

Thief 151

Chapter 151 - Registration Venue

8-11 minutes

King Kale finally understood the reason everyone was going crazy over that thief. This means he has many secrets and just this method of removing Qi marks can cause a war in entire lower lands.

"Lord Envoy, I'm not good at riddles." King Kale said with a wry smile.

"He's doing this for fame and name." The envoy said with a cold face.

King Kale also gets what the envoy means by this and couldn't help but agree with this answer.

Because every time that thief does thievery, he leaves behind a Fragment Qi Stone with his name and some owl tattoos which were impossible to remove.

If Ace were here, he would be also shocked seeing this man finding out his reason for doing all this so quickly.

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"But why would he do that? I mean, what could fame bring him?" King Kale couldn't help but ask this question.

"Who knows, maybe he wanted to prove something or show the world that he is invincible. But he's challenging the authorities by robbing Beast Tamers, Alchemist, and Rune Crafter.

"That's why the Pill Flame Organization send me as their envoy to capture him and make an example out of him, so no one would dare to challenge the authorities again." The envoy's eyes were icy cold as he said with a dignified demeanor.

King Kale and everyone on the right side gulped.

Everyone knows just how fearsome these three giants were and if someone dares to question their authority, they will kill them and their entire clan to the last dog.

"What order do Lord Envoy have for this King? I'll cooperate fully." King Kale said with a grim face.

"Nothing, we'll wait for him to appear and the moment he did it will be the last time anyone would ever hear the name Sky Stealer." The envoy coldly declared.

After this brief conversation, he stood up and leave with that woman towards his staying quarters.

Only the royalties of Regal Palace remained in the room, and everyone had a grave face.

"Royal Father, what do you think, will that thief come just like envoy said?" A young man, seemingly in his late twenties, asked. He resembles King Kale very much because he was the crown prince of the Regal Kingdom and Kale's eldest son, Zavier Regal.

King Kale's face was very ugly at this moment. "I don't know, but that man had a point and if everything he said is true, then that thief will appear. Don't forget the biggest chance for him to gain even more fame is the upcoming test of Damien Royal Institute!"

"Your Highness, if that thief appeared, then it will be a calamity for our kingdom!" An old man with light white hair spoke gravely.

King Kale smiles bitterly, "What can we do? That man is probably a River Core Cultivator! If he decided to slaughter the entire royal capital to fish that thief out, I'm helpless to stop him!" His face was filled with helplessness.

"We can only pray that he won't appear here again ever."

Inside a lavishing building in the Royal Palace.

"Brother, why did you tell them about that thief's ability to open storage ring? What if they disclosed this information to the public?" The beautiful woman spoke gravely.

"Everyone in three giants probably knows by now. Do you think it matters anymore?" The man coolly answered.

"You are right." She wore a wry smile as she speaks, "And what if he didn't appear here again as you said?"

"Then we'll leave after the test." The man impassively said, "But if he did...hehe."

His sharp laughter was as if some fiendish devil was laughing.

She felt a chill run down her spine because she knew this brother of hers was the most ruthless man she has ever known!

It was a sunny morning when Ace open his closed eyes.

He changed his robes into a new one and go toward the registration venue.

Ace found out from the inn's owner that the registration venue was outside the royal district and he headed in that direction, following the map he bought from a nearby bookshop.

The closer Ace gets to the registration venue, the livelier it becomes.

Most of the crowd were youngsters and their companions.

Ace finally spotted a tall building.

There was a huge wooden sign bore of Damien Royal Institute on it and was packed with youngsters.

Before Ace thought he was very early, but now he was thinking it was late after seeing the large queue outside the building.

"Why isn't the line moving?" Ace asked a young man in front of him after standing in the line for fifteen minutes.

"Those bastards are tending to the nobles first and their companions. It is like this since the first day!" The young man resentfully said while cursing.

Ace smile wryly hearing this, *'It will take forever like this.'*

He left the line and check the situation with heavenly sense.

Ace saw there were three counters inside the building. Many youngsters in lavishing clothing with arrogant faces registered themselves one by one and no one was paying any attention to this line, where only commoners were.

'Those idiots had another line on the other side, and it's probably only for the nobles. Sigh...' Ace helplessly sighed before his eyes contracted.

'This presence!' Ace quickly gets back in the line and acts ignorant like everyone else, as if he sensed nothing.

An average carriage was passing by the venue.

Inside this carriage was none other than the envoy of Pill Flame Organization!

This man's name was Alvin.

He wasn't an alchemist nor rune crafter; he was a Flame Guard of the pill flame organization. He was a real Qi River Core cultivator with martial sense!

His mission was very simple, to investigate the thief in the Regal Kingdom, and if he found any trace of him, do anything to capture him ALIVE!

Alvin was measuring the capital city in a low-key carriage and just happen to be passing by the venue of the registration. He uses his martial sense with a treasure to scan the youngsters' crowd and stop it the next moment because he loses interest after finding nothing special.

Alvin was a specialist in ascertaining people, and that's why he was sent here. But his careful probing alerted someone he shouldn't have; Ace!

Ace was also using his heavenly sense and the moment he felt a powerful Qi fluctuation, he instantly knew a powerful expert was nearby and hid his presence.

Ace soul and heavenly sense can detect someone of one larger realm higher than himself and this advantage truly saved him today!

'A Qi river core expert!' Ace grimaced because this was not good news for him. *'What the hell is this kind of expert doing in this Kingdom.'*

The moment this thought surfaced, Ace pulls a long face because there is only one reason that someone of this caliber was here and this reason was none other him!

Now he had to be more careful and refrain from doing any stealing until he was sure that this expert left this city first.

'My luck is always the worse!' Ace cursed.

He thinks he could harvest the large amount of TP in this section test. But things have changed. He didn't think those organizations would take him so seriously and so quickly at that.

Now his only choice was to play by rules for the time being because he knew those organizations only wanted him and they didn't care about collateral damage!

If a Qi River Core cultivator went on a rampage here, then he might not escape with his life intact.

Ace was calmly looking at his surrounding to see the expert, but he failed and didn't dare to use his senses to probe because he was afraid of being detected.

Now Ace was just like other common factions who were waiting for their turn.

After waiting for two whole hours, the common line finally moves and everyone finally had a massive sigh of relief.

Now and then a newcomer joins the line and some unruly ones would break the line by taking the spots of weak cultivators since no one was there to stop them.

But no one troubled Ace since his aura was of the fifth gate cultivator and he moved without caring for what was happening behind him.

Even if Ace had a problem, he won't interfere since he didn't want any attention to himself at this moment.

After three more hours of wait, it was finally Ace's turn.

An average woman was sitting behind a counter in the institute outfit. With a haughty expression, she looked at Ryan and said, "Put your hand on this stone."

Ace curiously looked at the black stone of human head size. He was observing for some time now and know every time someone put one hand on it, this lady would record something.

He put his hand and the stone blink for a moment before returning to normal.

"Participant Number 31,333. Go to next counter." The lady coldly said to Ryan.

Chapter 152 - Day Of Competition

8-11 minutes

Ryan thank her and moved to the next counter where an old man was sitting.

"No, 31,333. Put your hand on this stone and state your name, age, and cultivation base." The old man coolly pointed his finger at the same kind of stone but there were white lines on it.

"Oh, and don't dare to lie. The punishment for it is; cultivation cripple!" The old man chuckled coldly.

Ace's eyes narrowed as he places his hand on the stone and felt a sting of Qi on his hand but he felt nothing amiss.

"Ryan White, age sixteen, and fifth Qi gate cultivator." Ace lies except for his age.

He was quite confident in his ability to remain calm and this kind of inferior treasures can't detect his lies just like what he did at the city gate.

This kind of tranquillity came with the foundation of darkness and it helped him quite a lot, besides Ace unknowingly train his mind whenever he practiced rune crafting. This gave him the edge to fool these kinds of detection treasures.

The old man found nothing wrong. He knew these commoners didn't dare to lie here because everyone knew the power of institute background.

"Go to the last counter and pay ten low Qi stones, you'll get your participant token." The old man coolly stated.

Ryan nodded with a smile as he moved to the last counter where sit a young, beautiful lady. She was in the institute's uniform but she looked extremely bored.

She saw Ace with an indifferent face and faintly said, "11 low Qi stones."

Ace frowned, *'She is taking extra for herself.'*

Ryan put a knowing smile on his face and give her eleven Qi stones asking nothing since one low Qi stone meant nothing to him.

Everyone behind him saw this but didn't dare to raise any objection but their expression turned ugly.

"Here is your token. Come back three months from now." She lazily gave Ace a black token with a sword emblem engraved on it, this was the symbol of Damien Royal Institute.

Ace take the token and there was '31,333' engrave on it as well as a rune. But this rune was way different from the Beast Calling Token he had.

Ryan put the token in his storage ring and left the participation venue without drawing much attention to himself.

Ace's actual plan was to 'clean' some alchemy shops in the royal district after he take care of the participation. He had that new collection of pills from Olivia's storage ring that he didn't use because it was not enough to raise his cultivation.

That's also why he waited to come here but now that he knew about the terrifying hidden expert here. He went back to his inn and practice the rune crafting.

'Hmm?' Ace eyebrow raised as he senses some malice intent twenty meters away from himself.

This malicious intent was toward Ryan.

'Those idiots want to rob me?' Ace smile wryly while shaking his head. When the next turn came he disappeared using his lightning steps.

After thirty minutes, Ace came back to the inn's room.

Ace enjoyed some jade wine before he formed the earth runic symbol structure again with extreme diligence.

One month pass in a breeze.

The registration venue was still bustling like the first day and many new youngsters came every day in the regal capital.

All and all the city were peaceful and the Regal King was thrilled about it because if that thief still didn't show up now he would probably not in the future.

Alvin on the other hand was very calm, he constantly goes to his usual low-key patrol and returned after finding nothing.

But he wasn't disheartened and was calmly waiting for the thief to show up.

In the inn where Ryan was staying at this moment.

Ace didn't leave this inn for an entire month and only practiced the rune crafting and for two days' break, he would turn his attention to getting an insight into the second realm of dual shadow technique.

He had negated this technique for quite some time now because his focus was mainly on his escaping and concealment skills and then turn to rune crafting.

But now he can't move freely so he decided to ponder over the second realm Sword of Finger.

The Dual Shadow Sword technique was unique it didn't need fighting constantly in battles to understand it like a typical weapon technique. It is more like a technique; if you didn't understand the crux of it even you fight endless, you won't progress.

When Ace create the sword art Dual Swords Mirage in moon forest, he found out that his understanding of this technique deepened a lot.

But after that, he never found any sword skills or art to further research in the sword's way and the system never gave him any sword skills or art.

So, Ace simply conclude that the system wanted him to create his sword skills and arts according to his understanding. But to do this he didn't have material.

Ace's theory was he needed some kind of sword skill or art that can complicate the technique second realm just like when he created the dual sword mirage and he reach the peak of the first real.

But first, he had to understand the meaning behind Sword of Finger.

Today was his rune practice day since he can access the light soul Qi now.

He was creating the same complex earthly structure without blinking.

'Just the last circle!' Ace was sweating profoundly as his eyes were glued on the third white runic structure.

The white soul tread was moving very smoothly in a last circle around the complex structure.

When the soul thread completes the ending circle Ace's face turns solemn as he shouted abruptly.

"Combine!"

Steam of white soul Qi unleash from Ace's hand and encompassed the three white runic structures.

The runic structures glowed brightly as they blended simultaneously.

The first structure was a triangle with a complex structure inside, in the center was a rectangle and last was the circle that was just drawn by Ace.

The three structures finally combine and completely disappeared, and suddenly a green rune has appeared in their place!

This was the Earth Rune!

Ace was overjoyed seeing the complete rune. This was the first rune he ever created, and this was truly an enormous leap for him.

After admiring this work for some time, he cut off the light soul Qi and the earth rune faded into nothingness.

"Sigh... only three remain." Ace sighed in relief after thinking about the reaming symbols.

Ace had to admit that if not for the insights of Empty Dream he wouldn't be able to master the runic structures so quickly.

Although it was not the same, however, the principals were. It was just that heavenly rune crafting was more profound.

However, now that he had created a Heavenly Rune the other three would not be so difficult.

Fifty more days pass and today was the day of the competition!

Ace exited the inn he was staying in an excellent mood because he was very close to mastering the water rune and he had also gained some insights into the dual shadow swords technique during his training.

In these fifty days duration, Ace was sure that a powerful expert was patrolling the city every day in secret.

Because every day he would feel a strong martial sense brush past the area and he knew this was the same expert who he encountered that day.

Ace had his soul signature, though. If he saw him in person, he would know instantly who that expert was.

Ace was going to the venue of the competition, which was at the same place where he registered.

Ace wasn't early or late but when he reached the venue, he was surprised because there were thousands of youngsters standing there waiting.

He also saw many luxurious carriages on the other side, the nobles occupied that part.

There was a high platform set outside the registration building and everyone's eyes were on it. They all were waiting for someone to appear.

An hour past and at this moment a row of lavishing carriages surrounded by golden armed guards with Regal Kingdom's sigil winged wolf march in the venue from the royal district gate!

Everyone knows only one family can use this sigil in the entire kingdom and that was the Royal Regal Family, the rulers of Regal Kingdoms!

Ace's eyes narrowed into slits because he senses that Qi river core cultivator soul signature and a Flowing River stage cultivator in the last carriage of Royal Regal Family!

'These two must've belonged to the same organization, only those giants can dispatch existence like them here.' Ace's face sank.

Now he was determined to lie low until he reached the first-grade kingdom land of middle-level lands because that place was in the judiciary of the three giants!

Chapter 153 - Kingdom Level Test

9-11 minutes

The carriages of the Royal Regal Family finally stopped outside the registration building.

At this moment, a handsome middle-aged man disembarked the most eye-catching carriage in the very front. He wore a golden robe with a winded wolf sigil embroidered on its back and had a golden crown on his head. He looks like some aloof being with a superior aura around him.

He was naturally the Regal King, Kale Val Regal!

Everyone in the venue kneel the moment they saw King Kale with clear reverence in their eyes.

Ace also laid his eyes on Kale and felt the dignified atmosphere around him. He never would've thought that one day he would see a real King.

He does like the other and kneels calmly. Truth to be told Ace was somewhat moved by seeing thousand of people kneeling in front of a single man.

'So, this is the strongest man in the Regal Kingdom.' Ace thought as he calmly measures King Kale.

His cultivation was at the Empty River Stage but he was still the king of a third-grade kingdom!

King Kale smile faintly seeing everyone kneeling with reverence.

He said nothing before he stands straight on the high platform. "Rise!"

Everyone got back to their feet as they watch the King with worship in their eyes.

Some people were neutrally looking at King Kale, and Ace was one of them.

King Kale smile like a benevolent King and said, "Today is the big day for youngsters and most importantly it is a very important day for the Regal Kingdom.

"If any of you manage to pass this test, that's mean you'll be bringing glory to the Regal Kingdom and I will reward them abundantly without caring about their birth status."

Everyone's eyes shimmer with ecstasy when they heard about the rewards.

"I only wanted to say one more thing..." Kale's face turned solemn as he said, "Don't die a meaningless death!"

After that Kale exited the platform and went back to the king's carriage.

Every youth expression was solemn hearing Kale's last words. They all knew the risks involved in this competition and that was only the first test not the final.

Ace had a completely different thought process than the others.

'He's telling them not to die a meaningless death. Heh, he didn't care about their lives as long they die meaningfully.' He sneered.

All his attention was on the last carriage where those two powerful experts were, he was hoping for them to come out so he could see their faces. But by the looks of it would not happen.

Because after Kale left the high platform a man with a fierce look on his face exited the registration building. He wore the uniform of the institute and directly climb the platform.

He coldly scanned the crowd of youngsters before speaking, "My name is Dominik and I'll be your tester for this Kingdom Level Test!"

Dominik coolly said, "There are 149,839 registered participants for this Kingdom Level Test."

Ace was astonished to hear this huge number of people and so does everyone else around him. But those spectators weren't shocked by this because every five years this kind of number was normal.

"Let me tell you something very interesting." Dominik spoke impassively, "There will be three tests in total. Kingdom Level, Kingdoms Level, and Final Test!

"Kingdom level test is merely in the scope of one kingdom and there are a hundred tests today in every kingdom. At the end of this test, only one million excellent youths will pass throughout the middle-lands and take part in the Kingdoms Level Test.

"As for how many places allocated to your kingdom in this one million are... 6,000!"

Everyone inhaled sharply hearing this number, Ace also pull a serious face.

It pleased Dominik seeing everyone's grave expression, "Now we have 149,839 participants here meaning 143,839 among you lot will be failed at the end of this kingdom level test. As for the Kingdoms Level test you didn't have the right to know about it until you pass this stage."

Everyone was grimly waiting for what kind of test will be in this year's competition because in every selection there will always be a new type of test.

Dominik didn't keep everyone hanging as he finally reveal the test, "The kingdom level test of this year will Hunt!"

Everyone exclaimed in shock.

Dominik continued, "Fifty Milles north from the Regal City is the Dark Swamp Forest filled with all kinds of demonic beasts. The highest cultivation base of a beast living in that forest is the middle stage foundation building.

"All the participants' cultivation is below Qi Foundation Building Realm and this means if you did not trend carefully you'll lose your life. You all have fourteen days to hunt a Phantom Horn Lizard!"

Everyone's expression turns ugly hearing Phantom Horn Lizard's name because this demonic beast is very good at hiding and escaping. But the most dreadful thing about this Phantom Horn Lizard was its poison spit that can kill someone below Qi foundation realm within minutes!

Ace was calm compared to everyone else because he had nothing to fear in that forest and just had to find that lizard and bring it back.

"Now start moving." A cold smile flashed on his face before he said, "I forgot to tell everyone that the antidote for the Phantom Horn Lizard poison has been removed from the market.

"One more thing I'm watching this test with other institute testers and if we found anyone bringing a helper with them, they'll be killed on the spot no matter who you are! The institute rules are absolute!

"Good Luck and if anyone takes over fourteen days, they will be disqualified!"

Those nobles' youth's face was very ugly at this moment while the commoners had a joyful expression because this means no one can cheat or take advantage of their background.

Every youngster moved in a hurry. Because whoever reached the forest first will have the advantage to find the target first.

Those aristocrats youths also exited their carriages with an arrogant face before joining the race to the Dark Swamp Forest.

At the moment, a pair of young boy and girl disembark the royal regal family's carriages!

They were Kale's youngest children who were taking part in this test!

Everyone gave way to the prince and princess as they move towards the city gate.

Ace was in the enormous crowd and moving like everyone using none of his abilities. He was waiting to exit the city before doing his thing.

He was relieved about those two experts staying in the city especially that Qi river core cultivator.

As for Dominik, he was only an empty river cultivator and Ace can fool him anytime he wanted to.

Ace also saw those nobles forming groups and even that two royal children had their group of twenty. Everyone in their group had fifth gate cultivation and had an egotistic expression on their faces.

"This brother, do you want to join our team?"

Ace followed this voice and saw a chubby boy was smiling at him.

"No, I enjoy working alone." Ryan coolly answered before walking without even caring about the other party's reply.

Ace's disguise cultivation was at the fifth gate and he was welcome in any group. But no one was asking those weak cultivators below fourth Qi gates and all of them had formed their little groups.

After an hour Ace finally exited the city gate and move toward the Dark Swamp Forest.

He didn't use the lightning steps instantly because he could feel Dominik and ten other peak Qi foundation stage cultivators following the participants in shadows.

But before he could find a place to active his skills, Ace felt the familiar presence of that Qi river core expert!

Ace's expression stiffened, *'Why the hell is he not staying in the damn city!'* He cursed.

Now he had no choice but to move like the other using none of his skills because none of his skills can outmatch a real Qi river core cultivator!

In a single hour, those nobles were nowhere to be seen as they all had high-level skills at their disposal.

Ace was still in the middle range group. Only he knows just how frustrated he was because he can't use his skills and even had to pretend to be slow!

'At this rate, all those lizards might run out! That guy's smile was not normal, it was most likely the number of the targets are exactly six thousand. If that's the case then they're going to be a bloodbath!' Ace mused gravely.

Ace's guess was right on the spot because Dominik and other experts of the institute controlled the exact number of Phantom Horn Lizards!

As for other founding over one Phantom Horn Lizards, they simply didn't care. They had another alternative to fill the reaming positions.

Because the positions can't exceed six thousand but they can exclude!

Chapter 154 - Dark Swamp Forest

9-11 minutes

The Dark Swamp Forest was spread in thousands of miles and it was the largest forest of Regal Kingdom.

The name dark swamp came from its gloomy and dark environment and the black water swamp that expanded throughout the entire forest and it was very dangerous!

Many poisonous demonic beasts roamed in this forest, and this place was heaven for lethal beings. The air here alone was very threatening for any cultivators below the Qi foundation building realm not to mention mortals.

That's why whenever someone came here they bought antitoxins just to breathe normally.

However, on this day, many youngsters enter this dangerous forest with no antidote and they had to hunt the Phantom Horn Lizard that was sneaky and extremely toxic.

But these youngsters were full of spirit and enthusiasm because if they complete this task they can win riches and glory. So, the danger was worth it.

These youngsters were naturally participants of Damien Royal Institute's kingdom level test.

Almost 120,000 youths enter the Dark Swamp Forest without caring for their life or death.

As for the remaining ones, they were those who came to their sense and were afraid of death. They all had a weak cultivation base below the fourth Qi gate so forfeiting was very natural.

No-one stopped them or laugh at them because everyone's focus was on those who enter the forest.

The time was two weeks, just enough to not get die by toxic in the forest's air. But with each passing day, this toxic will affect the progress and judgment of participants, even reducing their action and reaction capabilities.

This made this test even deadlier. This was mostly the case for those who came from all over the regal kingdom because they never enter this forest like some nobles' children and other youths who came here for training or to collect materials for a living.

But this didn't stop those who were determined to win a place in six thousand!

Ace was one of those who never enter this forest or in a toxic environment such as this. But this didn't affect him much since his cultivation was too high and he had the dark void!

All this worry was about that hidden Qi river core expert, who was following them here and keep using the martial sense without pausing!

'Damn it, he defiantly using Qi stones and some powerful treasure!' Ace cursed.

He entered the dark swamp forest just an hour ago, but he didn't dare to use his actual skills in the presence of this hateful martial sense!

Ace was now just like the other commoners and moving at a normal speed of the fifth Qi gate cultivator. He could only wait for this mysterious expert Qi to run out since it was very taxing to keep using martial sense.

But to Ace's dismay, this martial sense didn't show any sign of weakening even after four hours.

Ace was now completely sure that his fellow was very rich since he was burning a huge amount of Qi stones just to keep the martial sense active.

Ace was almost right about his conjecture regarding Alvin's wealth and treasure.

First, Alvin didn't plan on following the participants in the test but when he was in the carriage of the Regal Royal Family, he felt something very peculiar.

It was as if someone was looking at the carriage he was sitting in!

Alvin wasn't like others who think it was just a coincidence.

This feeling came straight from the sharp martial sense that never failed him before. But when he probed the crowd with his powerful treasure, he found nothing.

But he was sure this feeling of being probed came straight from this crowd of youngsters!

This makes him even more curious because to his knowledge only someone in the same realm can fool his martial sense but it was also impossible to find a person like this here.

So, his suspicion leads his thoughts straight to that mysterious thief!

He wanted to instantly investigate the crowd of youths because this was the first time he found anything out of order after coming here.

However, Alvin refrained himself and investigated all of them when no one was around and that place was of course Dark Swamp Forest!

In this forest, he can do anything he wanted with whomever he found suspicious. No one will ever know about it not even his sister who was too lazy and disdainful to leave the city and come in this forest with him!

Alvin was using a formation treasure that can be operated with high Qi stones and he just had to use his martial sense to the lowest capacity with it!

Now, Alvin was observing a thousand square meters area around himself with that treasure and he cover every participant.

'So far nothing. Let's hope I was not mistaken.' Alvin licked his lips as he patiently waits in the shadows like a snake.

The moment he felt something is not right with someone he would not hesitate to act.

Ace was five hundred meters away from Alvin's treasure range and he keep it that way because if he moved any further he won't be able to tell if he was being watched since he didn't know the exact range of his martial sense.

And if he moves carelessly to through Alvin off, he might stimulate his suspicion.

Now, this has turned into the game of forbearing, whoever runs out of it first will lose!

"Phantom Horn Lizards are found in the middle area of forest and I'm still at the outskirts of the forest. It will still take me two or three days to reach that area at this speed." Ace mumbles to himself while looking at the map.

Although it annoys him to move like this, it didn't mean he will jump straight to the enemy's hand. He just has to wait for that annoying fellow to become careless and before that he just had to act which he was very good at.

'It is a blessing that no one is attaching anyone for now or I might show some opening by defending myself.' Ace pondered.

He knew this peace won't last long and the moment everyone reached the hunting ground of those lizards the actual test to skills will start then.

Eight hours pass, almost everyone was resting because a Qi gate cultivator can't move for long in this kind of environment. When it come to Ace that was whole another story, though.

But even Ace had to pretend to be resting like everyone else because that martial sense just won't go away.

'I wish I could just rob that guy's treasures!' Ace thought bitterly. But he didn't even know where he was and afraid of using his heavenly sense.

Ace now had some doubts seeing the persistence of that mysterious expert because he was using the martial sense like he knew Ace was here and this made Ace think he has slipped somewhere despite being extremely careful.

That is why he wasn't using even soul sense to probe in long-range like he always does.

Now, Ace can only think of one way to not draw attention to himself and that was to stick together with a group of people.

By doing this Ace could draw less attention to himself and he don't have to use his skills more often when the real hunt began.

'Now, which group should I stick with.' Ace carefully used his soul sense to scan a hundred meters radius area!

Ace was a lone wolf and didn't know how to play in a team but he was always ready for new experiences.

'Oh, a familiar soul signature.' Ace was astonished and go in the north direction sixty meters away from his position.

There was a party of eight youths resting under a brown tree. There were five girls and three boys on this team.

When they saw an average-looking youth walking towards them with a smile on his face, all of them become vigilant because his cultivation was at the peak Qi gate realm.

"Halt!" A tall, muscular boy shouted and stop the youth with acuity in his eyes. He was a fifth Qi gate cultivator.

"What business do you have with us?" He coolly asked.

Ace saw the six feet tallboy with muscular built with interest, he had an above-average face with bronze skin. A nine feet tall spear was in his firm hand. He was clenching it as if he would attack him if he finds anything awry.

Ryan put a friendly smile as he said, "I want to join your party. I wonder if you have any open spot for me?"

"No! We didn't need anyone. Please leave." The boy said without thinking twice.

Ace didn't find this rejection strange since he would've done the same to a stranger who wanted to join his party out of the blue.

Ryan said nothing and merely nodded with a faint smile on his face as he turned around to leave.

But before turning around he glances at a dainty girl sitting around the fire. She was looking at him with curious eyes.

She was the same girl who killed the owner of this face, Ace was wearing!

Chapter 155 - Joining A Team

8-11 minutes

Ace didn't expect to see this girl so soon after entering the forest.

The first reason he came to this party was to see if he could join them and the second and main reason was to see if this girl remembered this boy's face who she killed that day.

'Heh, she didn't remember.' Ace was overjoyed noticing she didn't react in any way.

It was also nighttime that day so it was very normal to her not to remember the face clearly and besides who would remember a terrible memory about a scum, right?

"Wait!"

Ace was going to leave so he could search for some other group he could join when a gentle voice stopped him.

Ryan curiously looked back toward this crisp voice and saw a beautiful girl was looking at him with a charming smile.

Her face was oval with a sharp chin and white skin. She wore a short skirt that reveals her long slender legs and a short robe that show her tone waist.

One can see a longbow laying on her lap and a quiver attached to her back, she was an archer.

Ace impassively looked at this seductive beauty, her cultivation was at the peak of the fifth gate and she was probably the strongest one among this party.

Because there were only the fifth gate cultivators included this charming girl, the spear boy, and that dainty girl who wasn't hiding her cultivation anymore. The other five were all at the fourth Qi gate realm.

"Why do you want to join a party now?" She asked with an interesting expression on her face.

Ryan smiles faintly before answering, "Because I first thought it will be easy alone but after coming here I understand I was wrong."

"Hehe, you're quite honest. Fine, you can join my team but if I found you a liability... I'll kick you out." She smiles seductively and lets Ryan join the party.

The boy with the spear grimaced and blurt, "Miss Nola, please reconsider. How could you let anyone join the team who comes out of nowhere?" It dissatisfied him seeing Nola letting this stranger join without counseling with anyone.

"Oh, now I need Little Brother Devan's permission to make my decision?" Nola gives an icy glare to Devan.

"I didn't say that but..."

Before Devan could complete his sentence, Nola cut him and speak coolly.

"Since you are against my decision very well. Let's vote for it. I don't want anyone to think I'm overbearing like those rotten nobles." Nola looked at everyone with a smile, "Everyone please speak your mind freely."

Ace on the side was observing this with recreation. He didn't think this girl was the leader of this small party and so resolute.

The six of them looked at each other with wry smiles. They were all strangers but everyone knows the attitude of their leader by now.

"I'm with Brother Devan." A mean-looking boy spoke at this moment.

"I'm also with Brother Devan in this. We can't let just anyone enter the party." A gentle-looking boy speaks solemnly.

Nola frowned but said nothing and looked at those four girls with great expectation in her round eyes.

"I think we should let him stay since he's also a peak Qi gate realm cultivator and this will give us more chances to fight for Phantom Horn Lizard." The girl with an average face speaks with a grave face.

Nola smile hearing this and nod in satisfaction. This was also the reason she wanted to let Ryan join the team.

"I-I...he can... join." A little girl timidly speaks while shyly glancing at everyone.

Devan's face stiffen when he saw the vote tied, and he looked at those two reaming girls.

"Sorry Big Sister Nola but I'm with Big Brother Devan in this." The girl with a sword said with an apologetic face.

Nola smiled at her as she wasn't holding a grudge.

Now everyone was looking at the dainty girl. She was the third strongest member and her opinion mattered a lot even if Devan had three votes.

The dainty girl deeply looked at Ryan who didn't speak all this time and only watched showing no emotions.

'*Why does he look so familiar?*' She thought confusingly. But no matter how much she run her brain she didn't remember encountering a peak Qi gate existence like this boy.

Her thought process was very simple, she only remembered powerful people that can stand equal against her and everyone else was only a flea in her eyes.

She had killed many people who court death after seeing her disguise cultivation and that's why she didn't remember the boy she killed three months ago.

"I want to test him, if he can take on one attack from me then he can stay, and if not... hihi." She said in her mellow voice.

"I like Little Sister Lilith's idea. What do you think Little Brother Dewan?" Nola claps her hand happily while looking at Dewan.

"Fine." Dewan also has no qualm since two of the strongest members were agreed.

"What do you think... um, I didn't know your name." Nola looked at Ryan while smiling sweetly.

"My name is Ryan and I don't have any objection." Ryan shrugs his shoulder.

Lilith also didn't delay and stand up from her position.

Ace was amusingly looking at her. He has seen this little girl's ability once and knew she was very good at fatal attacks.

Everyone moves twenty yards away to give them space and watch with serious faces.

They all were traveling for some time and they know just how powerful this weak-looking little girl was after seeing her defeating a demonic beast equal to a fourth Qi gate cultivator like it was nothing.

One had to know the demonic beasts' bodies were much tougher than human cultivators. A demonic beast of the fourth Qi gate can trouble even a fifth Qi gate cultivator. Yet this girl has killed it with a blow!

"I won't hold back." Lilith said with a faint smile, "So if you die don't resent me."

"Don't worry I won't." Ryan smile faintly.

Lilith's smile turn cold because she thought this guy was underestimating her. She hated those who look down on her and this instigated her killing intent.

Ace sense a faint killing intent from Lilith but didn't take it seriously. All his attention was on the martial sense that just won't go away.

Lilith finally moved at wind-like speed. She was using a movement skill that was her most powerful skill.

Everyone's eyes contracted because this move was the exact move she used to defeat that demonic beast in an instant.

Ace saw Lilith's movement and was slightly surprised by it because her speed was equal to his silent steps at middle-level mastery!

Lilith still didn't see Ryan moving nor did his smile change even in the slightest. She takes an eight inched dark blue double edge dagger out of her waist belt. It was a three-start treasure.

With her fast speed and that sharp dagger in her hand, it can penetrate even peak fifth Qi gate cultivation heart easily!

But her opponent was Heavenly Foundation Cultivator like Ace.

Lilith finally reached Ryan, and without any hesitation, she goes for the killing blow.

'Swishh...'

The dagger made an air-piercing sound but it only permeate empty air because Ryan has vanished before the dagger could touch his body.

"H-how!? Where is he?!?" Lilith was shocked seeing Ryan disappear and glanced around.

Lilith's eyes were wide open and everyone else was watching his exchange of move.

They all saw Ryan was standing one meter behind Lilith with a faint smile on his face. No one saw him moving, he just disappeared and appeared behind Lilith like a ghost!

Ace has used the silent step to sidestep Lilith's attack and sneak behind her.

This girl was good with her dagger but she can't force him to use his actual abilities.

From start to finish he was observing the martial sense to see if he could draw any attention to himself by using the silent steps.

'Oh, just a little flinch. I can use my silent step to fifty percent since it didn't consider it suspicious.' Ace sighs in relief and shifted his consciousness from the invisible bead in his thief's storage.

He was ready to use this bead to hide his presence at any given moment if he detected anything amiss.

"H-how you did it?"

Ace finally turn his attention to bewilderment Lilith and others who were dumbfoundedly looking at him.

"I'm just stronger than you." Ryan rubs his chin while speaking with a serious face.

Lilith's cute face turn red hearing this unreasonable answer but she didn't retort nor did she have a word to. Since she said she would use only one attack and Ryan beat her fair and square she didn't attack again, even if she was frustrated.

"Welcome to the team!"

Nola speaks at this moment as her eyes shimmer with excitement.. She was thrilled to have a person with a movement skill even stronger than Lilith.

Chapter 156 - The Hunting Ground

9-11 minutes

Everyone snapped out of their bewilderment after hearing Nola's enthusiastic voice.

No one raised any objection at this time and everyone welcome Ryan with broad smiles on their faces.

Dewan also welcome Ryan but his smile was forceful since he didn't have a ground to object anymore. Even he had to admit that Ryan's movement skill was alone worth having in the team and he simply can't counter it.

"I'll be in your care everyone." Ryan beamed broadly while nodding towards everyone.

Ace's genuine concern was that hidden expert at this moment and this new team was just a camouflage so he could not look so obvious while using his overpowered skills.

"Little Brother Ryan, where are you from?" Nola asked with full of interest.

Everyone was resting at this moment after Ryan join the party.

Ace calmly tell them what he told in the Regal city's gate and told that he was an orphan who wanted to achieve something in his life and the institute test was just the thing he needed.

After hearing Ryan's ambition everyone also open up to him and talked about their dreams as well.

Ace couldn't help but feel somewhat heartwarming seeing everyone smiling and talking with each other happily. His last interaction with someone like this was with Bill in Luminous City.

'Being ignorant is a blessing on its own.' Ace thought with a peculiar smile on his face.

In his opinion, this group was full of ambition and dreams completely ignorant of danger lurking in the shadows. After all, every one of them had a family to go back to.

They were not like him who didn't have a home or someone waiting for him except Alina whose whereabouts were unknown and probably millions of miles away.

But Ace didn't forget he still had someone with him and she was always traveling with him. Although she was sealed in that black and red cocoon in his living thief's space she will always be with him no matter what.

After resting for two more hours the group of nine moves again. They didn't wait for the night to pass since everyone was trying to reach the Phantom horn Lizard hunting group as soon as possible.

Ace was, of course, one of them now and he was moving in the rear and his task was to cover everyone's back.

Dewan first has a problem with Nola's decision to leave such a position to Ryan so careless but she was hellbent on it and others also approved of it. Dewan felt extremely helpless and agreed with this decision in the end, but he was moving with Ryan to make sure he won't play any tricks.

Ace was completely understanding Dewan's vigilance toward him and he also didn't trust him completely. But Ace has his doubts regarding two persons in this group after interacting with them and Dewan was not one of them.

They all travel for six hours and kill many toxic demonic beasts in their way. Those demonic beasts were not very powerful, but they were poisonous regardless of their cultivation base.

Ace also saw those five fourth Qi gate realm teammates' faces were bluish, and this was the sign of breathing this forest's air and traveling on the bank of dark water swamp.

They also encounter some other parties like them but no one fights since everyone was accumulating their Qi for the target and the fight will only start after they reach the middle area of the dark swamp forest.

One thing noteworthy was the nobles of Regal Capital were nowhere to be seen especially the Regal family's group of twenty. It was as if they were traveling without resting.

But no one had any time to ponder over them since everyone was busy dealing with this toxic environment.

"Don't you think this place is too dangerous for these youngsters?" A man's voice sounded somewhere in the forest.

"Heh, if they can't even take this much poison and survive then they will be killed by those second-grade kingdoms participants in the second test. Besides this test was nothing compared to top ten kingdoms." An impersonal voice jeered at this moment.

"He is right. This test is for their good or they all will be killed in Kingdoms Level Test and become stepping stone for others." Another sweet voice rang.

"Hahaha, do you all seriously think they can pass the second test or even survive? Almost for four hundred years, no one has ever won any seat from a third-grade kingdom. Besides the second test is very interesting this time, there will be a vast audience watching those ants getting crushed." A man's disdainful laughter rang.

No one rebuke him as if he was telling the truth!

Two days pass in a breeze.

Almost every participant has reached the middle area of the dark swamp forest. But everyone's face has a bluish hue as if they were all sick. Those youngsters finally understood just how difficult this test truly was and this was only the third day out of fourteen!

Now, in everyone's mind was only one thought and that was to find a Phantom Horn Lizard as quick as possible and leave this damn place.

Ace party's condition was also the same. The five weakest teammates' faces were bluish pale and the three strongest were somewhat better than everyone else except Ryan!

Ryan's face was still the same as he was two days ago. It was as if this environment didn't affect him in the least bit.

Although, it was a good thing but not at this particular time because Alvin's martial sense was still there and if he took notice of Ace's special condition, he might come running any time for him.

Ace was almost on the verge of crying because of this. He never would've thought his heavenly defying immunity will get him into life-threatening trouble.

He even asked the system if this mask can change skin color but to his dismay it has none!

Ace simply cursed at the system after learning about this flaw and the system ignore him like always.

In the end, Ace dived into the black swamp in the name of; he saw Phantom Horn Lizard and become completely black with dirt.

His teammates were ecstatic first when they heard it but soon they discovered it was just a false alarm and looked at dirty Ryan with sympathy in their eyes.

Everyone thought that he had gone insane because of poison and question him so they could test just how much he was sane!

Ace didn't know whether to laugh or cry seeing everyone's sympathetic expression but his action was indeed idiotic so he could only ensure them he was sane after answering their weird questions.

But no matter what he wasn't regretting his actions since now no one could see his complexion clearly and found his unusual poison resistance ability.

After this minor incident, they all search for the Phantom Horn Lizard as their lives depend on it.

"Follow me. I know where we could find those lizards!" The boy with a gentle face speaks at this moment. His name was Crosby, and he was a commoner from the Regal Capital City.

Nola and everyone looked at Crosby with obvious doubts in their eyes.

Crosby smile wryly seeing everyone questioning eyes and said, "I'm a beast hunter and come to this forest many times for hunting and gathering beast materials. I had to admit I had never dived this deep

in the forest before but I heard a senior hunter once talking about this place that was hunting a group of Phantom Horn Lizards. If I remember correctly, then we are not far from it."

Ace's eyes narrowed hearing this, but he said nothing and merely looked at Nola like everyone else. She was the leader of this party and she has the final say.

"I think we should try it. It is far better than roaming around aimlessly." Dewan spoke at this moment in the support of Crosby. He was very friendly with Crosby.

Nola pouted for a moment and looked at Lilith who was always in a sulky mood ever since she loses her exchange with Ryan.

Lilith nodded toward Crosby, she was clearly in agreement with Dewan's reason.

Nola then looked at Ryan. She also trusts this new member since he let no demonic beast past him in these two days and he was also very humble.

Ryan merely shrugs his shoulder and leaves it to Nola.

"Fine, we'll follow Little Brother Crosby from now on. We're already far behind those rotten nobles." Nola finally agreed with Crosby since it was also her first time coming to the capital city and this forest.

Crosby smile gently seeing everyone was going to follow him, "I won't disappoint you all." He takes the lead and starts moving in the muddy pathway between those tall gloomy trees' stilt roots.

By Crosby movement, it didn't seem it was his first time here as if he knows the forest very well. Nobody notices this detail since the poison clouded their judgment.

Well, everyone except Ace!

Chapter 157 - Treachery!

9-11 minutes

Ace's party of nine was following Crosby for half an hour. As they all moved in this particular route, the humidity was increasing. One can see dense clouds in the sky.

"It's going to be heavy rain." The girl with the sword said while frowning. Her name was Pearl, she was a lesser noble's daughter and came from Ale Province.

"I good if it's poured down heavy since it will clean this damn air." The boy with a mean face shouted. His name was Ramiro, and he was a commoner from Vin Province.

"No, it is not good at all. The rain will make it more difficult to move and many poisonous demonic beasts can easily sneak up on us with all the water in the way. I heard the black water swamp can easily flood the middle area of the forest in heavy rain. We don't want to be that swamp!" Lilith gravely speaks at this moment.

Everyone expression stiff hearing this because Lilith was stating the obvious and they all speed up their movement.

Ace on the other hand was ecstatic and wholeheartedly wish for heavy rain because the rain can moderately hinder that damn martial sense! The water will create small ripples in the Qi of this atmosphere that was already full of water element Qi.

This will give Ace some chance to use his abilities freely!

Now he just had to wait for the rain to start.

"We're here!" Crosby's excited voice sounded after half an hour.

Everyone looked at the area and was astonished because there were many fifty meters tall purple trees with needle-like purple leaves which were one meter long.

Ace's eyes narrowed because he wasn't like the others seeing with just naked eyes, he was observing with soul sense. He found many tiny demonic insects on those trees.

'This might be a hunting place for Phantom Horn Lizard. Since it's two feet long and enjoys praying on small demonic beasts.' Ace thought with ecstasy, *'If I can get one I don't need to be on edge all the time and I can leave this place for good.'*

"Everyone please be careful of those trees are extremely toxic and if those needle-like leaves or the tree bark itself even faze you, you'll be dead in two hours!" Crosby grimly warns everyone.

Everyone's excitement dies down the moment they heard Crosby's warning. They tend the way more carefully in high alert now.

Just like this, they disappear into the forest of those poisonous trees, and an hour passed, but they didn't find any trace of Phantom Horn Lizard.

However, everyone's complexion was pale blue since this area's air was much poisonous than outside air.

"I... I thi...think... we should leave this place." The little shy girl spoke in a mosquito-like voice at this moment. Her name was Natalia and she was a commoner of Capital City.

Natalia's personality was shy and she speak very little and only listen to everyone else like an obedient little child. She was the youngest in the group only 13 years old.

Although Natalia's voice wasn't loud, yet everyone hears it since they were all cultivators.

"I'm agreed with Little Natalia." The girl with an average face instantly agreed with Natalia. Her name was Ashly, and she was a commoner from ale province.

"We can't just give up after coming this far." Ramiro instantly retorted with an angry face.

Little Natalia was scared and quickly hide behind Ashly.

"Hey, you can't take with her like this." Nola rebuke Ramiro and said, "I know how you're feeling but we can't stay here for too long or we'll die before we could find those damn lizards!"

"But leader we can't just go back after we've come this deep and our target may be just around the corner!" Crosby said gravely. He was unwilling to leave.

"He had a point." Dewan nodded with a grim face.

"Oh, it seems you didn't cherish your life." Lilith speaks with a sneer at this moment, "Look at your face it is already this pale if you go deep you'll die maybe in three more hours and those weaker than you had little time either. Now decide if your life is more important or this competition?"

Dewan finally closely looked at his hand and was shocked after seeing his blue skin with small black dots on it.

"We're leaving!" Nola decisively said after noticing her beautiful skin turning into this hideous blue and spinning around.

"Hah, they finally couldn't take it anymore!" At this moment a contemptuous voice of a male resounded from the shadow of the trees.

Nola and everyone's faces fell after hearing this voice.

"Who are you, show yourself, coward!" Ramiro yells with anger.

"Oh, this one is still lively." A sweet voice scoffed at this moment from the opposite direction to that male voice.

"We've been surrounded." Ryan calmly said at this moment, he was the only one who wasn't surprised by this sudden ambush.

Ace has long sensed this hidden party after they enter this part but didn't point it out since it would look suspicious. After all, some commoner like him can't sense someone's presence from twenty meters away from him by normal means.

So, he could only wait and see how this thing would play out while watching the sky.

'Just fall already!' Ace bitterly thought.

"Please, we don't want to fight. Just let us pass." Nola said gravely. She knew no one in the condition of an all-out fight because if they waste anymore Qi the poison will penetrate their defense and enter their internals.

And when it happened, it will be over for everyone!

"Hehe, you don't want to fight, you say? It's more likely you can't fight."

At this moment a tall skinny boy walks out of the tree's shadow with a mocking smile on his face.

Thereafter, eleven more youngsters walk out from their hiding spots. This new group wore lavishing robes and the most shocking part about them was their complexions were perfectly fine with no trace of toxicity!

"Y-you how did you're fine!???" Dewan was shocked.

"Hehe, a mere dirty commoner like you don't have the right to know." The skinny boy disdainfully said.

Dewan's face turned unsightly hearing this answer. He hated these nobles for their ego and haughty attitude.

Nola and other expressions were also not good.

At this moment in everyone confusing and shocking eyes, Crosby moves toward the party of aristocrats with a crooked smile on his face.

"My Lords, I've done what you asked for. Now can you give me the cure, I'm almost out of Qi." Crosby said while kneeling in front of the skinny boy.

"Brother Crosby, YOU!??" Dewan's face turned bloodless pale seeing the person who he considers a friend turning into a traitor instantly.

The remaining party members also show the same expression as Dewan, except for Ryan.

Ace knew this guy was up to no good from the start when he lies about his background and lures everyone into this forest. But he didn't point it out for obvious reasons.

He felt sorry for the poor guy Dewan; he was always on guard against him but never suspected the closest person, who was pulling his chain all along.

"You, traitorous bastard, you sell us down the river!" Ramiro clenched the two axes in his hand as the fire of hatred burned deep in his eyes.

He wanted to attack Crosby but Nola stop him and stiffly said, "You'll die!"

"Hehe, listen to this whore. She is telling the truth in this condition I can just dodge and you'll be helpless after your Qi run out." At this moment, the bulky boy ridicule while glaring at Romero's pale blue face.

Nola show killing intent hearing that boy calling her whore but didn't attack.

However, a spear moves in a lightning speed at this moment with no warning and its target was none other than kneeling Crosby's head!

This attacker was none other than Dewan who was blinded by rage and just wanted to kill this traitor.

"NO!" Nola finally saw Dewan moving without caring about the consequences but it was too late to stop him.

Crosby also saw Dewan coming and sneer as he looked at the skinny boy without moving from his position. He had no intention to dodge.

The skinny boy sneered and swept his sleeve nonchalantly. A white barrier suddenly appeared between Dewan's spearhead and Crosby's head.

'Clang'

A metallic voice sounded when the spearhead touched the light barrier and Dewan blew backward because of the shock wave created by this collision.

Dewan's face was bloodlessly pale as he struggles to stand up and suddenly vomit a mouthful of blood. His eyes were almost listless.

Ace's eyes contracted after seeing this light barrier and gravely thought, *'An array barrier treasure!'*

His knowledge about runes was not so shallow anymore, and he instantly found out the nature of that light barrier.

Ace didn't use his runic eyes because he didn't want to active Light Soul Qi and cause unusual soul ripple in the air.

But he could tell because that brat can't control a formation barrier with his fifth Qi gate cultivation, and besides formations cannot be bought at markets like candies!

Chapter 158 - Living Bait!

9-11 minutes

Dewan was palpitating heavily while struggling to keep his conscious, but the hatred in his eyes didn't dim in the slightest.

"Are you, all right?"

Dewan felt two firm hands giving him support and helping him stand up. He weakly looked to the side and saw Ryan was the one who supported him.

Dewan felt guilt wash over him, he never trusts Ryan even for a second but in the end, it was the person he trusted most that stabbed him in the back, and now who he trusted the least is helping him.

Dewan weakly nodded at Ryan in affirmative.

"Oh, you collide directly with my golden shield and only splutter some blood. I had to say, I'm impressed." The skinny boy said with sarcasm.

Dewan looked at this boy with naked killing intent but he was helpless to do anything.

"What do you want with us?!" Nola grimly asked.

"You'll find out soon." The skinny boy said while showing his white teeth, "Brother Frank and Brother Callen, I have to trouble you both with escorting them to the Young Duke. I have to go back since more of my minions are coming with more living bait."

"Hahaha, don't worry Brother Finn, we'll handle this delivery perfectly." A tall handsome youth with long hair walks forward, with a broad smile on his face. It was Frank.

Following Frank was a muscular young man, he was Callen.

"I expect nothing less from you, Brother Frank." Finn smile while nodding at them.

Frank turned his attention to Ace's party of eight and his warm smile turned cold.

Ace frowned when he hears Living Bait but he still can do nothing, *'Just what is these nobles planning?'* He wanted to see just what is this all about.

"Now my little friends follow me and don't try to play any tricks or Brother Callen here will cut your arms as punishment." Frank chuckled coldly.

Ace's party expression was pale, but they had no choice since both Frank and Callen were peak fifth Qi gate cultivators and they were not in the condition to fight while they were perfectly fine.

"Just do as he said and you'll be fine we don't want your life," Callen spoke impassively at this moment.

"It's not like we have any choice." Nola smiled bitterly and helplessly agreed to follow those two and so does everyone else.

"Hey, kneeling guy why aren't you moving?" Frank annoyingly looked at Crosby who was amusingly watching his former teammates' ugly faces.

Crosby's face turn bloodlessly pale as he looked at Finn instantly.

Finn chuckles coldly, "You hear the man, follow them you're also living bait. I didn't save you for nothing consider it me returning the favor."

"M-my L... Lord, please don't do this. I was always loyal to you!" Crosby instantly begged.

"Don't shit around or you don't want your hand?!" Frank coldly speaks.

Crosby tremble and quickly join his former team again with an ugly face after hearing Frank because he knew this guy will do what he said.

Finn didn't even flinch seeing Crosby's pleading expression and said before leaving while waving his hand, "I'll leave everything to Brother Frank."

"Go in peace." Frank chuckles.

Nola and everyone else were looking at Crosby with eyes full of hatred and killing intent.

"You reap what you sow, huh." Lilith coldly said with killing intent. If not for Nola gripping her hand, she wanted to stab this backstabbing bastard.

Crosby's face was as if he will cry at any moment, he was simply thrown in the pack of wounded lions now. So, he quickly changes his position and begins to walk closer with Callen.

Frank led the way and to Nola and the other eight dismay they were moving deep in this poisonous forest again.

"My Lords, we'll die in two hours if we keep moving in this forest!" Crosby said in a begging tone.

"Shut up! The more poison your boy accommodates the better." Frank pursed his lips.

"Can you tell us what this living bait thing is?" Ryan calmly asked at this moment.

Frank coolly glance at Ryan's dirty face and said, "Ugly you seem quite calm from everyone else why is that?"

"Panic will make the poisoning process even faster and besides it's not like I can run away from you."
Ryan indifferently answered.

Frank couldn't help but take another glance at Ryan's calm eyes and was little started by them. He didn't find any trace of fear in them.

Everyone else in the group was also astonished hearing Ryan's words and quickly try to calm themselves.

"Hahaha, interesting, very interesting. You know what! I like you. How about you pledge your loyalty to me and I'll let you live." Frank said with a smile.

Callen frowned and said coldly, "Stop your nonsense, or I have to report this to Young Duke!"

"Tsk, ts, you're not fun brother Callen." Frank chuckles while darkly looking at Callen.

"Sorry Ugly it seems your luck is not so good," Frank said as he shrugged his shoulder.

'Tell me about it.' Ace smile bitterly.

"Since I like you let me tell you about living bait," Frank said nonchalantly.

Everyone's ears perked as they all listen very carefully and Callen also didn't stop Frank this time.

"As you can tell, you all are living bait for Bloodthirsty Earth Mantis because it loved poisonous blood of humans!" Frank said.

"Y-you aren't talking about that insect that feeds on blood and laid its eggs in its target's bloodstream?!"
Pearl abruptly asked as her face was ghastly pale.

"Oh, this little chick knows her stuff. Yes, it is indeed the one and only Bloodthirsty Earth Mantis." Frank coldly chuckles.

Everyone's faces darken to the extreme.

"Why Bloodthirsty Earth Mantis?" Ryan asked again calmly.

"Hehe, they are the favorite food for Phantom Horn Lizard. That damn lizard is too difficult to find but it can't resist the temptation of Bloodthirsty Earth Mantis." Frank said.

Ace finally understood these nobles' plan.

"Hah, you figure it out, right?" Frank beamed at Ryan who was naturally looking at him.

"Yes, you guys know about this test in advance or you couldn't plan this kind of strategy in given moments. Since you know about this beforehand; you all scatter your minions in different groups so they can lure living baits here for you. In the end, you all are brokers who are paid to bring us to those higher nobles." Ryan coolly said.

Frank deeply looked at Ryan and so does Callen. They had to admit this guy's mind was too sharp for his good. Because he almost guessed the whole truth by little information.

Nola and everyone else were also astonished after hearing Ryan's shocking conjecture.

"Hahaha, I had to admit it but you're quite something and I want to put a slave item on you. Yes, someone has leaked this information about the test and we turn it to our advantage." Frank laugh out loud.

"Heh, so much for the fair competition." Ryan pursed his lips and smile bitterly.

Nola and everyone's expression stiffed hearing this.

"Hehe, my Ugly friend trust me if you have the right price to pay you can buy anything in this world." Frank nonchalantly said.

Ace couldn't help but agreed with Frank on this one.

"That's enough or you'll know the consequences." Callen pursed his lips and stiffly warned Frank.

"Hehe, you're not fun brother Callen. Fine, no more talking everyone." Frank chuckled.

Deep in the dark swamp forest.

Alvin was sitting cross-legged on a tall tree while his eyes were closed.

He was observing the participants for three days now with his martial sense.

The Martial Sense differed greatly from Soul Sense.

Where soul sense can sense soul's emotion and soul Qi fluctuation, the martial sense can detect physical activities, martial Qi fluctuation, and it can also form a Qi projection to living. Simply put as long as you're alive and have any kind of Qi in your body you can't hide from Martial Sense.

Although this Qi projection was very vague in the Qi River Core realm, it was enough to find hidden enemies.

Both senses have their pros and cons, heaven didn't make everyone perfect after all.

Moreover, one can amplify both senses if they have the right treasure but these treasures were very rare and few crafters know how to forge them and their materials were quite rare in lower lands.

But these kinds of treasures can only be completed after a rune crafter crafts some special rune symbols on them. That's why they were so rare.

Alvin also had one of these rare treasures and that's why he can enlarge his martial sense of hundred meters into one thousand meters and even use Qi stones to keep it active.

However, even he had his limits and he was reaching it quickly since martial sense also took a huge toll on his soul, just like soul sense can affect physique!

'It's going to be rainfall soon and I need twelve hours to recover before I can use my martial sense again.. I should investigate those five in meantime.' Alvin thought and a grim smile appeared on his face!

Chapter 159 - Royal Family Arrival

9-11 minutes

Ace's party stopped after one hour when they reached some kind of campsite.

Everyone was astonished to see someone camping in this poisonous forest.

This sight did not surprise Frank and Callen and casually move towards the large fire where five youngsters were sitting.

Two were sitting on a golden couch while the other three were assumed on the ground and when they sense Ace's party presence they turned around with no fear as if they know who was coming.

Frank put an obsequious smile and promptly said, "Young Duke, I bought you the last batch of living bait."

At this moment an extremely handsome boy with silver hair smile gently hearing Frank's word. He was laying on the golden couch while his head was resting on an alluring beauty's lap.

"Scram now and tell Young Marquess I'll remember his favor." The silver hair boy indifferently said with no hint of skepticism as if he didn't care about Frank or Callen. His eyes were fixed on new living baits.

"Yes, as Young Duke command. I'll let Young Marquess know." Frank didn't dare to show any dissatisfaction and quickly looked at Ace's party.

"If you guys want to live don't piss him off trust me he's the exact example of 'looks can be deceiving.'" Frank faintly said before quickly leaving with Callen. He was truly afraid of this Young Duke.

"Hehe, it seems Young Duke has quite a reputation." The sedative beauty brushes the boy's long silver hair and giggles after hearing Frank's parting words.

"Hah, it's not like he speaks any lie." The silver hair boy didn't mind Frank's words and chuckles while answering the beauty.

Nola and Lilith frowned seeing this new party was also in good condition.

"Do we have enough?" The Young Duke asked nonchalantly to a dwarf boy sitting there.

"After combining these nine we have 41 living baits, Young Duke. I think it is enough." The dwarf boy respectfully answered.

"Heh, let's hunt some Phantom Horn Lizard, what do you say Lady Jenna?" The Young Duke looked at the charming beauty with a soft smile on his face.

"As Young Duke Leo command." She smiles seductively and nodded in agreement.

"You three slaves bring them with everyone and follow us, make sure to give them paralysis pill so they won't retaliate." Leo coldly looked at those three boys and command.

"Yes." The three answers in unison.

Speaking of which when Ace saw this young duke enjoying himself in this kind of environment, he couldn't help but admire him.

He even makes a mental note to buy something comfortable like that couch for himself since he was always traveling and it was not like he didn't have space to store these kinds of things.

The dwarf boy approached Ace's party and coldly said, "Eat these pills. Although they can stop the Qi flow in your body for ten hours, however, they can also slow the poison effect."

He took nine purple pills from his storage ring and tell Ace's party to eat them.

Lola and Lilith hesitate but when those other six hear these pills can slow the poison effect they quickly take the pills and throw them in their mouths.

"Did you three want to die?" A boy with a scar on his left eye released his aura of peak fifth Qi gate realm. This was a warning for Nola, Lilith, and Ryan.

Nola bitterly took the pill so does Lilith and Ryan. They knew it would be suicide to retaliate against these three peaks' fifth Qi gate cultivators.

They can't win against Frank and Callen much less these three and not to mention those two who were flirting with each other on the side.

Ace also took the pill and throw it in his mouth with no hesitation.

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"[Host has consumed Low-Grade Pill (Green-Ranked pill)]

[5 EXP has been added to Host's status]"

{EXP: 29.95 Million/50 Million}

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'Just Five this time eh. it seems green rank pills will be useless once I reached peak heavenly foundation stage just like the white rank pill.' Ace smile bitterly.

It was his first time gaining EXP after he reached the high stage of Heavenly Foundation Building Realm.

It came to no surprise that even green rank pills were giving him so little EXP.

Every time Ace reached a higher realm those low-level things that give him EXP lost their effects and this was not a good sign for Ace.

Because he needed a large amount of EXP when he reached the upper levels of cultivation and normal cultivation was just too slow for him.

Ace has noticed that one minute of normal cultivation can only give him **[1 EXP]** because stealing Qi from heaven and making it his own is difficult. But EXP made this thing very easily.

Because the system can turn this EXP in heavenly Qi and make the absorption process almost child's play!

Simply put, he can just buy or steal those pills, Qi herbs, or kill demonic beasts and get at least **[5 EXP]** instantly without going through the devious process of processing the Heavenly Qi into his own body.

As for the recovery of his Heavenly Qi, it was also a very mysterious process because for some reason once he processed a stance of Heavenly Qi successfully and make it his own he can easily replenish it without a hitch whatsoever.

He didn't know the mystery behind it because it was just too profound and he only know all of this had to do with the system.

That's why he stopped wasting his time in cultivation normally long ago and put all his effort into his skills and other techniques. By doing this Ace can use the time he saves from cultivation and hone his thieving skills with it.

But now gaining EXP is also become more difficult, and he needed high-quality pills and materials that were rarely seen in markets. That's why he has set his sight on Pill Flame Organization's people!

And this test was perfect for him to reach the territory of the first-grade kingdoms in the shortest time.

But he underestimated those three giants and now he was under the radar of a Qi River Core cultivator that was searching for him like his life depend on it!

"Good now starts moving, and if you lot try anything..." The third boy threatening voice sounded at this moment when Ace was mulling over his future.

Dewan and others' complexion become somewhat better after taking those pills.

'It seems he was telling the truth about the poison resisting effects of those pills.' Ace thought.

Everyone moves toward the east direction while following Leo's party.

After walking for two more hours they reached the black water swamp again but the surrounding area was very ghastly. A potent smell was in the air while the surrounding was deathly silent.

When Leo and Jena stop, everyone saw a large group of youngsters, and their complexion were not better than Ace's party of nine not to mention even worse.

They were other living baits beside them; they were resting at this moment. Every one of them had blue skin and strange blackish marks on their skin, their eyes were almost lifeless.

"We have enough people let's start before the rain comes down." The dwarf boy said to those twelve youth who seem to guard the living baits, and they were all in perfect condition.

"Wait, we have company." Leo abruptly speaks in a grave tone while looking at the left side of the woods.

"And here I thought who could reach this place so quickly. It is indeed none other than infamous White Ghost, Leo Nicolas." A jeering voice sounded within the tall trees.

Leo pull a long face when he heard 'White Ghost' because no one dares to call him that and everyone knows he hated that name.

"IMPUDENT! You dare to talk with Young Duke like this!?" The boy with a scarred yelled while pulling a long halberd from his storage ring.

"Hehe, White Ghost your slaves are indeed like you with no fear of death."

At this moment a handsome boy enters the area and following him were almost two hundred people!

Leo's eyes narrowed, and the scared boy almost wet himself seeing this young man.

"Oh, so it was Prince Mark and Princess Haley." Leo smiles mildly while bowing in greeting towards those two leading the group.

Jena also followed Leo curtesy and greeted the two.

The boy was six feet tall and had a tone build like Leo but he was somewhat lacking when it comes to looks compared with Leo. He wore golden robes of the Regal Family; he was the youngest son of the King, Prince Mark Val Regal.

The girl beside Prince Mark was tall with 5.11 feet height and had a kingdom toppling figure. Her face was almost like a beautiful painting with bright green eyes, perfect shape nose, and cherry lips. Her inky long hair was like a dark waterfall.

She was the only daughter of Regal King and also known as the number one beauty of third-grade kingdom lands, Haley Val Regal!

Chapter 160 - Coalition

8-11 minutes

Ace had long been noticed this group approach, but he didn't think this would be the group of the royal family. Although he had their soul signatures, he never remembers small fries and only took note of someone like that mystery's expert.

"Y-your... highness... I didn't know it was. Please forgive me." The scarred-eyed boy immediately kneels in front of Mark and pleaded for his grave mistake.

However, Mark didn't even glance at him as if this scarred-eyed boy was invisible to him. He only looked at Leo with a faint smile on his face as if he was implying something.

Leo coolly speak after noticing Mark was looking at him knowingly, "Your Highness, don't take offense, it was just a minor mistake. You were the one who was sneaking around. I hope you can be magnanimous and forgive my subordinate."

Everyone inhales sharply seeing Leo talking so casually to Prince Mark as if they were bosom friends.

But when everyone saw Mark's expression stiffen they all hearts sank because the meaning of this was they were not friends and Leo was provoking a hornet nest.

One had to know Leo's party only had twenty members while Prince Mark's had twenty. If the fight breaks out it would be the end of Leo.

After all, no one can do anything to Prince Mark as long as the news of this event does not get out, which also means everyone here will be killed so the White Duke and also Leo's father, could not retaliate.

"Fine, I won't blame this salve for what he said since we come here unannounced. But leave this place it is under royal family control now." Mark pursed his lips while saying.

This surprised everyone because they didn't expect the Prince to not retaliate and even let Leo's party leave safely.

Even Ace was surprised by this scene and deeply looked at the silver hair youth because till now he has encountered no one who can speak with their superior with no fear. And the most surprising thing was the superior was backing down, and this superior was to be a prince no less.

'A prince is afraid of a Duke's son. This Young Duke is interesting.' Ace observed this situation with more interest now.

"Forgive me your highness but I came here first, so this place is mine. Why not you go ahead, I heard there is an even better place. I left it especially for you since our Young Prince deserved the best." Leo coolly said with no hint of fear in his voice.

'Madman!'

Everyone thought this as they looked at Leo and those living baits take two steps backward since they could sense the tabulation in the air.

Most of them wanted Leo and Mark to fight because they will escape, in the confusion. But some of them with brains didn't want this fight because everyone's Qi was blocked and they won't be able to survive if some demonic beast or insect attacked them during their escape.

Mark's face fell, he was indeed a little afraid of Leo because Leo was known as White Ghost for very good reason. Leo had killed a Duke son before whom cultivation was Early Stage Qi Foundation Realm in a single move!

This cause a huge ruckus in the capital and the King didn't even punish him, on the contrary, the Duke's family vanished after that incident in a single night!

No one ever investigates this incident as if it never happened.

But those higher up of the kingdom knows the reason for this is Leo's Father White Duke!

Mark clearly remembers his father the Regal King's warning; to not fight with Leo in any way or the consequences will be disastrous!

That's why Mark let this offense slide so easily or if there was someone else he would've killed that dog before punishing the owner afterward.

But now Leo was provoking him in front of so many people with no restraints and if this news would leak he would become the laughingstock of the entire kingdom.

Mark was going to fight it out with Leo when Haley who was silent all this time speak.

"How about we share this place since we all are here?" Her voice was very pleasant to the ears.

Leo looked at Haley and a peculiar glint flash past his eyes.

"I have no problem with Her Highness Princess's suggestion." Leo nonchalantly said.

Mark frowned and looked at his younger sister with displeased eyes. He was not fond of anyone deciding for him.

"Royal Brother, we need all the personnel we have, did you forget from the reports, there are early Qi foundation stage demonic beasts here." Haley impassively said to her Royal Brother.

Her voice was not loud but everyone heard her clearly and their face darkened hearing this grave piece of information.

Only Leo was unfazed by this news because he already knew this but seemingly he wasn't afraid.

"Let's fight it out with them, if those powerful demonic beasts showed up we're nothing but sitting ducks here!" Someone in the group of Mark's living bait yelled.

"Shut up, do you think we can fight with those perfectly fine nobles? If you want to die, then die alone!" A second person retorted gravely.

At this moment a subordinate of Mark moves and with no warning cuts the person's head who speaks first!

That person was poison, to begin with, and so he didn't retaliate. After that person was killed no one even breathed heavily because they were afraid of the same fate.

"Don't interfere between nobles!" He coldly looked at those living baits and warn them.

Every living bait that has the same thoughts as that first person quickly threw them away because it was impossible to escape these people.

Mark didn't pay any attention to this little ruckus because all his attention was on Leo who was now looking at Haley with lascivious eyes.

As for Jena she never spoke even once and was calmly observing the situation. She was beautiful but compare to Haley it was different between earth and sky.

Although she had an intimate relationship with Leo, she knew Leo was known for his weakness to beautiful women and she was also using this weakness for passing this test. So, it didn't bother her if Leo had over one beauty by his side as long as Leo didn't forget about her.

But even Jane had to admit that going straight after Princess Haley was courting death!

Mark's face was extremely ugly when he saw Leo was so insolent that he was looking at his sister like this, in his presence.

'I'll kill him the moment I get the chance!' Mark swore and forcefully hide his killing intent before saying.

"Fine, we'll work together. But I want the first catch of Phantom Horn Lizard!" Mark pursed his lips.

"How about we divided it equally?" Leo coolly said.

"Fine." It was Haley who agreed before Mark had any chance to say anything.

Mark resentfully looked at his sister and harshly said, "Don't make my decision for me again!"

Haley however said nothing and merely nodded slightly as if she didn't care about her brother's feelings.

Mark's face darkened seeing Haley completely ignoring him but he could do nothing but wait when they were alone before educating his sister in private.

"We will divide the haul in 70/30. Take it or leave it!" Mark coldly purposed while looking at Leo.

Leo deeply looked at Haley before answering Mark's proposal, "I agree since Prince Mark has more people it is very normal for you to take the large part of the haul."

"Then let's start before the rain or this method won't be effective." A boy with scholar looks said. He was at Mark's party. He only speaks after the alliance was formed.

"Than what are you waiting for?... Lead them!" Mark coldly said.

The scholar boy quickly nodded, he knew Mark was not in a good mood and he don't want to be his punching bag.

"Your Highnesses, and Young Duke please take cover and leave these living baits behind." The scholar boy grimly said.

Leo merely nodded and find a cover with Jane and his subordinates leaving 41 living baits behind. Mark's party does the same and leaves the vacancy.

After everyone left only the scholar boy and the boy who cut off the person's head remained with 221 living baits.

The group of living baits was blueish pale seeing the time has finally come but they could do nothing even if they had the number. These nobles have played their cards well and only approached them after they were in their weakest state and they had no choice but to swallow that pill.

Now they could only pray; they just take some of their blood and let them go afterward.

"Begin!" The scholar boy looked at the boy beside him and nodded his head grimly.

The boy smiles like a grim ripper and with no warning he slashed his raptor vertically like lightning towards ten living baits' throats standing before him!