

## Resonance 241

### Chapter 0241: May Fear Be Gone

"We will be placed into the outer periphery of the Umbra Cave. In the zone, there are purified spots that the school has painstakingly carved out. We will be sent to the nearest purified spot according to the number on our Greenwood Comforters.

"There will also be many other squads nearby. Our combined job is to clear the area around our purified spot."

In the noisy courtyard, they were huddled together, Jiang Qing'e patiently explaining the plan to the newcomers.

Li Luo's squad took out their greenwood plaques, spotting "13" in the corners.

"There are also purification towers in the zone, with purification runes carved all over them. But because of the corrupting influence, the power in the runes has been completely spent. We need to use the purification dust that the school gives us to refresh these runes and bring the tower back to life.

"Once the towers are re-energized, the purifying light will gradually cleanse the entire area."

The newcomers listened with rapt attention. Finally, the great mystery of the Umbra Cave was becoming clearer to them.

"Sounds... easy enough?" Li Luo said.

Tian Tian laughed from the side. Her arms were crossed, her generous curves not fully hidden by her baggy clothing. "While re-energizing the tower, the purifying energy triggers the Others. They will come swarming to the tower.

"Which means," she said, leaning in, "we will be completely surrounded on all sides by Others. No room for error. Either we successfully get the tower running and cull the Others, or we die, overwhelmed by the horde."

Li Luo bit his tongue.

"Since the school has done so much preparation within the Umbra Cave, why not just leave it permanently open and maintain the purification towers?" he asked.

From what Jiang Qing'e had explained, it seemed like these purification towers were rather effective. Why bother shutting it away and giving the corruption time to reassert itself?

"Because of the dark tide. Every once in a while, a dark tide will form in the depths of the Umbra Cave. It's a black hole of evil energy that spills over from the shadow world, a terror beyond imagining.

"Even Dukes have to be careful when the dark tide is in effect. That's why the purgings have always been back and forth. When the dark tide comes, we have to back off, but that wipes out the purification towers. We have to wait for it to recede, then we move in to reactivate the towers. Otherwise, the darkness will take hold and spawn even more Others. In the end, they will grow strong enough to breach our world."

Li Luo's respect for the shadow world was growing healthier and healthier by the moment. It had looked like a puny, little gap in the tree, but it demanded all of the Astral Sage College's strength to hold at bay.

He gave up asking about permanent solutions to the Umbra Cave... Clearly, they lacked any such strength.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were looking curiously at the patiently explaining Jiang Qing'e. It was a side of their leader they rarely saw.

She was not the kind who liked long conversations. Anyone else in Li Luo's position would have received zero words from her.

Soft spots.

Which was strange for them. Did Jiang Qing'e really think of herself as Li Luo's future wife?

What manner of sorcery did Li Luo possess?

Soon enough, time passed, and the evening sun was a red orb low in the sky, its rays a mellow warmth ready to bow gracefully away to the coolness of the night.

Dong!

A low gong that startled the students sounded.

They looked over to see the huge, greenwood doors rumble slightly, an eerie howl behind them.

As though something was rattling it from the other side.

The experienced students took it more calmly, but some of the newcomers were freaking out.

Be that as it may, one of the runic patterns on the doors began to glow with a dim light, and soon the shuddering subsided.

"It's just the sounds of the Violet Vibrance mentors coming into contact with the stronger Others," Jiang Qing'e said calmly.

"Although, this means it's about time for us to go in."

Right on cue, a mentor called out, "All students, standby."

"Four Star Hall students and Gold Gleam mentors, enter first!"

The already-prepared wave of students and mentors made a final check on their weapons and then stampeded in.

"May fear be gone."

"May we live long."

The quiet chorus of voices affirmed their unshakable belief, and like a coordinated army, they marched through the greenwood doors as one.

The newcomers were awed into silence. Even through this, they could tell the difference between the seniors and themselves.

Not just in strength, but in sheer belief and willpower.

After four years at the Astral Sage College, they had already gotten used to the dangers of the Umbra Cave and had even developed some basic defenses against the Others.

No wonder these Four Star Hall students often regarded them with disdain and amusement. What they had gone through was way beyond what the newcomers had ever seen before.

Li Luo was equally awed. The Astral Sage College's strength did not just lie in the teachers. They had the best of the new generation as well.

He was suddenly struck by how broken House Luolan was in comparison.

"That's the battle chant of the Academic Federation. It's been passed down through generations, and is meant to strengthen our faith," Jiang Qing'e said. "The Gold Gleam mentors and Four Star Hall students will comb for stronger stragglers. They also act as roaming reinforcements to deal with emergencies."

The march to go inside lasted for a full hour.

An hour later, the last Four Star Hall student finally disappeared through the door, and Jiang Qing'e was first on her feet immediately. Long legs standing firm under her battle skirt, and high shoes on her feet.

Alongside was the navy shawl that she always wore, that added just the right touch of queenly charisma. She was by far the most arresting sight among the Three Star students.

She hefted her heavy sword, swinging it effortlessly.

Shing.

"May fear be gone.

"May we live long."

Her voice rang out clear and calm, and the Three Star students heeded her clarion call as one, calling out the chant after her.

"May fear be gone."

"May we live long."

The navy shawl fluttered like a queen's mantle, and she led Qiu Bai, Tian Tian, and Li Luo's team forward.

Behind her, the rest of the Three, Two Star Hall students.

Soon, the doors were looming before their eyes, and the crack opened, swallowing all light from outside.

Jiang Qing'e cocked her head, looking back once at Li Luo. Their eyes met, then they stepped forward as one.

Together they stepped through the light into darkness, into the yawning gloom and whatever threat awaited them.

## Chapter 0242: Purified Spot Number 13

When Li Luo opened his eyes, he saw a grey and dreary world before him. Soot-colored clouds drifted past in the sky like puffs of chimney smoke, low enough to feel oppressive.

Visibility was limited, and low voices seemed to float out of the foggy translucence, whispering straight into their hearts.

They were getting jumpy, but then the Greenwood Comforters on their chests blew a cool air that calmed them down.

Whoosh.

Li Luo was quickly alert again. He cast his eyes about his surroundings, noting many other flashes of light as the others were appearing around him.

He saw that all of them had arrived in stone towers within a spot, each one shoddily built and an assortment of heights. They happened to be near the center, and the tip of their stone tower winked faintly with light that shone downwards to form a screen.

The black fog stopped at the barrier, dissipating rapidly when it came into contact with the light.

This spot seemed to be the purified spot that Jiang Qing'e had told them about.

This was purified spot 13, their one shelter in the Umbra Cave.

"How does it feel?" Jiang Qing'e's concerned voice preceded her. Behind her were the other four.

"Feels bad," Li Luo admitted honestly.

There was an oppressive feeling about the place, and he felt like there was something twisting and sinister lurking just out of sight in the fog, ready to twist its way into his heart.

And they were still within the purified spot. It would definitely get worse once they stepped out.

"It's your first time in the Umbra Cave, and you're weaker than the usual student who passes through. You'll get used to it," Jiang Qing'e said to them.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian nodded as well, not laughing at them at all. This might be the first time in the Astral Sage College's history that One Star Hall students were being sent in.

It was anybody's guess how they themselves would have fared if they had been sent into the Umbra Cave as newcomers.

Li Luo took a deep breath. He looked around to see that roughly a hundred people had gathered nearby.

"What now?" Li Luo asked. "Begin purging?"

"There's no hurry. Purging missions don't just span a few days. We'll find a place to rest, a temporary shelter. Then we plan."

Jiang Qing'e pointed at the tall tower behind them. "That's the heart of the purified spot, fashioned out of the branches of the Tree of Resonant Power. However, the transport only works once per day. From now on, the school will send daily provisions through this."

"Seems like we're in for a long one," Li Luo said.

"There's no need to get too down. The Umbra Cave is not without its benefits. Cultivation is faster here, and the chances of a breakthrough are higher.

The three newbies looked up in surprise. "There's such a thing?"

"It's said that the laws of nature are different here... It's a limbo between our world and the shadow world, where limitations are lowered. The Nobles' Battlefield is like that too," Jiang Qing'e said.

"Stronger, even. The Kings and Dukes who go there do improve at slightly faster rates than average. That's why some experts do volunteer to go there, seeking that risky edge.

"Additionally, the stress and grueling danger trains one's will. All things said, the Umbra Cave is the perfect training ground, and probably many more would choose to come here if not for the dark tide."

Jiang Qing'e said this with a hint of personal interest. She was one of those who would relish the challenge.

"Leader, you could probably drop the word 'many.' Not many have a lion's bravery like you," Qiu Bai said dryly.

"When we finish our purging mission, I'll be the first one out of here. I don't want to stay a moment longer than I have to." Tian Tian agreed, flicking her hands away from her. Others were creepy. She didn't want to encounter them at all.

Jiang Qing'e smiled. To each their own.

Another group of people approached them. The one leading them was Duze Honglian.

Beside her, Ye Qiuding's Nature's Cauldron squad.

Small world.

Duze Honglian folded her arms across her chest. "Jiang Qing'e, I'm afraid your first place position can't be held in this purging mission," she said half smugly, half challengingly.

Jiang Qing'e showed no emotion at all on her face. She merely looked at Ye Qiuding by his new leader's side and then brushed past.

Jiang Qing'e's too-cool-for-school attitude was nothing new to Duze Honglian, yet it pissed her off every time.

And damn if she didn't have the skill to back that attitude...

Still, they had a great advantage this time, and they had a good chance to overtake Jiang Qing'e. Just one victory would go a long way towards cooling her resentment against her long-time rival.

Li Luo followed Jiang Qing'e, sliding past Duzhe Honglian and her gang. As he passed Ye Qiuding, the latter turned his head along with Li Luo.

"Li Luo, I will show Senior Jiang that she made the wrong choice."

Li Luo's eyebrows went up. "Oh, do your best," he said with utmost sincerity. "You see, she told me that I have to stick by her side throughout all the Umbra Cave purging missions in the future. Bothersome, don't you think? If you could do your best to free me, I'd definitely thank you."

He left.

Ye Qiuding stood petrified to the spot, as though electrocuted. His squadmates looked at him sympathetically.

Ye Qiuding was seized with an urge to jump into the dark tide with Li Luo.

Insolent scumbag!

### **Chapter 0243: Different Feelings**

Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo's squads began to make their preparations for the purging mission.

At a dark place in the Umbra Cave.

Wraith-like figures moved through the deep fog, voices muffled in the gloomy, smoky air.

The tapping of light footsteps.

This person wore the robes of a Violet Vibrance mentor from the Astral Sage College. It was none other than Shen Jinxiao.

He traversed the fog easily, completely unafraid of the evil he knew lurked nearby.

He stopped at one point, looking down to see pale, bloated hands twisting around his ankle like snakes.

The evil aura swamped his leg, trying to invade his body.

Shoosh!

The fog around him swirled, all manner of other things stirring to life in response. It converged into a dark wind that blew against him.

Shen Jinxiao was unfazed by this sudden attack. His own resonant power formed a shield, brick-like and impenetrable.

"Flame God's Halo."

With a low mutter, a huge halo of fire rippled out of his body, raising the temperature around him.

The halo was covered in fiery symbols that seemed to resemble a dragon's scales. The black mist evaporated before it, and the dangers hidden in its murk were burned to a crisp.

As well as the pale hands.

Soon, the entire area had been cleansed.

Such was the power of a Duke.

After the area had been purged of corruption, Shen Jinxiao moved towards a hill, hands clasped behind his back as he contemplatively gazed deeper into the Umbra Cave.

There was a powerful aura beyond, one that gave him pause.

He could sense the overwhelming power within, a beacon of raw, elemental strength that drew the danger to it.

The principal.

He stood in a balance against the powers of the Umbra Cave.

"King-class experts are something else." Shen Jinxiao sighed. A long time ago, he longed to taste that power.

However, the breakthrough to King was incredibly difficult.

Many geniuses before him had been foiled at this hurdle.

"Time to move some plans ahead... for the sake of my path to King." His head jerked backwards, to another location in the Umbra Cave. n/Ove**l**1n

"Ninth-grade light resonance... brilliant as the sun, and heart as clear as glass. No evil can even get in.

"Why is Li Luo so important to you?" Shen Jinxiao mused to himself. "If he dies before you, will that break your pure heart?"

With a flare of his robes, he moved on.

At the spot where he stood, the ground began to crack, revealing a sinister human face that poked out of the ground.

It stared in the direction that Shen Jinxiao had gone with a nasty smile, then it sank back down again until it was a mere thread of black on the ground. It moved backwards swiftly.

...

Some time later, Li Luo's group had already found a place to camp: on the top floor of a stone tower.

It was barely adequate in terms of facilities, but space-wise it was enough for everyone to have their own room, so the two squads chose it.

They handed out the special jerky that the school had prepared. It was said to have been soaked in energy liquid to encourage healing and stave off hunger. One piece could last most of the day.

Hunger dealt with, Jiang Qing'e spread a coarsely-made map on the stone table. In the center was a tall tower magically glowing with light rays.

This was the purified spot that they were at.

There were other, smaller towers depicted nearby in a discouraging black.

"Those are the locations of the purification towers, and they're currently dark because evil has overrun them. They haven't been activated yet.

"Once they are, the map will show them as lit," Tian Tian told them.

The newcomers nodded, impressed. This rough map was not at all as shoddy as it looked. It could reflect changes in the purification tower status? That would save them a lot of trouble.

"Don't look down on the map. It's very useful. As good as the Greenwood Comforter," Jiang Qing'e told them.

Li Luo touched it, and his hand jerked in surprise. "Is this made of the tree's bark?"

Tian Tian and Qiu Bai looked up at him curiously, nodding.

Now he understood. The grand tree that sheltered all of the Astral Sage College seemed more and more important by the day. The students cultivated with it, the Umbra Cave was defended by it, the door was activated by it...

It almost seemed like the entire school revolved around the tree. Without it, there would be no school.

"The density of the tower's darkness is different... Is that because the corruption levels are different?" Bai Mengmeng asked.

"Indeed. That's an astute observation." Jiang Qing'e praised her.

Bai Mengmeng blushed and looked down.

"As she said. The corruption levels are different around each purification tower, which is why the school has divided them into a simple three-level system.

"The area around the purification tower where we land is generally level one. However, the further we get from the safe base, the stronger the darkness is. That would be level two..."

She gestured with her finger at some of the further points on the map where the darkness was indeed more pronounced.

Li Luo nodded in understanding, then he looked at the furthest edges of the map, where two towers were depicted.

They were almost completely black, like a pair of eyes staring out of the map.

"Those... are level three purification towers?" Li Luo asked.

Jiang Qing'e nodded solemnly. "The two most dangerous places, and also the ultimate goal of our purging mission.

"The corruption there is especially bad, and the chances of stronger Others appearing is also higher. It's hard to deal with, but we eventually must go."

Li Luo nodded woodenly.



Qiu Bai laughed, breaking the tension. "High risk, high reward, eh? Level three purification towers are worth 10,000 school points, you know."

Li Luo's head jerked up so fast that he almost sprained his neck. "10,000 school points?" he croaked. Their hard-won first place in the ranking battle had barely squeezed 5,000 school points. And one level three purification tower here would get him twice that?!

Jiang Qing'e inclined her head. "10,000 points for a level three purification tower, 4,000 points for a level two purification tower, and 1,500 points for a level one purification tower."

This was a crazy point scale. The ranking battles were looking cheap in comparison.

Suddenly, the map on the table looked like a drawing of riches. There had to be dozens of purification towers, right?

How many was that in total?

Li Luo's heart was beating like mad. So this was the best way to get points in the Astral Sage College... No wonder Jiang Qing'e was desperate to bring him along.

Rinse and repeat a few times, and suddenly 100,000 points didn't seem that far out of reach.

"Besides the tower bonus, eliminating Others also gets points," Tian Tian continued. "500 points for a white eroder from the Eroding Class, and 800 for a red eroder.

"Disaster Class Others are divided into Earthly Disaster and Heavenly Disaster Classes. The chances of Heavenly Disaster Class Others appearing isn't too high in our zone, so we just need to watch out for the Earthly Disaster Class Others.

"Even the Earthly Disaster Class is further classified, but it's quite simple. Greater Earthly Disaster Classes are roughly equivalent to a late stage Earth Fiend cultivator, and worth 4,000 points. Lesser Earthly Disaster Classes are worth 2,000 points.

"As you can see," she chuckled, "prices are all clearly marked."

Li Luo felt his fear give way to greed. Raw, unfettered greed.

"So when do we start?"

Tian Tian and Qiu Bai were looking at Li Luo's over-eager appearance apprehensively. This was a bold kid.

Only Jiang Qing'e was looking amused. She rolled up the map.

"No time like the present.

"Oh, and..." She turned to look at the three of them properly.

"Welcome to the test... of the terror of the Umbra Cave."

#### **Chapter 0244: Stumbling Mind**

At the main gate at purified spot number 13.

Li Luo and the others stood before the light barrier, on the edge of the peaceful sanctuary. Outside, sinister, dark fog roiled, obscuring their vision.

The opacity was the crux of their fear. Who knew what lurked beyond? It was always the unknown that made one's imagination supplement the fear—and who knew one's fears better than oneself?

Jiang Qing'e's squad was calm, being familiar enough with the Umbra Cave through their years of experience.

The same could not be said for the twitchy newcomers. Past the barrier, there would be nothing shielding them from the raw reality of the Umbra Cave.

Other teams were nearby as well, and Li Luo sensed that they were watching with at least some amusement alongside their sympathy.

"Jiang Qing'e, first time for the first years, eh? How many attempts do you think they'll need to overcome the Stumbling Mind?" Duze Honglian's gleeful voice came from behind as she swaggered up with Ye Qiding's squad in tow.

"Stumbling Mind?" Li Luo asked.

"What I told you about just now," Jiang Qing'e said, ignoring Duze Honglian completely. "The corruptive influence of the shadow world permeates the black fog completely. The transition is especially difficult the first time. After all, such people would never have experienced it before. They are especially vulnerable to the corruption before they get used to it.

"The corruption will affect your reason, play with your emotions... And so we call it the Stumbling Mind. You three will definitely encounter it as well.

"Still, there is no need to worry even if you fail to overcome it quickly. It's just a matter of time, and once you build sufficient resistance, we'll be good to go."

Jiang Qing'e explained everything lightly, but Li Luo understood. If the three of them faltered here, they would bring down the efficiency of the mission, since Jiang Qing'e's squad would have to wait for them.

Duze Honglian was watching with relish.

"The Umbra Cave is a freaking gauntlet of troubles." Li Luo sighed. Even stepping out was dangerous.

No wonder the school had never sent One Star Hall students before. Too green.

"Well, let's give it a try," Li Luo said to his two teammates encouragingly. "Best if we can clear it in one."

The two nodded seriously.

All three stepped out of the purified circle together.

In the first instant, Li Luo felt the temperature plummet to an extremely uncomfortable chill.

Voices. They whispered to him, speaking right into his ears, into his heart. They told him of his worst fears, promised them to him with a conviction he could not ignore. They came at him from all directions, and he was lost to them for a moment.

Eyes. He felt eyes on him, watching, watching closely. He spun around. They were watching him. He could feel them. Right on him. Right behind him. There! He spun again. Saw nothing.

Fog. The dusky darkness clung to him like cold condensation, and suddenly he felt clammy hands reach out to take him, to drag him down into what had to be death.

Absolute terror, swamping his every sense. Li Luo clung desperately to his sanity.

His face was pale, his breathing ragged.

From behind, Jiang Qing'e watched closely. If the three showed signs of trauma, she would reach out to pull them back, and they would have failed the first Stumbling Mind attempt.

Which would be normal. These were One Star Hall students who were entering the Umbra Cave for the first time.

She fully expected that they would take two or three attempts to get used to it.

Which would put them a few days behind other squads. The level one purification towers would have been cleaned up by the others already.

Duze Honglian smirked behind, watching Li Luo flail in terror.

Oh, Jiang Qing'e, such is the price you pay.

Ye Qiuding fought to keep his expression neutral, but there was a hint of satisfaction in his eyes.

Li Luo stood his ground, even as the whispers continued to tell their tale of despair, weaving the illusion of doom tighter and tighter around him.

Li Luo might be a newcomer, but his heart was not as frail as one might expect.

Terror failed to overwhelm his reason.

He was blind now, the darkness fully cloaking the others from him. He could hear voices, but they all sounded menacing.

And still, he grew calmer and calmer.

The Others were scary, dangerous, deadly. But what was his goal here in the Umbra Cave?

To earn his 100,000 points.

What would happen if he failed?

No Royal Sap. No progress beyond the General tier. No life after four years.

Duke in five years? A foolish dream.

If he didn't get the points, he was screwed either way.

Was there anything more frightening in the world than imminent death?

"I'm going to die, damn it! Why would I be afraid of you mongrel Others?!"

The fire in his brain started and chased back the shadows of fear far back into the corners of his mind.

His vision cleared. Everything was normal again.

The malicious whispers from Duze Honglian's group came to an abrupt end.

Li Luo opened and closed his hand experimentally. "Does this mean I've passed?" he asked with a tone of surprise. Inwardly, he laughed. Heheh, he sure was a good actor.

"Seems very easy." Bai Mengmeng's voice replied. He turned around to see her looking around with clear cognition in her eyes.

"You... you're okay?" Li Luo said, taken aback. She'd been quicker than him.

She blinked. "I felt something bad, so I went into my hypnosis state, and then it was gone."

Li Luo's jaw dropped. The hypnosis state that she refined spirit liquids in?

During that time, Bai Mengmeng had been calm, collected, and completely dismissive of any emotion that disrupted her work. That worked against the corruption?

That was cheating.

Li Luo cursed himself. Damn, the real pro was right here instead.

Suddenly, Jiang Qing'e jerked forward, moving right to the edge of the barrier. At the same time, Li Luo felt a deadly killing intent approach.

He whirled around to see Xin Fu, eyes red with pure spite and murderous intent.

Still, the red haze passed in moments, and Xin Fu was himself again. He looked up at Li Luo. "Is it over?"

Li Luo nodded wordlessly.

Well, well, so both of them were pros.

### **Chapter 0245: Hand Spiders On The Road**

Li Luo's squad had passed with flying colors, to the consternation of many watching.

Many among them had spent several days trying to overcome the trauma of Stumbling Mind...

And yet these three had cleared it like a bothersome fly. They felt cheated of a show, and also somehow humiliated.

Were newcomers these days all made of such stern stuff?

Jiang Qing'e was pleasantly surprised, while Qiu Bai and Tian Tian goggled at them. These newcomers were more reliable than expected.

They had already mentally prepared themselves for a few days' wait.

Jiang Qing'e's radiant smile seemed to light up the gloomy air around them.

Ignoring the infatuated looks her way, she walked out of the barrier, only pausing briefly to deal with the transition.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian followed just as easily.

"Let's go. It's time to get purging," Jiang Qing'e said, striding ahead into the fog.

Li Luo's squad hurried after, while Qiu Bai and Tian Tian brought up the rear for defensive purposes.

Duze Honglian watched sourly as they disappeared into the fog.

"Let's go. We have targets to hit as well," she said peevishly. "We're going to clear a level three purification tower before Jiang Qing'e's group. If possible, we'll take the other level three purification tower too.

"If both are ours, then our points will definitely be the highest in this purging mission."

Her team nodded eagerly, just as ready to beat Jiang Qing'e for once.

Although the Black Swan Squad was strong, surely Li Luo's newcomer squad was far behind their own in terms of firepower. Jiang Qing'e would definitely move more cautiously than usual.

Duze Honglian stepped out of the barrier as well, leading her own team onwards.

Behind them, other teams were starting to move out as well, and the still silence of the Umbra Cave now stirred with action.

...

The murk was a troubling presence. The lack of vision and constant whispers grated on one's nerves, wearing away at their wills.

Li Luo and the others walked on, passing the occasional stone lamp hung from pillars along the road. They had energy stones within them that emitted a faint light to guide the students.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu were extremely jumpy, their movements jerky.

Li Luo was much calmer. The figure ahead of them gave him a sense of security.

It was dry, tedious plodding, and none of them bothered with conversation, instead choosing to concentrate on keeping a good pace.

On and on.

The tedium did not last for long. A strange wail came from ahead, and Jiang Qing'e halted.

She raised her hand.

Behind her, the others prepared their resonant powers and weapons.

One moment the fog remained blank, and then the next there was a loud chittering as black creatures leaped out of the dark.

They looked like spiders, but a closer look sent a chill down Li Luo's spine. At the ends of their claws were not tapered ends, but dismembered hands that looked grotesquely spliced on.

And in the middle of each spider's body was a human mouth, complete with pearly-white teeth.

"Hee hee!"

The human-hand spiders laughed like babies, the high-pitched voices jarringly horrific.

"These are the lowest level of Others, hand spiders. Their laughter can cause hallucinations, but if you simply shield your ears with resonant power, you can deal with them easily enough."

Jiang Qing'e called back calmly. Her sword rose as she charged, tearing into their ranks.

RUMBLE!

An arc of light resonant energy turned the hand spiders to ashes, their high-pitched laughs of delight turning to screams.

"The Others are really twisted," Li Luo said with deep feeling. His scalp was still crawling from the encounter, and he patted his head to make sure there wasn't a hand spider on his head or something.

"They are born of evil thoughts... which came from all of us. Our hearts. That is why you can see human parts attached to the Others.

"The hand spiders are as easy as they come. They can't even strictly be considered white eroders. When you see Disaster Class Others, you'll truly know what twisted is," Jiang Qing'e explained while she double checked the map. She beckoned for the others to gather around.

"Our goal today is this level one purification tower. Over the next few days, we'll push to clear these towers to secure a safe path back," Jiang Qing'e said, pointing at a line of level one purification towers.

They nodded. Their main goal was the level two and three purification towers a little further ahead, but the Umbra Cave was too dangerous. Before they went that far, they would have to clear the way there. If the danger was too great, at least they could fall back in a safe manner.

A cautious and prudent approach.

Tian Tian scrutinized the route. "Leader," she said quizzically, "your route isn't the most direct path to the nearest level two purification tower."

Jiang Qing'e pointed to another spot. "Because I intend to go there."

Li Luo looked to see that she was pointing at an area marked with a bloody skull.

He didn't need any explanation to know that it was an incredibly dangerous place.

Qiu Bai looked up at her, alarmed. "The forbidden zone?"

Tian Tian was a little quicker. "Not the forbidden zone," she said, looking at Li Luo. "The Onyx Lake outside, right?"

**Chapter 0246: Onyx Lake**

"Onyx Lake?" Qiu Bai scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I almost forgot there was one outside the forbidden zone.

"But it's only a level two Onyx Lake, meant for- ah."

Jiang Qing'e wanted to send Li Luo in to improve himself.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian exchanged a doubtful shrug. Clearly, this whole excursion had been planned for the sake of one silver-haired pretty-boy.

Even they were starting to feel jealous. Even though they were engaged, Jiang Qing'e was going way beyond anything a fiancée would do now.

Perhaps she had already given up on getting first place from the start. With burdens number one, two, and three tagging along, their purging effectiveness would not be as high.

Still, they weren't going to object. Jiang Qing'e was the main engine driving the Black Swan Squad. They both owed her too much for past glories, and they were willing to give up this one.

"What's this Onyx Lake?" Li Luo asked.

"Remember that the Umbra Cave is the limbo between two worlds, much like the Nobles' Battlefield, although weaker?" Jiang Qing'e said. "The Umbra Cave functions differently from the world outside, most notably in the presence of the dark tide, which scrambles and twists the natural order of energy. But nature has a way of reasserting itself. For every poison, an antidote naturally arises. In the Umbra Cave, such special places exist, and the Onyx Lakes are one of them.

"There is actually no lake water in the Onyx Lake. Instead, it's filled with worldly natural energy that is condensed into liquid form. The theory is that the dark tide chases the worldly natural energy away, and it then flees into these lakes.

"It's the only good place in the Umbra Cave. If one can fully submerge themselves, the cultivation benefits are substantial, especially the first time. If you are strong enough, it might raise your cultivation by a tier. A while back, I managed a breakthrough myself."

"Ah, Leader," Tian Tian interrupted. "As far as we know, there aren't more than five people in the entire history of the Astral Sage College who managed a breakthrough the first time," she chided. "Still, of course it's worth a visit."

"Won't the detour slow down our purging speed?" Li Luo asked. "We can always go after we're done, right?" He felt that Jiang Qing'e was running this purging mission however she wished, and her teammates were just along for the ride.

It was bad enough that Jiang Qing'e was dedicating all her time to him. Bringing her two teammates along for the ride felt doubly bad, especially since they could have won first place otherwise.

"Onyx Lakes have a finite amount of energy," Qiu Bai said lightly. "If we go too late, other students might have used it all. Anyways, don't worry about it," he said, waving a hand indifferently. "We owe our leader too much. It's time to pay some of it back."

They were good friends indeed.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu didn't say a word, but they knew who was boss now. They just had to hop on their leader's coattails, who was hopping on Senior Jiang's coattails, and they would ride the coattails' coattails to glory...

"Why is the forbidden zone forbidden, anyway? Super strong Others?" Li Luo asked curiously.

Jiang Qing'e shook her head. "No Others exist in the forbidden zone."

What? Then why on earth was it forbidden?

"Not only Others exist in the Umbra Cave. There are also spirit beasts. They somehow entered the Umbra Cave from the outside world and then got trapped here. They are strong to have survived, but they have been driven mad by the dark tide. They are feral and savage, eating humans and Others alike.

"There is one Heavenly Dipper General-class spirit beast in this forbidden zone, and there are suspicions that it's actually even stronger than that. Possibly even a Duke-class."

No wonder it was a forbidden zone. With such a monster around, not even the Others would show up.

"The school has sent Violet Vibrance mentors to stamp it out before, but the beast is adept at camouflage. It lays low when it senses stronger presences, and it knows the terrain too well. The Violet Vibrance mentors were stumped.

"Fortunately, it doesn't wander out of the forbidden zone. We simply have to avoid rousing it, and it will leave us alone."

Li Luo nodded. This spirit beast was probably the baddest boss around. Best leave it alone.

Route explained, Jiang Qing'e packed up and led the way forward.

They hastened along the road.

As they traveled, they encountered all sorts of Others, but they were too low level to be anything remarkable.

Jiang Qing'e had explained that the Others' corruptive abilities were still present even in the weakest of foes. Many careless students had fallen after rampaging through the weak Others, ending up as mindless killing machines themselves.

They had to maintain a pure heart throughout, allowing no evil in.

Still, the Others they saw were not even Eroding Class, and Li Luo and the others didn't have to lift a finger.

Finally, they climbed a small hill to find a dead forest ahead. From amidst the ebony branches, a single white tower could be seen.

The black mist was especially dense around the forest.

The haunting whispers were especially loud as well.

"That's our first target." Jiang Qing'e pointed.



The three newcomers were worried. They could sense the dangers ahead.

As expected, the area around the purification tower would be the most dangerous.

"Are we going in now?" Li Luo's hands were getting itchy from not having done any work in a while.

Jiang Qing'e leaned back against a trunk nearby. "Level one purification towers aren't difficult. Go purify them, Fairness & Justice Squad," she said with a hint of amusement.

Li Luo's squad stared at her.

They were going to do it themselves?

Li Luo stared at her, looking for signs that she was joking. She wasn't.

Damn, weren't you protecting me like a precious treasure all along the way? This seemed like an unreasonable difficulty jump.

Could they really deal with this level one purification tower themselves?

What were the chances of them getting wiped instead?

#### **Chapter 0247: Fairness & Justice's Independent Mission**

On the slope, Li Luo and his squad were still staring at Jiang Qing'e in disbelief.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were taken aback as well. A level one purification tower was easy peasy for them, but for Li Luo's squad? They were first years, in the Umbra Cave for the first time, and fighting Others for the first time, for goodness' sake.

They were filled with confusion and panic during their first encounter as Two Star Hall students. Without seniors to guide them along, they would have been in trouble for sure.

How would a One Star Hall team fare?

Jiang Qing'e had been looking after Li Luo better than a baby, and then suddenly she was yeeting him out into the forest. The difference was uncanny.

"Well? Is there a problem?" She regarded them with cool, golden eyes. "You might be first years, but are you too scared to deal with some Eroding Class Others? It's no small risk, I'll give you that. But... are we here to do risk-free purging?"

"I can definitely protect you throughout. I can make it so that you don't need to lift a finger at all. Is that what you want?"

The disbelief in Li Luo's eyes slowly faded away into understanding. "Got it, Qing'e." She couldn't always be keeping him safe. It would rob him of his edge, and his courage.

No wonder she had been giving them a crash course along the entire way. It was to prepare them for this.

A test for Li Luo.

See how much value this newcomer team was going to bring.

He swung around abruptly to study the dead forest with eager eyes.

"Scared?" he asked his butterfly girl and shadow boy.

She blinked back at him innocently. "Well, I'm just the support. Good luck out there in front, Leader!"

Xin Fu's head lifted up an inch, letting the light fall on his pale but determined face.

"A keen blade fears no Others," he said, voice raspy with tension.

"Look here, Xin Fu," Li Luo said. "We're just going to cleanse a teensy, weensy, measly, puny level one purification tower. If you sneak around whispering like that, the Others are going to think we're planning to swallow the spirit beast in the forbidden zone or something."

Xin Fu was speechless.

"The Fairness & Justice squad rides out to take the tower, my fair lady," Li Luo declared grandly.

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "We'll be watching from here. We'll move on when you reactivate the tower. If you don't, we won't move."

Li Luo grimaced. The swan was a real hen when she decided to get pecking.

He nodded in acknowledgment and started down the hill towards the forest.

His team came with him.

Tian Tian looked over at Jiang Qing'e. "You really intend to let them take the level one purification tower alone? Both Li Luo and Xin Fu are First Patterns, and Bai Mengmeng is not even at the Pattern Genesis Tier. There are at least five white eroders at the Pattern Genesis Tier down there, stronger than any of them individually. Plus, you know how the Others fight."

Qiu Bai nodded in agreement. "You should test them more cautiously. An entire level one purification tower might be more than they can chew."

Jiang Qing'e broke into a radiant smile, first at her team, then at the advancing figures ahead.

"Oh, don't look down on our young lord."

Qiu Bai almost blushed at the sheer power of her beauty, and Tian Tian gave way as well. "Alright, Leader, you win. Your smile's too cute. We love you deeply and you are correct. Say... do you think Duze Honglian's pitted herself against you because she's secretly smitten too? Maybe she's being contrary because she wants your attention."

Jiang Qing'e rolled her eyes.

...

Li Luo's trio soon reached the forest.

Dark mist hung on dead branches in a dystopic imitation of cotton candy trees, and the ever-present whispers continued to eat away at their resolve.

Again, they couldn't shake off the impression that they were being watched.

Shing.

Li Luo unsheathed his swords, then he moved noiselessly into the unwelcoming forest.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng followed closely.

The moment he stepped into the treeline, he could sense a cold wave of hostility. Their enemies were somewhere... above.

He looked up just as a shadowy streak of energy flew out from behind him, pinning a creature down. It was a bird-like Other with a sickly, white plumage. He looked closer at the strange wings... Of course. They were made of rotten fingers.

The shadowy power had come from Xin Fu.

"Leader, are we going straight to the purification tower?" Bai Mengmeng asked, looking around anxiously.

Li Luo shook his head. "Once the reactivation process begins, the Others within the forest will swarm and attack. Given our current strength, we can't possibly deal with them all if they flock, so we'll have to pick off stragglers and thin some numbers. We can only reactivate the purification tower when we're sure we can handle the rest."

They were not going to hide from the Others, but take the fight to them instead.

Still, Li Luo's decision was the most rational one. Weaker leaders would have chosen the more dangerous and cowardly route of hiding instead.

"Alright." They concurred with his decision.

They moved ahead swiftly for a few more minutes, until Li Luo sensed something and halted.

His resonant power swirled in readiness around him, Water Edge flowing on his shortswords.

He peered ahead worriedly at the disturbed fog ahead, then a creature several zhang tall strode out.

It had extremely long hands and legs but no head. Instead, all of its limbs were attached to a single, large eyeball.

The sclera was especially wide, and the eye turned on them with malicious attention.

They had no time to guard themselves. The black pupil swirled like a vortex, and they found themselves freezing up.

It was an immediate firsthand lesson regarding the dangers of the Umbra Cave.

### **Chapter 0248: Eye Other**

In the grey shroud of mist, all they could see was the eye monster. All around them were trees, but only pieces of them—cracked wood, long dead, promising them the same fate would soon be theirs.

It held them all, mesmerized, a horror straight from the nightmares that had awoken them in their childhoods, making them weep for hours.

“Ss. Ss.”

The eye monster made a strange hissing sound as it swung its sharp claws at the trio, trailing a ghoulish miasma in the attack.

There was corruption on the claws. If it made contact, it would enter their bodies, leaving a fatal wound.

Weng!

The black claws raked against Li Luo's scalp, clamping down. It squeezed.

The digits passed through his head without resistance.

The eye contracted briefly in confusion, then it narrowed in frustration as the three figures faded away.

Illusions!

The hissing grew even more furious now.

"The Umbra Cave really is dangerous as hell." Li Luo sighed, walking out from behind a tree. Their eyes were protected with resonant power.

He had made the prudent suggestion for them to use illusions to scout ahead, while they would follow at a safe distance.

Which meant that the eye monster's bewitching effect had gone to waste.

"Leader, you're awesome." Bai Mengmeng praised him with dutiful applause.

"Oh, you. Your illusions are the real star here." Li Luo congratulated her in turn.

Shoosh!

While the two were busy slapping each other on the back, Xin Fu was already taking care of business. He was most at home in this dim environment. With a few quick leaps, he was behind the eye monster, dagger in hand. A tongue of shadow resonant power licked out from the blade, wavering in length from moment to moment. He reversed his grip, aiming to drive it into the fleshy eyeball like a stake.

A milky-white aura pulsed out from the creature, then a claw reversed its direction, lunging at bewildering speed to block Xin Fu's attack.

Golden sparks clanged out, a brief flash of bright yellow in the monochrome.

Xin Fu faded back, using the mist to his advantage.

"Careful, it's quite strong. A white eroder, should be about Second Pattern in strength," he called from the shadows.

"Second Pattern, huh..."

This was a notch stronger than both Li Luo and Xin Fu. But luckily, they had already nullified its hypnotic abilities.

"Watch yourself, Mengmeng."

Li Luo warned her, then he shot forth, shortswords in hand. His Water Edge hummed with intensity, cutting through the air.

Within him, both resonance seeds flared to life, supplying energy to their user.

He charged the Other, the dull roar of a tide coming from his blades.

With a frustrated screech, the eye creature moved to meet him, white energy on its claws. They clashed and disengaged again and again.

More sparks.

Li Luo was fully concentrating now. The impact of each clash felt powerful enough to rip his arms off at the shoulder, and yet he stubbornly stood his ground, tanking the attacks. He might be up against a Second Pattern, but his dual resonances allowed him to stand up to it without too much of a disadvantage.

As the battle dragged on, the eyeball was gradually turning from white to red, becoming more aggressive and unpredictable.

Li Luo was weaving in and out of its long claws, trying to close in, when the eye itself suddenly started to glow, sending a greyish-white beam of light straight at his face.

Too fast! He was caught off guard...

A butterfly of pure starlight fluttered past his face, its wings opening to shield him from the grey light.

It only shielded him for a moment, its paper-thin shape eviscerated by the attack in a flash.

The single moment was enough. Li Luo had already made his escape, leaving the grey light to sail on and bore a hole in the tree behind him.

The tree immediately began to decay before their very eyes.

Li Luo blanched. If not for Bai Mengmeng's save, he would be rotting away right now.

Foiled yet again, the eye monster was working itself into a frenzy. It leaped at Bai Mengmeng.

Midair, Xin Fu struck. He unleashed a blistering series of shadow strikes faster than the eye could see. They punched through the monster's defenses and connected with its fleshy eye-body. Milky-grey pus spurted out.

Its ire now raised, the creature shot another beam of grey light at Xin Fu, who retreated hurriedly.

It charged after him, but suddenly the ground beneath it became as goey as a swamp. Its feet sank in.

It was ready when Li Luo appeared before it, shooting another attack his way.

"Watch out!" Bai Mengmeng cried from behind.

Li Luo barely batted an eyelid. Swords raised, resonant power gathered on the edges as he started to fashion a pathetic little ball of light.

"Waterlight Ball."

It popped in a brilliant flash, briefly lighting up the mist.

When the attack released an insignificant pop, the eye monster let out an anguished wail. Sticky pus spurted out in every direction and black smoke billowed. It began to crumble, and after a few moments, there was no trace that it had ever existed.

Xin Fu appeared beside Li Luo. "Just like that?" he asked, shocked.

Bai Mengmeng had run over timidly as well. "Seems like it's scared of strong light."

Li Luo nodded. "It might have some strong abilities, but it has weaknesses too... The eye was too large. It's very weak against light.

"I noticed that it was flinching away from light in our clashes before, especially whenever sparks flew. Careful observation helped me find its weakness."

"Still," said Xin Fu doubtfully, "that waterball attack of yours seemed especially bright. It's not a normal attack, is it?"

"Ah, a special house blend," he said lightly. He saw that there was a black fragment left on the ground, charged with some evil will.

He bent down and gingerly picked it up, throwing it into a bottle that he carried.

Proof of points earned, to be brought back to school.

"First blood."

With the eye monster settled, Li Luo was in good spirits. They had had their first encounter with the Others and emerged triumphant. It hadn't been easy, but together they had overcome it with the power of friendship.

"Let's keep on clearing them out in that direction."

Li Luo gestured ahead. Their first win had put some confidence back in their hearts.

Both nodded, and they set off.

On the slope.

The three third years were watching the battle intently, and their surprise showed when Li Luo's group managed to take down the eye Other.

"Not bad. Illusions to scout the way, and an intelligent seeking of the Other's weak point..." Tian Tian said in admiration. These three were way better than she had expected.

"Most importantly, they didn't charge ahead recklessly to clear the purification tower. They're sweeping and preparing the ground first, so they don't get swamped later."

"They were a little panicky at the start, but they're doing well. These newbies aren't half bad," Qiu Bai said with an approving nod.

Jiang Qing'e was still watching the forest, especially a spot where the black mist was particularly dense.

"This is just the beginning..."

"Save your judgment for when they successfully reactivate the purification tower."

### **Chapter 0249: The Others' Cannibalization**

Boom!

A tremendous blast of resonant power bent a tree at the thickest part of its trunk. Li Luo's figure was sent flying through the trees.

A dark figure appeared behind him, supporting his back and breaking his fall. The two landed safely.

Whoosh.

Li Luo was winded. The dead tree was breaking down in front of them. It was a wily one, looking exactly like a tree except for two gigantic human hands.

An Other.

It had stood there quietly, blending in with the environment, and it had even resisted attacking their illusions. When the real trio passed, it had struck.

It was a close shave.

The ambush had caught them off guard, but luckily it had a limited attack radius. The three managed to escape, catch their breath, and regroup before finishing it off.

Bai Mengmeng carefully picked up the fragment it left behind. As she stretched out her hand, she saw a long, black gash on her arm.

Some strange power was affecting her because of it, and her mood started to turn dark.

Li Luo quickly went over, taking her arm. Condensing a drop of liquid healing energy, he let it fall on the wound.

SPLATTER!

Faint, black smoke rose from her wound, accompanied by a hissing sound of the corruption being expelled. A moment later, her arm was as good as new.

Bai Mengmeng was delighted, running her finger experimentally over her skin, which was as smooth as new. "Thank you, Leader!"

For a girl, complexion was very important, and Li Luo's healing result was definitely going to be popular.

"Leader, me too."

A blackened arm was stuck out by a hopeful Xin Fu.

Li Luo's kindly smile faded away. "Look here, Xin Fu," he said with the air of a remonstrating parent, "scars are the mark of manliness, and this little bit of pain makes our spirits stronger. If you can't even bear this, we should leave the Umbra Cave right now!"

Xin Fu was a little confused by the strange encouragement, but he nodded. "Er... yes. You're right."

Li Luo nodded approvingly. Phew. His healing cost a lot of resonant power. Bai Mengmeng was a girl, and so he should take care of her, but the two guys as well? He'd be drained before they even reached the purification tower!

"Hmm, we've finished off what? Four white eroders so far?" Li Luo asked.

His squad nodded.

"Judging by the direction and distance, we're only left with one last zone to clear," Bai Mengmeng judged, pointing to their right.

Li Luo felt a little pang of fear. That was the place he had avoided so far. The black mist was densest there.

Surely the strongest Others were waiting there.

The previous four they had met had all been white eroders, but strictly speaking, they were normal strength ones, at about Second Pattern in strength.

Stronger ones could well be Third or even Fourth Pattern... tough opponents indeed.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng matched his sobering mood. They too understood that their biggest obstacle lay ahead.

"Well, let's go see what we're up against," Li Luo finally said.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng followed, and the three cautiously moved on.

Strangely, the zone was suspiciously devoid of any Others. Completely deserted.

"Weird. The other places had low-level Others everywhere. This place is sterile," Li Luo said in a low tone.

Plosh!

Just then, there was a huge collision of evil energy from ahead.

They shielded their bodies with resonant power and rushed over.

When they broke out of the mist, their eyes narrowed in shock.

A scene of carnage opened up before them, blood and guts in piles.

In the middle, a monster without skin. The bloody, red flesh of its body lay exposed to the environment. The flesh bulged, and a gruesome tentacle began to grow from the body.

This fleshy Other was bound by some grey chains that prevented it from escaping, no matter how hard it struggled.

They stared, unsure of what to make of this scene. This Other was a cut stronger than any they had met so far, and probably a Third Pattern in strength.



And yet... it didn't seem to be doing too well?

"What's going on?" Bai Mengmeng whispered.

"A fight between Others," Li Luo slowly replied. So Others fought among themselves too.

While processing this new information, they saw a piece of white human skin float out of the mist like a magic carpet.

Except unlike the fairytales, this one had a pair of eyes on it.

The human skin Other had to be the source of the chains, and it was quite evenly matched against the fleshy Other.

Strange roars and groans filled the air as the two nightmarish brutes duked it out.

The human skin Other expanded and expanded and then it fully encompassed the flesh Other.

Rumble!

The skin stretched and bulged, and furious struggling came from below. Occasionally, tumor-like swellings rose, distending the surface of the skin, but it was eventually squashed down.

The human skin Other was eating it.

The scene was appalling, and bizarre enough that it made their skin crawl.

Eventually, the human skin Other won, the struggle subsiding. A large, pale tentacle began to grow from the human skin's surface, and stale blood leaked out from underneath.

"It's getting stronger. When it finishes, it might be a Fourth, even Fifth Pattern," Xin Fu whispered urgently.

"Shall we sneak an attack now?" Bai Mengmeng asked.

Li Luo chewed on this for a few moments, but he eventually shook his head. He sensed that they might have some small advantage now, but it wouldn't be enough to put them in a good situation.

"Let's not panic. Human Skin over there will need some time to fully absorb Fleshy..."

"Let's use this chance to reactivate the purification tower. If it can't stop us because of its feeding, that would be ideal. When the tower is activated, it'll be dealt with naturally.

"And if it comes..."

"We'll have to prepare a nice, warm welcome for it."

### **Chapter 0250: Purification Tower Reactivated**

"That's the purification tower?"

Li Luo and the others saw a white tower ahead, ringed by fallen leaves black with age.

But within a meter of it, everything was perfectly clear, without any black mist at all.

Evidently, the purification tower might be dormant, but it was still just powerful enough to repel the corruption.

Li Luo and the others walked over closer. The purification tower was five or six meters tall, and its surface looked as smooth as white marble, although on closer look, it proved to be some sort of patterned wood with a comforting, musty smell.

It was almost a given that the purification tower was also made from the Tree of Resonant Power. Li Luo carefully pushed open the door and crept in. To their surprise, the inside of the tower was lit with a dim fluorescence that had a soothing effect.

The interior was simply furnished; empty save for a little, stone platform where intricate lines of light glowed.

"Let's prepare," Li Luo said. He took out a bottle filled with purification dust that would reactivate the runes.

He placed it on the stone platform.

Hum~

The light of the stones glowed in response, and the bottle shuddered more and more violently, spilling its contents.

Glowing dust danced on the platform to an invisible rhythm, and the runes grew brighter and brighter, finally absorbing the dust in.

As the runes took in the dust, the entire purification tower began to vibrate, humming to life and glowing with purification light.

The light pulsed out, awakening a response from the black mist.

Like pouring ice into a bubbling fryer.

SPLATTER!

An ear-splitting cacophony of howls, as the Others were drawn to their antithetical beacon.

The purification tower was reactivated, and it instantly began to work its purification on the corruption in the area.

On the slope.

Jiang Qing'e and her squad looked at the pulsing light, surprised.

"They pulled it off!" Qiu Bai whooped.

"They've managed to clear out most of the Others in the forest... Still, that last Other—they probably won't be able to deal with it, right?" Tian Tian said. They could all sense the last Other, and how strong it was.

"It was a Third Pattern, but after eating the fleshy Other, it's now a Fourth Pattern. Once it completely digests and absorbs that power, it might even rise to become a red eroder in strength."

A Fourth Pattern would be well beyond Li Luo and the others. They would pay a heavy price if they encountered it.

"Leader, are we going in?"

Jiang Qing'e's eyes wavered slightly. "A little while more."

Tian Tian's eyes widened. "You wouldn't be thinking of leaving them to deal with it, would you?"

"Let's wait and see."

Although it would be easy enough for them to finish it off, it would do Li Luo's growth no good.

She didn't mind protecting him, but not at the expense of his development.

Deep in the dark forest.

With the purification tower activated, Li Luo's squad did not linger, backing out of the purification tower at speed. They were glancing in that one direction apprehensively.

With most of the zone cleared, the only threat left was that last human skin white eroder...

Well, technically it was no longer a human skin eroder only. It had already started to show signs of peaking as a red eroder.

"Leader, is that Other going to come?" Bai Mengmeng fretted.

Li Luo chewed his lip. "Come or not, we're prepared. Effective or not... Well, we'll find out."

"We don't really need to worry. Even if we fail, we have guardian angels, eh?" He grinned.

Bai Mengmeng smiled, comforted. But if Senior Jiang intervened, would that mean that they had failed?

As a girl, she didn't really care about pride or anything, but she could sense that both Li Luo and Xin Fu had a strong streak of it running within them.

Perhaps even at the cliff's edge, the two would fight rather than open the parachute of safety.

Like in the situation they were currently in.

Bai Mengmeng stared ahead into the mist. Hopefully, her leader's preparations were effective.

RUMBLE!

A sudden surge of corrupt energy, followed by a shriek.

They turned as one, pale and sweaty, watching the barren branches of trees fall one by one, closer and closer.

The human skin Other was here!

In a few short minutes, it was upon them.

The thing that emerged from the mist was different from what they had seen. It was ponderous, and it was now scuttling like a scorpion. Eight hands, dripping with fresh crimson, leaving deep prints on the ground as they propelled it ever closer.

It had no nose or mouth where its face was, only a pair of milky-white eyes glittering with malice.

It charged in the general direction of the hated purification tower, as well as the three guardians standing in its way.

Evil energy surged forth, a vortex of chaotic, violent destruction.

Fresh meat! Time to eat!