's commands. I simply do not wish to see House Luolan's dirty laundry aired in public. If we cause a fuss here, the whole Xia Kingdom will laugh at us."

Li Luo spluttered a laugh. "Where were you when Pei Hao was poisoning resonance artificers at the Sun creek Villa? Causing a fuss? Dirty laundry? I didn't see your noble self there to stop him."

Mo Cheng's smile did not fade. "Pei Hao is one of the candidates in the running for house lord. As an ancestral elder, I have a duty to see to his safety."

Li Luo shook his head in frustration. Pei Hao had come to them back then with Elder Mo Cheng's plaque in hand. And now the latter had appeared to defend him. They were clearly close.

"In the running for house lord? He isn't even first in line. It was my parents' legacy that was left behind," Li Luo said coldly.

"Young Lord, you make many assumptions. In my eyes, you're a young lord, and Pei Hao is a young lord too... He is the disciple of the House Lords. And back then, the House Lords decreed that anyone who was recognized by two elders and four pavilion masters was in the running. Pei Hao qualifies," Mo Cheng said solemnly.

"Elder Mo, he is a namesake disciple," Li Luo corrected sharply. "My parents only took one true disciple: Sister Qing'e."

Elder Mo smirked. "A disciple in name is still a disciple. Actually, it really doesn't matter. All you need to know is that Pei Hao qualifies for the running. In the end, all you have to blame is yourself. If only you had shown your dual resonances and potential earlier. Why else would anyone in House Luolan waver?"

Li Luo sighed out loud. "I very dearly want to know which mighty power is backing Pei Hao, to even turn two elders to his side. Still... aren't you worried that my parents will return?"

"We aren't... Our actions don't violate the rules that the two House Lords set!"

"Heh," Li Luo chuckled. "Is that a guilty conscience I smell?"

"Nothing you say matters," Mo Cheng said, recovering his composure. "In half a year, all will be decided at the Housemeet. And according to the House Lords' rules, only Pei Hao and yourself are in the running."

He looked over. "Of course, Miss Jiang is very skilled, but strictly speaking, her status as heir is incomplete... She does not have the support of two ancestral elders."

Li Luo nodded. "I hear you. I'm supposed to go up against Pei Hao at the Housemeet? And Sister Qing'e can't interfere?"

Mo Cheng smiled and nodded. "After all, that's how house lords are chosen. If you can win at the Housemeet, you'll be formally appointed. At that time, all the wandering hearts will return to your side, and House Luolan will be complete again."

"Even those who are on Pei Hao's side won't have a leg to stand on."

"Well calculated, I must say," Li Luo remarked.

"A second-tier Resonant Master against an Earth Fiend. Is your brain screwed, or is mine?"

Elder Mo smiled infuriatingly. "Seems unfair, doesn't it? Those are the rules though. Or perhaps you could secede to Pei Hao and then challenge him again when you're strong enough."

Li Luo laughed. "It all boils down to the fact that Pei Hao is scared of Sister Qing'e."

"A ninth-grade light resonance is exceptional." Pei Hao spoke up mildly from behind. "It would scare anyone, and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

Li Luo shook his head. "Enough with the crap, Elder Mo. Perhaps according to House Luolan's strictest rules, Sister Qing'e might not qualify, but you know well that she's engaged to me. We are one, and so she is qualified to fight in my place."

"Which means," he said with a taunting smile Pei Hao's way, "if you want to fight me, you'll have to go through her first."

Mo Cheng's eyes narrowed. Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan were noble people... How had their son grown up lacking any scruples?

"You are running away... Even if Miss Jiang takes the win for you, no one will be persuaded. They might follow her, but no one will follow you."

"And how will the other powers in the Xia Kingdom see House Luolan? A husband hiding behind his wife? Preposterous."

Li Luo rubbed his ear off-handedly. "The easy road is the way of the privileged."

Mo Cheng's sneer was growing by the moment. Li Luo was more pathetic than he had expected.

He thought the son of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan would have some pride, that he would fight to the bitter end. Outcome aside, he had to convince them with his attitude.

None of that was to be seen. Li Luo had chosen to cower behind his strongest queen on the chessboard. Beat her first!

Manliness? Privilege? He didn't care!

He shook his head with disdain. "Perhaps you'll change your mind when the Housemeet comes, Young Lord."

"Stop right there," Jiang Qing'e said coldly. "You think you will take him away so easily?"

She had remained silent up to this point, content to let Li Luo lead their conversation.

Mo Cheng snorted. "Oh, Miss Jiang. A ninth-grade light resonance is exceptional indeed, but you are no threat to me. Yes, I know that you've marshaled most of House Luolan's forces outside this courtyard, and it will be hard for us to win if we really fight.

"However... are you planning to fight?" he asked smugly. "There are too many eyes in Xia City, and many must already be here..."

"Problems at the Suncreek Villa during the day, and now a fight between the Young Lord's faction and an ancestral elder? Surely not."

"Since the cake is already ruined," Jiang Qing'e pointed out, "there is even less reason to avoid breaking the eggs."

"Do as you please." Mo Cheng shook his head, walking out uncaringly, side by side with Pei Hao.

Her hand tensed on the hilt of her sword, but Li Luo waved her back.

There was really no good reason to fight now, not when they had no guarantee of holding the two.

Pei Hao brushed past Li Luo. "Remember, Li Luo, you have half a year more."

Li Luo cocked his head with a smile.

"Thanks for the reminder. Oh and..."

He licked his lips and nodded encouragingly. "That was a sweet present indeed."

Chapter 0232: The Six Month Deadline

In the end, Li Luo let Pei Hao walk away.

"Let" as much as one could "let" the sun rise. With the Heavenly Dipper General Mo Cheng around, not even the combined strength of Li Luo's forces could emerge unscathed from a straight fight. And if the Heavenly Dipper General chose to flee, there was no one capable of stopping him.

There was no point in trying to do the impossible.

And Mo Cheng was right—there were many eyes watching them.

It was time to call an end to a busy day at House Luolan.

Li Luo watched Pei Hao and Mo Cheng disappear into the night, and he listened to the crickets chirp at him in disappointment. He had a sense of foreboding that tonight would not go the way he hoped, and indeed the killing of Pei Hao had been foiled.

Pei Hao would not have been so foolish to slip up at the end.

Still, Ancestral Elder Mo Cheng appearing to protect him was unexpected.

"Traitorous old man."

Mo Cheng had lapped up the esteem of House Luolan and now turned against the house.

"How did people as smart as Dad and Mon leave behind so much flotsam?" Li Luo demanded of Jiang Qing'e.

She laughed, her radiant resonant power fading away. "Perhaps they never cared too much. As long as they were around, nobody could cause any trouble for the house.

"I'm sure Mo Cheng was a model worker in every way when they were around, serving without complaint. Maybe they just never thought the day would come when they would both leave House Luolan at the same time."

Li Luo wrinkled his nose. As if that bunch of filth ever worked an honest day in their lives.

Perhaps his parents had not been careless in choosing their people, but were rather powerless to fend off the enemies swarming them.

"If only Uncle Biao could fight." He sighed. Ox Biaobiao was a Duke at least, although he was unable to step out of headquarters for mysterious reasons. Neither could he use his powers with abandon, it seemed.

That was a great pity—House Luolan badly needed a Duke to shore up its foundations against the winds of trouble. It would definitely give their enemies a healthy dose of wariness.

The wrath of a Duke was nothing to be trifled with.

"Uncle Biao's circumstances are special. We can't think of him as a deployable force." Jiang Qing'e shook her head. She was not that discouraged, having come from worse circumstances. At least now she had Li Luo to help her. The Suncreek Villa had recently risen again, and House Luolan's situation had taken a turn for the better. If they accrued enough capital, they could definitely grow much stronger. "I've already sent someone to inform Elder Yuan Qing. He will come back to House Luolan headquarters tomorrow. When he returns, we will be much stronger."

Li Luo nodded. Elder Yuan Qing was the only one of the three ancestral elders still loyal to him and Jiang Qing'e.

At his command, the elite troops of House Luolan silently fell back. Only Pavilion Master Lei Zhang and a few others remained.

The two walked back out to the well-lit streets of Xia City, where the cheery, orange flames comforted them. But then they looked up, and the dark sky seemed on the verge of smothering all that lived below.

"I'm afraid the Housemeet in half a year's time will determine the fate of House Luolan," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo nodded. Not only would the official house lord be chosen, but Ox Biaobiao had also mentioned that the defensive wards would dip into a slump during that time.

House Luolan would be very vulnerable, especially against Duke enemies.

The convergence of the two... anything could happen then. If Ox Biaobiao himself strolled in wearing a wedding dress with Pei Hao in hand, he probably wouldn't bat an eyelid.

"There's no time." Li Luo sighed. Half a year was just not enough.

"Plenty for you to get done in that time," Jiang Qing'e said seriously. "It's a ninth of your remaining lifespan. Remember, you have to reach the third tier of the Resonant Master Stage by the end of your first year. At least the Second Changing of the Evolving Resonance Tier. It's difficult, but you must do it to remain on track to becoming a Duke in five years.

"A five-year Duke needs not only talent, but luck as well... And it's lucky that you have the Golden Dragon Secret Key. I hear the Golden Dragon Dao Fields are a magical place. Even in the periphery, it will definitely do you a lot of good. I hope you take it seriously, and not just as a holiday."

"The Golden Dragon Dao Fields next month, huh..." Li Luo mused. Of course it would be a good opportunity. He would not pass it up.

"And also the matter of the Royal Sap..."

Li Luo felt a headache coming on at the mention of those two words. According to Ox Biaobiao, he would need roughly 100,000 school points' worth of sap. He wouldn't be able to get it even if he placed first in the ranking battles for a full year.

But if he couldn't solve his hollowness, he wouldn't be able to get to the General Stage. Li Luo's cultivation could not afford such bottlenecks. Others had a lifetime to overcome it, but Li Luo had four and a half years.

His cultivation was a desperate race against the sands of time. He had to try everything that he could.

He could not let a foundational weakness trip him up. He had to rectify it promptly before the problem grew bigger.

"We are returning to school tomorrow. Regarding the points, there should be a chance for a huge surge in the upcoming month."

"Oh?" Li Luo perked up.

"I guess you haven't heard of Umbra Cave?"

"Umbra Cave?" He frowned. He recalled that Mentor Chi Chan had mentioned it before in passing.

There was fear in Jiang Qing'e's eyes that made Li Luo afraid too. Anything fearsome enough to make her scared made him scared too.

Jiang Qing'e took a deep, steady breath. When she spoke again, her voice was a haunting whisper.

"In the Umbra Cave...

are the Others."

Chapter 0233: That Which Is Called Umbra Cave

"Others..."

Li Luo felt a lump in his throat which he swallowed. Not an answer he had expected.

When he had learned of the Nobles' Battlefield, where Kings and Dukes marched relentlessly in to die, Li Luo had known the Others were to be feared. And yet there had been this sense of disjunct - the Others were far away, a problem he only had to deal with when he neared Duke strength.

And now Jiang Qing'e was telling him that there were Others in the Umbra Cave under Astral Sage College!

So they had always been nearby?

"The Others are not just confined to the Nobles' Battlefield. They are entering our world through rifts that can be anywhere. Xia Kingdom is quite lucky - there aren't many rifts here, and as a result the common populace is largely oblivious of the problem."

"In other rift-filled regions, Others appear all over, leading to Other Disasters. Many once-rich and powerful countries have been led to ruin because of them. Under Astral Sage College, one such rift point links the two worlds. It's called Umbra Cave."

"Astral Sage College was built in part to contain the rift. Astral Sage College's principal spends most of his time in Umbra Cave, keeping it under control. He also fights the stronger Others, preventing them from escaping into our world."

Li Luo had a sudden lurch of understanding. So that was why the principal was rarely seen. So he had a greater burden to bear.

"Although the principal can suppress the rift, but he cannot completely destroy it. The open connection with the shadow world leaks pollution into our world, which manifests as Others when it grows strong enough. The pollution and Others are endless, and can never be fully eradicated. And yet if they are allowed to grow strong enough, they will rush out of Umbra Cave and wreak havoc."

"The principal alone is not enough - and he is busy dealing with the stronger Others. That is why every once in a while, Astral Sage College opens up Umbra Cave for cleaning duties. Mentors conduct a sweep of pollution and stronger Others."

"Still it is not enough... and so the cleaning duties are also given to the Three and Four Star Hall students. It's also seen as a test of sorts."

"Each cleaning is rewarded generously with school points. Of course..." Jiang Qing'e's voice almost cracked. "It is very dangerous, and each cleaning sees casualties. It's not a surprise if an entire squad is wiped out."

Li Luo felt a chill run down his spine. Astral Sage College had seemed like an idyllic place of cultivation to him. And yet such great dangers lurked closer than he had thought.

Still, destroying the Others was a collective responsibility. If they really escaped, the whole of Xia Kingdom would probably be destroyed.

"At first, only the Four Star Hall students were given the cleaning duties. Later on, Three Star Hall students were involved. In the last few years... Two Star Hall students were also included, albeit the best squads only."

Jiang Qing'e looked straight into Li Luo's eyes. "Do you know what this means?"

He shivered in the night breeze. "It means that the pollution in Umbra Cave is intensifying, so we need more cleaners?"

She nodded. "I don't know why that is. But I do know that the principal has been seen less and less in recent years. Which means that the task demands a King's full attention."

"So there's a chance that One Star Hall students might be involved this time?" Li Luo asked.

"It's not impossible, although it will likely be limited to the Violet Vibrance squads. There might also be changes to the participation format. You will know soon enough. Violet Vibrance squads are usually ordered to take it up, whereas other squads have both reason and permission to refuse. If you refuse, you'll be expelled." Jiang Qing'e said gravely.

Li Luo knew this should be no surprise to him. The Violet Vibrance squads were given the best guidance and the best resources... of course they should have correspondingly heavier responsibilities. He had never thought Astral Sage College was a charity giving handouts.

"Perhaps it wasn't such a good thing entering Astral Sage College after all." Li Luo sighed.

Perhaps only the stronger factions in Xia Kingdom knew about Umbra Cave - it was not public information.

The price for Astral Sage College's favorable cultivating conditions was the threat of Umbra Cave.

"Some things can't be avoided." Jiang Qing'e pointed out.

Li Luo nodded. He had no intention of avoiding it. Quite the contrary - now that he knew about Umbra Cave, there was a strange eagerness building within him.

He wanted to know the enemy that his parents were currently facing.

"As long as one makes it back successfully from cleaning, each squad gets points... ranging in the five-digit range. Of course, there can be more depending on performance." Jiang Qing'e said.

"Five-digit points from one mission..." Li Luo was practically drooling. After all, he had only gotten 5,000 points or so from his hard-won win at the ranking battles.

"If the school does include One Star Hall Violet Vibrance squads in this cleanup mission, I think they will use stronger-weaker pairings. A high-star Hall squad will lead a lower-star Hall squad. In that way, weaker squads won't die so easily due to the lack of experience."

"If that happens," Jiang Qing'e continued, "I suggest your Fairness & Justice squad join our Black Swan squad."

Li Luo's heart leaped. Jiang Qing'e's squad was one of the top ranked squads in Three Star Hall. If they could team up, the risk would definitely be much lower.

He was happy to ride her coattails to success.

"Won't we be trouble?" Li Luo dearly wanted to take up the offer, but still had to ask.

She shook her head. "Heh, you're the first in One Star Hall after all."

Li Luo nodded gratefully.

What she didn't say was that the weaker pairings also included Two Star squads. Which meant that Three Star squads usually picked Two Star squads. A One Star squad like Li Luo's was definitely going to be weaker than the Two Star squads.

But it couldn't be helped, if she was to help Li Luo get points.

Time to go convince her two squad mates. After all this time, they knew her way of doing things. If they didn't agree... they would fight until there was agreement.

Chapter 0234: News of the Others

The next day, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e handed over all their affairs back to Cai Wei, and then followed Yu Lang, Bai Mengmeng and the others back to Astral Sage College.

Li Luo immediately felt much freer upon entering the school compound. He felt safe there.

At the same time, there was a marked tension among the more senior students, and worried faces were to be seen everywhere.

Probably because of Umbra Cave.

After all, if the sweeping missions were activated, these senior students would be sent into Umbra Cave. Death and injury awaited within.

Casualties. It was a simple word, but when it applied to your peers that you had been through thick and thin with, it hit different.

Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing split from Li Luo's group the moment they reached school. Soon enough, it was just Li Luo and Bai Mengmeng heading back to their tower.

Li Luo's bright laughter and Bai Mengmeng's giggles filled the air, as they moved with light steps towards their tower.

The pair came to an abrupt halt at the stone steps before the tower. The tree's shadow was unnaturally large.

Li Luo had almost stepped in it when he realized what it was, catching Bai Mengmeng before she stepped on it.

"Xin Fu," he said kindly. "Why are you squatting here? You look... pitiful." He looked like an orphan waiting to be adopted.

Bai Mengmeng jumped backwards in alarm. "Sorry, Xin Fu, I didn't see you there."

Xin Fu looked up glumly from under his hood.

"Er..." A thought occurred to Li Luo. "You wouldn't have spent your entire holidays here, would you? Don't you have friends to go out with? Xin Fu shook his head mutely. He had barely spoken a word to anyone here at Astral Sage College. Of course he didn't have friends.

Li Luo had guessed as much. The man was reticent to a fault, perhaps because of his shadow resonance. One barely noticed his presence, and he was often overlooked.

"That's really pitiful." Li Luo sighed.

Bai Mengmeng looked at him with sympathy as well. "Xin Fu, we'll definitely take you with us when we go out next time. I did walk around trying to find you before I left. I walked all around, but didn't see you anywhere." She explained.

"When you left, I was sitting right here," he said morosely.

Bai Mengmeng's face froze. "Erm, well, I really didn't see you."

Xin Fu shook his head and gave a suffering sigh.

"Oh, you're all here."

The three looked over to see Chi Chan walking over, her slender frame clad in her usual veils.

The three students hastily greeted their teacher.

Chi Chan nodded to them. "Well, since you're all gathered let's begin today's lesson. I have important news for you today."

She turned and walked to the garden with a seriousness in her bearing that made Li Luo pretty sure what she was going to talk about.

He'd bet a sixth-grade spirit liquid it was going to be Umbra Cave.

All three hurried after her to the spacious pavilion, and the four seated themselves.

"Well, you might have heard bits and pieces of what I'm going to talk about, which is Umbra Cave." Chi Chan said immediately.

She went over some basic information about Umbra Cave. Li Luo took it a bit more calmly, having heard it from Jiang Qing'e. Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu needed a little more time to deal with it. Especially the former, whose fair skin was looking even paler than ever. She looked scared enough to faint.

They too were struck by how close the Others really were.

"This month, the school will organize purging missions. The Two, Three, and Four Star Hall squads will all participate. We received news that the pollution this time is especially bad, and even some of the most

peripheral areas have been contaminated. This time, the One Star Hall Violet Vibrance squads might also be called."

She looked at them gravely. "The summons are compulsory. If you reject, you will be expelled."

"Umbra Cave not only threatens Astral Sage College. The school protects all of Xia Kingdom from Other Disasters. Whether you do it for school or family, you should have no reason to refuse."

The three students nodded stoically, showing the steel and perseverance that had helped them win their positions as Violet Vibrance students in the first place.

"However, even though you are called, senior squads will accompany you, imparting experience and protection." She said, nodding with satisfaction at how well they were taking this.

"Mentor, can you tell us more about the Others?" Li Luo asked.

Whether they were called up for the purging missions this time or not, they now knew that it was inevitable in the near future.

"It is about time to tell you," Chi Chan concurred. "I told you before that the shadow world was born of the evil of humankind. These others are those evil thoughts incarnate."

"Others are deadly and strong, and come in all shapes and forms. They are largely divided into four classes. Eroding class, Disaster class, Catastrophe class, and Other Kings. Eroding class others eat away at your character, allowing your evil thoughts to surface and take control of your body. Eventually you will succumb to their control; become their puppet."

"Erosion is a classic power of the Others... in all these years of culling at the Umbra Cave, many have fallen to their own comrades, corrupted by the evil influence of erosion."

Even Li Luo felt clammy when he heard this. Not only did they have to be on guard against the Others, but also against their own squad mates?

If it came at a critical moment, they might well be doomed.

"The Eroding class Others are also dichotomized into white and red eroders.... as their evil wills grow stronger, they gradually transit from white to red."

"White eroders are roughly second-tier Resonant Master in strength, while the red eroders are at the third tier... If you are assigned to purging missions, these will be the ones you take on."

"The Disaster class Others are at the General stage in strength, while the Catastrophe class Others are as strong as our Dukes. Once such an Other appears, it can turn a prosperous city into carnage in the blink of an eye."

"As for Other Kings..."

A moment of dread, as Chi Chan's voice wavered slightly.

"I hope we never meet those. Each one is truly a reckoning on its own. They have enough corruptive power to turn an entire country mad."

Her three students shared a collective shudder.

Although she had not said it explicitly, it was implied that Other Kings could only be dealt with by human King stage cultivators.

She took a deep breath. "The Others normally have grotesque appearances, but the more they resemble humans the stronger they get. So if you see one that looks exactly like us, whether in Umbra Cave or elsewhere..."

"Better run."

The three students nodded fervently.

"And now, let's continue the lesson for today. There is no news confirmed on the purging missions yet, so you may continue cultivating for now." She said with a small sigh.

"Hopefully you will not be called upon."

If they were activated, it indicated the Umbra Cave pollution was very serious. That was not good news at all.

Chapter 0235: Clashing Opinions

Astral Sage College, Three Star Hall.

A training arena.

The middle-aged woman called Huo Xu was examining her three students' progress, and she gave them a stern smile. "Looks like all of you have been keeping up your training. Especially Qing'e—if you keep this up, it's very likely you'll break through to the Heavenly Dipper General Stage by year's end. Your chances of beating the Seven Astral Pillars will be much higher."

Jiang Qing'e nodded.

"Now, I'm sure you must have heard the news already. The Umbra Cave will open this month. The purging missions will, of course, include you. You're not newbies, and it won't be your first time going in, so I won't repeat all the usual stuff. Just take a moment, remember the danger you know it holds. Be careful.

"Soon, we Violet Vibrance mentors will enter the Umbra Cave first. We will punch deep in to wipe out the stronger Others.

"This time, you will bring a junior team with you. As for how you choose the junior team, that will be up to the squad."

Huo Xu stood up, then waved and left.

As she left, Jiang Qing'e turned to her two teammates, who were breathing out in relief. "Mentor's as strict as ever."

Her teammates were one girl and one guy.

The guy was skinny and had sharp features, his skin dark as a coal in the fire.

He had keen, piercing eyes, and when he smiled, his brilliant, white teeth almost seemed to sparkle.

His name was Qiu Bai.

The other girl was a diminutive figure with a ponytail. She was in a white training uniform that didn't fully hide her womanly figure.

Her name was Tian Tian.

These were Jiang Qing'e's teammates in the Black Swan Squad.

"Good going, Leader. If you beat the Seven Astral Pillars, you'll have set a new record," Tian Tian said.

Qiu Bai, who was examining his own reflection seriously in a hand mirror, nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

Jiang Qing'e looked at them. "Any thoughts on the junior team we bring?"

Tian Tian's smile was cat-like. "Leader, we already have a lead."

"Oh? Who?"

"Who else? Your biggest fan in the Two Star Hall, Ye Qiuding," she teased.

Qiu Bai looked up from his mirror. "Ye Qiuding's quite strong. His Nature's Cauldron Squad clinched second place in the last ranking battle, just behind the Fire Fairy Squad."

"Ye Qiuding joined us on a mission before as well. It makes sense that we choose them again," Tian Tian pointed out.

"I don't intend to ask him," Jiang Qing'e said calmly.

Her teammates looked up in surprise. "You don't want to choose Ye Qiuding? Who then? Of course the Fire Fairy Squad would be even better, I guess."

"I intend to bring the Fairness & Justice Squad."

"The Fairness & Justice Squad?" Qiu Bai ran over the name in his mind. Didn't seem like it rang a bell among the Two Star Hall teams.

Tian Tian got there first. "You mean the One Star Hall team? Their leader's Li Luo, isn't it? Leader, you..."

Even Qiu Bai put his mirror away at this. "A One Star team?" He frowned. "That doesn't seem too appropriate."

They might have given way in other circumstances, but the Umbra Cave was nothing to mess with. A mistake there might prevent them from making it out. Of course they would want to choose their best chance—the strongest team possible.

They had never brought a One Star squad into the Umbra Cave before.

"I admit it's for selfish reasons. But the Fairness & Justice Squad isn't weak. They're the top squad in the One Star Hall," Jiang Qing'e admitted. "I don't believe they'll drag us down. And I will do my best to cover their weaknesses in the Umbra Cave."

Tian Tian sighed exasperatedly. "They're promising, yes, but they're just a One Star team..."

"Won't you reconsider, Leader?" Even Qiu Bai was speaking up.

Jiang Qing'e was silent for a moment, then she shook her head. "Sorry. That's my stand. Even if they're lesser in any way, I can plug the gap. I hope you can trust me on this."

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian shared a look. Their cool and rational leader always had a blind spot where Li Luo was concerned.

"Leader, you know the dangers of the Umbra Cave as well. Of course we believe in your skill, but how will we cover any crisis that comes up?" Qiu Bai pleaded.

"We will cover it with my life."

Tian Tian inhaled sharply. Jiang Qing'e would go so far for this man? Weren't they only engaged? Still, it was a clear declaration of a special relationship, if she was willing to put her life on the line.

Li Luo was a lucky man.

"Well, if that's your choice... We'll have to settle it according to our squad rules," Qiu Bai casually said. He took a few steps back, and black flames roared to life, shrouding him. They parted, and a fire-tipped spear appeared in his hand.

Tian Tian splayed her hands and stepped back as well, her green resonant power taking the silhouette of a bird. Her flapping wings raised coiling gusts of wind.

The squad rule was simple. When the opinions didn't match, brute force was the decider.

Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Couldn't we have just done this earlier? Save me some breath.

"Still, thanks."

Both sides understood that when it got to this stage, it meant that they had accepted her suggestion...

Why?

Because they couldn't beat her, damn it!

Even so, it was a formality that had to be upheld.

There was a grimace from the pair and then, with an upheaval of resonant power, they charged.

Chapter 0236: Four Star Formula

The next few days passed with no news about purging missions for One Star squads. The school was probably still discussing it.

As a result, Li Luo and the others were keeping up with their cultivation as usual, now that they knew the purging missions would come around later, if not sooner. The stronger they were, the better their chances of making it out of the Umbra Cave alive.

One day.

Li Luo had just finished his training in the underground basement. He made his way upstairs to see Bai Mengmeng setting the table with a sumptuous meal.

"Leader. Done with training? I brought these back from the canteen." She smiled at him.

"You're a treasure," Li Luo said happily, sitting down at the table.

She sat opposite him. Grinning, Li Luo pulled out a small bottle with an opaque liquid inside. He set it down carefully in front of Bai Mengmeng.

"A present?" she said, surprised.

"Try a drop," mumbled Li Luo, busy trying to stuff an entire hunk of crispy, golden, barbecued pork into his mouth.

She looked at the liquid dubiously, then her eyes widened as she looked at Li Luo with a joy she could scarcely believe. She reached out with a quaking hand and put a drop on her tongue.

She went rigid with shock.

"This... is sweetness?!"

Li Luo nodded and grinned. "I told you I had an inspiration. I made this flavor taster over the last two days. It's sweet, indeed. Once I get it all down, you should be able to taste the full range of flavors. Then your sense of taste should be fully restored."

Bai Mengmeng clutched the bottle tightly.

"Leader, thank you," she said softly.

Li Luo waved it off, but his nonchalance faltered when he saw large teardrops streaming down her face.

"Er..."

Just then, footsteps were heard from the staircase. Xin Fu had come down the stairs just in time to see Bai Mengmeng crying as if her heart was broken.

All sorts of dramatic love intrigues flashed through his imagination. Finally, his attention settled on Li Luo.

Playboy.

"Bad time?" he asked softly.

Li Luo rolled his eyes at him.

Bai Mengmeng hurriedly wiped away her tears, a little embarrassed.

"Mengmeng, I said I would restore your sense of taste. Trust me," Li Luo said kindly.

"Besides, we are such good friends with such a good relationship. For you, forgoing sleep and food is worth it," Li Luo said with a noble sigh.

Bai Mengmeng carefully stowed the bottle. "Leader, I haven't been slouching on my formula creation either." She smiled happily.

"Oh, what are those compared to our friendship! Take it easy. At your own pace." He took a deep swig of water to hide his expression.

"I've worked on this formula for many years," she said eagerly. "If all goes well, it'll definitely be a four-star formula!"

"Pffffff!"

Li Luo's mouthful of water sprayed out. If not for a last-second turn of the head, he would have sprinkled the entire table of food very nicely with saliva.

"Four- four-star formula?"

After so many years, the best that the Suncreek Villa had come up with was a three-star formula. Even for the best villas, a four-star formula was a great treasure of inestimable value.

How many times had Li Luo dreamed of a four-star formula for the Suncreek Villa, to take it to new heights?

Each time he woke up from the dream, he could only sigh sadly.

It was a daydream indeed. Even if one occasionally appeared on the market, the price was unbelievable.

And now Bai Mengmeng had said that she was on the verge of completing one!

It was like a pizza falling out of the sky.

There was a hint of impish mischief in Bai Mengmeng's eyes. "Oh, yes, a four-star formula. I've worked on it for many years."

Li Luo stared at her. "Look here, Mengmeng," he said seriously, "we're still young. It's alright for us to have some late-nighters. We should work with all we got. We can take it."

"Ahem..." Xin Fu sat down. "Leader, your greed is showing."

Li Luo ignored him. His entire brain was filled with thoughts of a four-star formula. He was seized with a sudden urge to kidnap Bai Mengmeng and lock her in the lab until she finished.

All his casualness had evaporated before the temptation of a four-star formula.

He squashed his emotions down violently and hurried over to pour Bai Mengmeng a bowl of warm soup.

"Thanks, Leader." She took the soup with a grateful smile. "Don't worry, Leader, this formula will definitely be the Suncreek Villa's."

Ah, bliss. How he wanted to kidna- invite her to the Suncreek Villa...

There was a mood of optimism and cheer as they dug in.

Dong!

A low, rumbling gong sounded, echoing all across the Astral Sage College. It didn't sound good.

All three put their chopsticks down slowly.

The door swung open, and Chi Chan walked in.

"No time to eat," she said brusquely. "The Umbra Cave's open."

"The school's decided that One Star Violet Vibrance squads must also join, for the experience. Come with me."

They looked at each other.

The time had come.

Chapter 0237: Ye Chengying

Li Luo's squad hurriedly crammed some food in their mouths before heading out after Chi Chan.

As they walked, they could see many others hurrying about their business. These were Two, Three, and also Four Star Hall students, all of whom would be participating in the purging missions.

A mobilization of this scale made one nervous.

This past, peaceful month was a thing of the past now. In its place was taut tension and stress.

These were the horrors of legend, the Others.

As more and more people appeared, Li Luo noticed that they were all heading for the Tree of Resonant Power.

"The Umbra Cave is right under the Tree of Resonant Power," Chi Chan confirmed.

The students were surprised. So they had been cultivating above the Umbra Cave all along?

"The Tree of Resonant Power isn't just for cultivation purposes," Chi Chan said, lifting her head up to survey the tree. "It also helps to suppress the Umbra Cave's power. If not for its help, the principal alone would not have been able to hold it back for so long."

Li Luo swallowed. It really seemed like the Umbra Cave was the real reason for the Astral Sage College's location.

A thought occurred to Li Luo. "Mentor... the other Sage Colleges, are they all built to suppress rifts like the Umbra Cave as well?"

"Sharp, aren't you?" she said with an approving smile. "Indeed, it's the case for all Sage Colleges... It is the reason for the school network."

That was impressive planning. So all around the world, these powerful schools were plugging the gaps and preventing widespread carnage.

Soon enough, they reached the Tree of Resonant Power, where an undercurrent of tension tinged the crowd's voices.

There was a teeming mass of people, yet they were clearly divided into their halls.

Compared to the louder One and Two Star Hall groups, the seniors were a lot more composed.

Clearly, their many experiences with purging missions gave them a good sense of what to expect.

There was a stirring in the Four Star Hall crowd, and Li Luo looked over to see that two stars had arrived.

Gong Shenjun and the First Princess.

Gong Shenjun was the ultimate specimen of a man. Good-looking and hailed as the strongest of the Seven Astral Pillars, it was hard to say which of those features attracted the girls more strongly.

And if Gong Shenjun was a god to the girls, then the First Princess was a goddess to many of the guys.

If not for Jiang Qing'e, she would be the undisputed goddess in school.

"While the Umbra Cave is open, Three and Four Star Hall students are the main culling force. At this time, even the Seven Astral Pillars will come," Chi Chan said.

Li Luo was interested now. The Seven Astral Pillars was a name he was pretty familiar with now—the seven strongest students in the Astral Sage College that everyone wanted to be.

Still, Li Luo had only seen Gong Shenjun and the First Princess so far. The other five were still a mystery.

Were they all going to show up today?

He wanted to see who they were. After all, Jiang Qing'e would challenge one of them at the end of the year...

He didn't have to wait for long.

"Look, another Seven Astral Pillar!" Bai Mengmeng pointed excitedly. "That senior's figure is incredible," she said admiringly.

"Oh?"

Li Luo looked over, analytical mode on. Indeed, there was another tall figure standing with Gong Shenjun and the First Princess.

She had long hair and was clad in a latex suit that left nothing to the imagination. Many of the girls were looking over enviously.

Her face could be considered classically pretty, except for the complete lack of emotion. Her eyes looked like death itself. A real contrast to the other youthful ones.

She might not even be as pretty as Bai Mengmeng, but one's eyes rarely made it up to her face. That body. Oh. My. God.

"She's called Ye Chengying, from House Lanling. I hear she takes on side jobs sometimes," Chi Chan said.

"Side jobs?" Li Luo repeated, puzzled.

"As a killer."

"..." Well, that was quite an intense side hustle.

"Better be careful, Li Luo," Chi Chan said with a sudden grin. "Seeing the way House Luolan is going, someone might well hire her to kill you."

"..." Li Luo started to sweat. "Er, surely not? We're all schoolmates."

"Well, school is school. Business is business. No clash there."

"Mentor, please. I'm a timid one."

While they were discussing Ye Chengying, no one noticed that Xin Fu had looked up from under his hood and was staring intensely at her.

Ye Chengying seemed to sense it, and she turned her cold eyes his way.

Xin Fu hurriedly lowered his eyes.

Ye Chengying's eyes lingered on him long after, and then finally she turned away indifferently.

Chapter 0238: The Umbra Cave Opens

After Ye Chengying, the other Seven Astral Pillars started to show up one after another, each stirring interest with their arrival.

"That one's called Wang Chao, from one of the three great families of Xia. He has a lower eighth-grade topaz beast resonance. He probably has the strongest defensive abilities among the Seven Astral Pillars..." Chi Chan introduced. Li Luo and the others saw a barrel-chested youth with a glimmering, golden hue to his skin. He stood there like a wall of gold, and there was an immovability to his stance.

"That one is Zhong Taiqiu. His father is one of the few governors in the Xia Kingdom that control three provinces. He has a lower eighth-grade devil python resonance."

Zhong Taiqiu looked rather unremarkable, with a friendly smile that puffed his cheeks upwards to the point that his eyes were slits. Still, there was a slippery feel to the man.

"Governor of three provinces."

Li Luo was suitably impressed. This was on a completely different level from Shi Huang's father.

Perhaps he had too much bad history with governors' sons before, but Li Luo took an instant dislike to Zhong Taiqiu.

"The girl on the far left is called Qiao Yu. She's the one with the most ordinary background in the Seven Astral Pillars. Her accomplishments are all results of her sheer hard work and ability. She has a lower eighth-grade lightning resonance, and a fiery temper to match. She doesn't like those pompous elites who think very highly of themselves. You'd best stay away from her, Li Luo. You're exactly that sort of elite."

Qiao Yu had a neat, short bob of silver hair, and she was pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. She could be considered as good looking as Ye Chengying, and she wore modest, plain clothing, including long pants that showed off her height.

Li Luo was stung. "Mentor, perhaps my background is quite elite, but do you really think I'm puffed up and loose?"

Chi Chan's eyes flicked over to Bai Mengmeng. "Oh, do I?"

Li Luo shook his head irritably. He had no idea why his mentor had developed this wrong impression of him. It was the curse of being handsome... which he had no control over.

"I think you've seen the last members of the Seven Astral Pillars before. House Jinque's young lord Si Tianming... He's the one who most recently ascended to the Seven Astral Pillars."

"Si Tianming, huh..."

Li Luo looked at the man with oily, green hair. Welp, another one he didn't quite like.

Now all seven were gathered.

Such was the importance of the Umbra Cave, that not a single Seven Astral Pillar could be absent.

As more and more students started to gather, a few of the tree's branches began to twinkle with light, and Vice Principal Su Xin appeared.

Her cheeks were drawn with tension, a sharp contrast to her usual, warm and smiling composure. It was a sobering look.

"Students. You all know why you are here.

"The Umbra Cave is open, and the corruption within spreads rapidly. We must cull it quickly, before it overruns into the world as we know it.

"This year's purging missions begin now.

"The corruption is especially bad this year, so the school has decided to include One Star Violet Vibrance squads as well. You will need to find a Three Star Hall squad to pair up with you when you enter." A low muttering broke out. Even for the seniors, it was the first time they had seen One Star squads being included.

The First Princess frowned. "I wonder how bad the extent of corruption is this year, to warrant this."

Although only their Violet Vibrance squads were included for now, it looked to be a clear pilot test. Which meant that eventually, One Star Gold Gleam squads might also be included.

The Umbra Cave was in bad shape for sure.

As the First Princess of the Xia Kingdom, she was even more worried than the others, as this concerned her kingdom. If the Umbra Cave fell, it was not only the Astral Sage College that would suffer, but all of her territory.

That was not an outcome she could accept.

Gong Shenjun nodded in agreement. "I suggested to the school before: why not open the Umbra Cave to all the powers in the Xia Kingdom and get them to help? But the school simply replied that the time was not yet right."

"I'm sure they have their own considerations. The Umbra Cave is nothing to take lightly. It has to be carefully handled because the stakes are high."

"Perhaps," Gong Shenjun said slowly, looking at Vice Principal Su Xin.

The vice principal's voice rang out again. "As per our past cullings, the Violet Vibrance mentors will lead the first batch to wipe out the strongest Others. They will advance deep in, to lend the principal their strength.

"The second batch will be Four Star squads, cleaning up any stragglers that might have been overlooked.

"The Three Star squads and Two Star squads should focus on improving the general safety, cleaning up what you can."

Strategy explained, she turned to the Violet Vibrance mentors by her side. "If we're all prepared...

"Let's go."

The mentors nodded solemnly.

In the next moment, worldly natural energy surged in a kaleidoscope of colors, forming a web that stretched across the whole sky. A keening sound filled the air, covering the entire school.

Shoosh!

A ribbon of rainbow-colored resonant power arched in the sky, twisting in ancient and complicated runes before connecting to the trunk of the Tree of Resonant Power.

Rumble!

Suddenly, the Tree of Resonant Power cracked with a loud bang, as though some beast had been awakened. The gap in the trunk grew wider and wider at the base, until finally there was an ancient door about a dozen feet wide.

There was a primalcy to it, an ancientness that seemed to precede all that they had ever known.

Creak.

The heavy, wooden door slowly creaked open.

Behind it, complete darkness.

Whoo!

An eerie wind howled from within, and the temperature in the courtyard plummeted. A wave of terror blew past the students.

They looked at the black gap with trepidation.

This... was the Umbra Cave?

Chapter 0239: Choices

The chilling feeling continued to pulse out periodically from behind the ancient wooden door, putting fear into the students' hearts.

A fear of the unknown.

As the door opened, Su Xin shouted her commands. "Besides the Violet Vibrance mentors tasked to protect the school, the rest will follow me in now.

"Students, sort out the pairings amongst yourselves."

Streaks of resonant power shot forward, hovering in front of the door to the Umbra Cave.

These were the Violet Vibrance mentors, a formidable force commanded by the school.

"I'm going in too," Chi Chan said to her squad. "Find a Three Star squad willing to pair with you. They will instruct you on the specifics of what to do inside."

They could hear the concern in her voice, even though they could not see her expression behind the veil.

"I hope to come back and see you three safe."

"You take care too, Mentor."

She inclined her head and turned to join the others in front of the door.

And then the Violet Vibrance mentors disappeared through the gap.

"What a force..."

Li Luo marveled. These Violet Vibrance mentors were all Dukes. Seeing them move in force was an impressive sight. They could probably trample House Luolan's special defensive wards without a second thought.

Such was the might of the Astral Sage College.

Vice Principal Su Xin herself entered, and now the students were left whispering amongst themselves.

The remaining mentors yelled for order. "All students, prepare! If you need to pair up, pick among yourselves now."

They dissolved into a chaotic discussion.

Li Luo noted that the Four Star students remained above the uneasy mood. They quietly went about their preparations, their calm belying their experience in the Umbra Cave.

Still, the dangers of the Umbra Cave were not merely overcome with experience. Each purging mission saw casualties—both death and injuries. Once they entered, it was almost certain the same number of people would not be coming out.

Unlike the first years, the Four Star Hall students were already used to the casualties. Neither expulsion nor entering the Umbra Cave was an inviting option, but by their fourth year, many students had come to silently accept this deadly responsibility.

After all, they had all developed some sort of affection for the Astral Sage College after their years of cultivation here.

"Leader, are we going to go find a Three Star Hall team?" Bai Mengmeng asked anxiously.

From what Vice Principal Su Xin had said, a team as green as theirs would be much safer with a stronger Three Star squad.

All of the other Violet Vibrance squads were heading over to the Three Star Hall students.

The senior students were avoiding them scrupulously. Of course they would rather pair with the Two Star squads, even if the other option was the champion of the One Star Hall...

The additional responsibility of protecting new students was a very tiring one.

Of course, mentors were clarifying the additional rewards for successfully bringing back a newcomer team. It was making some of the Three Star squads reconsider.

Still, the truly elite Three Star squads did not care about such small handouts. As long as they had a free hand to do their culling in the Umbra Cave, they would earn points galore. Burdens? No thank you.

The first year Violet Vibrance squads were hitting walls everywhere. They might well be the biggest fish of their One Star pond, but here they were small fry.

"Leader, the Three Star Hall students are ignoring us." Bai Mengmeng fretted. Still, it was understandable. No One Star team had ever entered the Umbra Cave before.

Li Luo shrugged with uncertainty. Jiang Qing'e had said that she would take them, but back then he hadn't understood the immensity of the danger... He didn't want to drag Jiang Qing'e down. He would rather just chill at the entrance or something.

Get a little experience, even if he had to forgo the points.

Suddenly, a wide swath opened up in the Three Star Hall crowd. Jiang Qing'e's sylph-like figure strode out.

Behind her, her two irate teammates.

She walked straight towards Li Luo.

"Senior Jiang." A voice cut in. "For this purging mission, how about our Nature's Cauldron Squad joins you?"

She paused, turning to see a Two Star squad stepping out into her way. The speaker was none other than Ye Qiuding.

He smiled with confidence. "Senior Jiang, we have worked with you together before. We understand each other well, and I don't think we'll let you down if we team up."

He looked behind Jiang Qing'e with another confident pump of his eyebrows. "Senior Qiu? Senior Tian? What do you say?"

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian shrugged noncommittally. They would have been pretty happy with Nature's Cauldron Squad, but their leader was too strong.

"Leader, do you wanna reconsider? Ye Qiuding's squad would be a welcome addition for any Three Star squad. Li Luo and the others are getting into the Umbra Cave for the first time. It's not necessary for them to follow us, actually. It might actually be more dangerous for them," Qiu Bai said in a low voice.

According to the school rules, the Three Star squads only needed to take a junior squad, but not necessarily a One Star squad. It made sense to choose a Two Star squad that could actually help them out.

Jiang Qing'e just shook her head slightly, her golden eyes not even flicking an inch in his direction.

Li Luo needed a mountain of points for Royal Sap. He had no time to gain experience only in the Umbra Cave. 100,000 points. No risk, no reward.

With her, at least things would be in her control.

Maybe it wasn't too fair to her two teammates, but Jiang Qing'e had sworn that she would cover their weaknesses with her own strength.

Jiang Qing'e shook her head again. "Sorry. Given your squad's strength, I'm sure there are better squads out there to take you."

She was already gone by the time her words were out, striding straight up to Li Luo and taking him by the wrist.

"You. And your squad. You're coming with us."

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu thought she was the coolest thing they had ever seen.

The Three Star Hall students stood in awe. And confusion.

Jiang Qing'e? Choosing a newcomer team?

Life was strange indeed.

Chapter 0240: To Each Their Own

Jiang Qing'e choosing Li Luo's team was a shocking decision for the other students.

The Black Swan Squad was the strongest in the Three Star Hall. Each time they entered the Umbra Cave, they basically cleaned the most corruption, killed the most Others, and earned the most points.

For a squad of their caliber, it was all about efficiency.

An efficiency that would inevitably be hampered by a newcomer team, which would trip them up.

It was expected that the mid-level teams would be the ones accepting the newcomers. They were not strong enough to worry about efficiency, not weak enough to have no headroom to spare... A sweet spot where the trade off with the point reward was just about right.

Still, surprise turned to jealousy soon enough.

Jiang Qing'e, choosing to protect Li Luo.

To the point where she would give up a ton of points.

The purging missions in the Umbra Cave also ran according to a leaderboard. The first ranked team would always be showered with rewards.

In the past few purging missions, the Black Swan Squad had always dominated in the Three Star Hall. With a burden this time, the other squads smelled opportunity.

Which made the other Three Star squads happy enough with this arrangement.

"Lovey-dovey, aren't they?"

Duze Honglian sneered. Jiang Qing'e was really giving up a lot for Li Luo.

Still, it was all because she could completely thrash her two squad mates, quashing any dissent with sheer power.

"Nobility has its price, and for you it'll be the first place reward." She chuckled. Her younger brother, Duze Beixuan, was also involved in the purging mission, but she had not teamed up with him.

Firstly, she might be the leader of her group, but the power dynamic here was not so imbalanced that her whims could rule the squad.

Secondly, she wasn't that arrogant. Newcomers were weak, even if they were Violet Vibrance squads. They would definitely only slow down the Three Star Hall students.

The right way was for these newcomers to get familiar with the Umbra Cave in their own way. When they were stronger, it would be a pleasure to work with them... But until then, they should stay out of everyone else's way.

Jiang Qing'e ignored the crowd, pulling Li Luo along with her towards where the mentors stood, straight past the Four Star Hall students.

The First Princess had noticed this as well—she was always aware of Jiang Qing'e's movements.

"She is a little too sweet to Li Luo. But I wonder if the silver spoon in his mouth is really the best way to help him grow," Gong Shenjun remarked.

The First Princess' red phoenix eyes were thoughtful as she recalled how Li Luo had surprised them again and again at crucial times.

"Why do you think Li Luo will be a burden?"

Gong Shenjun started. "A Three Star squad's culling will definitely involve Disaster Class Others... You know the danger of that," he said with a disbelieving laugh. "Li Luo's only a First Pattern right? The gap is huge."

"Perhaps." The First Princess smiled mysteriously.

Gong Shenjun looked at her again. For some reason, he felt like the First Princess had been paying special attention to Li Luo lately.

"Li Luo's handsome, but surely that's not it..." he thought to himself. If there was one thing that was certain about his royal younger sister, it was her ambition. Li Luo's dual resonances might be unique, but to her highly-set sights, they were merely above average.

There should not be anything going on between the two.

While Gong Shenjun pondered this, Jiang Qing'e had already led Li Luo's squad over to a mentor and registered them.

The mentor handed each of them a plaque of green wood.

Li Luo turned the greenwood plaque carefully in his hands. It was cool as ice to the touch, leaching the heat slowly away from his palms with a slight stinging feeling that was somehow comforting at the same time.

"This is made from the Tree of Resonant Power. It's called a greenwood comforter, and it will guard your heart against the corrupting influence of the Others. Wear it at all times in the Umbra Cave," Jiang Qing'e warned them.

Noob Li Luo, Noob Bai Mengmeng, and Noob Xin Fu nodded obediently.

"When in the Umbra Cave, we'll all be one team. Let's get to know each other," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo looked over at Jiang Qing'e's squad mates, smiling respectfully. "Please take care of us inside, senior brother and sister."

Both Qiu Bai and Tian Tian kept their doubts to themselves. The matter was settled, and they had to commit to their leader's decision, for better or worse.

"Stick to us inside. Don't do anything crazy," Tian Tian said with a kind smile.

"We have time now. The Violet Vibrance mentors will probably take half a day to open the path before we are cleared to enter," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo's squad nodded.

...

The chaos eventually began to settle, the One Star teams finding willing teams after some time.

There was one snag, however. The Two Star squad Fire Fairy Squad had approached Lu Qing'er, Qin Zhulu, and Yin Yue.

"Qing'er, how about our two squads team up? We're only in the Two Star Hall, so our mission isn't too dangerous. We might serve both our purposes well working together." The leader of the Fire Fairy Squad was Zhu Xuan, and he was currently turning up the charm.

Lu Qing'er's eyes were still lingering on Li Luo as he was being dragged away by Jiang Qing'e. She wasn't bold enough to hold his hand before everybody.

Still... they were engaged after all.

The thought irritated her enough to not want to deal with Zhu Xuan all of a sudden. "Well, I don't care either way, but you'll have to ask our leader."

Qin Zhulu's eyes widened. "Damn, now you remember I'm the leader?? Why am I the meat shield?"

Still, the ferocious countenance of Qin Zhulu normally intimidated people too much to see the subtleties of his expression changes clearly. Before Zhu Xuan spoke, Qin Zhulu had already shaken his head. "If you can keep your squad's girl away from me, I'm good."

That was a dastardly request that caught even Zhu Xuan off guard. The Umbra Cave was a dangerous place. How the hell was he going to keep squad mates apart like that? That was dangerous as hell!

The busty girl in Zhu Xuan's squad stared angrily at Qin Zhulu. Was this guy a moron?

In the end, Zhu Xuan left, bitter and confused. No way could he get along with that weird guy.

...

"Leader, we've been slighted."

Ye Qiuding was still looking in Jiang Qing'e's direction, his back to his teammates, who were offering sympathetic encouragement. "Jiang Qing'e's reckless. Our squad is way stronger than that one."

Inside his sleeves, Ye Qiuding's fists shook with anger.

He hadn't expected Jiang Qing'e to abandon the better option by far. Was this still the same rational Jiang Qing'e that he thought he knew?

Ye Qiuding took a deep breath, then he shelved his anger and led his team away silently.

"Interested in working with us?" He had barely turned away when another voice called out to him. He saw that it was Duze Honglian.

Ye Qiuding frowned.

"Come with us. We have the best chance to win first place. Show Jiang Qing'e the error of her ways as well," Duze Honglian said with an arrogant drawl to her voice.

Ye Qiuding's eyes drifted to the dream couple, huddled together in the distance.

"Well... why not."