

Resonance 261

Chapter 0261: Businessman Li Luo

All eyes were on Li Luo as he burst out of the onyx lake, the last one to emerge.

His resonant power was clearly far stronger than it was when he went in.

So he had made a breakthrough. But... had he reached the 38th step?

Jiang Qing'e saw the wild look in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Li Luo forced himself to calm down. He hesitated. What if he had simply imagined the threat down below?

Now that he was out of onyx lake, the ominous depths seemed a world away, and the feeling of danger had passed, as if it had never affected him in the first place.

Eventually, he shook his head, indicating it was nothing.

"Did you make it to the 38th step?" Jiang Qing'e looked at him more closely and realized that she did not need an answer.

The resonant power coming from him was more than what a single breakthrough could bring.

Li Luo nodded with a smile. "I reached the 38th step and then I made a double breakthrough. Third Pattern now."

Wow!

His words were met with a wild gasp.

Li Luo had made it to the 38th step?!

And a double breakthrough just like Jiang Qing'e?!

Too damn awesome!

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were looking a little thrown off as well.

Li Luo had done it...

"Impossible!" The voice came from Song Qiuyu, who had lost her composure. Her face was livid.

Li Luo had snatched that onyx leaf out of their hands... What if they hadn't set themselves against him? What if they hadn't made it so he had a clear target to focus on? Would he have failed?

She felt the sour taste of regret fill her mouth.

Wang Yufeng was blinking stupidly as well. The 38th step was beyond him, even. And yet Li Luo, a One Star Hall student, had done it?

It seemed too fantastical to be true, and yet the resonant power pulsing from Li Luo's body was all the proof that he needed.

In less than two hours, he had undergone an incredible metamorphosis.

"Leader, you're amazing!"

Bai Mengmeng cheered for him enthusiastically.

Xin Fu looked at him admiringly as well. Back when they had just started school, he was ahead of Li Luo by one stage, and now Li Luo was already two ahead of him.

Even with the cultivation disadvantage, Li Luo had still managed to beat the likes of Wang Hejiu. It was hard to imagine how strong he was now.

He was probably ready to take on the true champion of the One Star Hall, Qin Zhulu himself.

Li Luo was the center of envy. A consecutive breakthrough to Third Pattern—he was now considered strong even within the Two Star Hall.

Even Wang Yufeng himself was only a Fourth Pattern.

Li Luo was already hot on his heels after half a year. A speed to rival Jiang Qing'e's.

Her eyes were soft and golden. "Since you're done here, let's go," she said happily.

They had gotten great gains here. Now they should continue on their purging mission.

Li Luo grinned. "Hang on, I've got business to attend to." He slowly pulled out a bunch of familiar-looking black leaves. Her mouth dropped open.

"Ahem!"

Li Luo drew their attention with a cough, then fanned himself with the black leaves.

The students rubbed their eyes incredulously. They wanted the leaves so much that they thought they were hallucinating.

How could Li Luo possibly be holding a bunch of onyx leaves?

You have to be kidding.

Some started to laugh weakly—the madness had gotten to them.

Li Luo reaching the 38th step was hard enough to believe, but at least that had been done before. Who had ever heard of someone bringing onyx leaves back from the lake?

Amidst the denial, some of the sharper ones saw the opportunities. Their breathing grew heavy with excitement.

Li Luo stepped up. "Ladies and gentlemen, while I was in the onyx lake, I saw the onyx tree and took some onyx leaves..."

"Yep, these right here. Your eyes aren't playing tricks on you."

He waved them and smiled.

Silence.

Growing excitement.

Eyes locked hungrily onto the leaves.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were staring open-mouthed. Things were going crazy.

They had never seen such a thing before!

"How did you get those leaves? The worldly natural energy should have formed a barrier that's impossible to penetrate." It was Jiang Qing'e who asked him.

The astonishment was even more justified coming from her. She had been to the 38th step and seen the same leaves, but she had come short.

"The dual resonances," Li Luo said smugly. "Normal resonant powers can't penetrate them, but my powers are anything but normal."

Dual resonances were truly something else. No wonder Dukes were so powerful.

The others couldn't care less about the explanation. All they wanted was the leaves, not the backstory of how they had come about. How was he going to distribute them?

None of them thought that he was just flaunting it in their faces. They would just lead to public anger and no profit.

"So I guess everyone's interested," Li Luo said, cutting straight to it.

"Half a bottle of Royal Sap for a leaf.

"Fair trade is no robbery. I'll trade with anyone."

Chapter 0262: Li Luo's Game

One leaf for half a bottle of Royal Sap.

The other students' eyes widened at the price. It wasn't cheap.

One Royal Sap was 5,000 school points. Half a bottle was 2,500 points!

Not everyone could bulldoze purification towers like Jiang Qing'e's group. Most teams might aim to just take one tower down.

According to past calculations, most squads left the Umbra Cave with about 5,000 points.

2,500 school points was no small price to pay.

But, but, but. If the trade-off was the opportunity to cultivate in the onyx lake, it might just be worth it.

After all, school points were traded for cultivation resources... the onyx lake was skipping this whole process to help them achieve the end goal of cultivation.

The students stirred restlessly, tempted.

Jiang Qing'e did not know whether to laugh or cry. Li Luo's entrepreneurial spirit was on another level.

Still, he had earned those onyx leaves with his own strength, so he could do whatever he wanted with them.

"Li Luo, onyx leaves are released for free with the pulses of the onyx lake. Now you've gone in earlier to take leaves and intend to sell them at outrageous prices? That's a little too underhanded, isn't it?" Song Qiuyu's cool voice sounded.

The other students paused, doubt creeping back on their faces.

Li Luo lazily cocked an eye at her. "Firstly, even though I've taken these leaves, there are more that will continue to be released by the lake. If people aren't interested in my leaves, they're more than welcome to keep waiting.

"Secondly...

"Only a few leaves are available every time they come up, and there are a lot of teams here. Only the stronger teams like yours stand a chance, while the others are going to end up empty-handed.

"Now I've come up with a simple solution for more teams to get leaves, but you're not happy. I guess you want to keep the privilege of cultivating in the lake for yourself?"

Song Qiuyu's eyes narrowed. Li Luo had turned the tables back on her.

"Li Luo's right. The waiting time for the lake's leaves is too long, and the leaves are too few. We can't get any. Rather than pining away here, we might as well spend 2,500 school points to get a leaf," a student suddenly said.

"Yeah!"

"Me! I'll pay!" Once the floodwaters broke, the students all clamored for the leaves.

Poorer students.

Seeing them flood forth, Song Qiuyu held her tongue, fearful of incurring more wrath.

Li Luo cheered inwardly.

"Li Luo," one student cried, "we don't have Royal Sap with us right now. Can we pay you when we get back?"

"By all means," Li Luo said expansively. "Such minor problems—don't let them trouble you. I went through all this effort to get the leaves just so that everyone could cultivate more conveniently."

They cheered at that, with the exception of Song Qiuyu. This guy was just here for a profit. Noble support of their cultivation? My foot!

Li Luo was happy enough to accept their notes. If anybody tried to default, he'd bring Sister Qing'e when he went knocking!

More and more people were lining up, and then a squabble even broke out. Finally, Li Luo had to organize a raffle.

Soon, seven happy squads were departing to cultivate in the lake.

They were pleased with their purchase. The energy in the onyx lake each time was limited, and an early entry promised better rewards.

Wang Yufeng and Song Qiuyu were looking sour. No one knew when the next wave of leaves were coming out. Which meant that they would be using a weaker onyx lake compared to these teams!

The cultivating effect was getting worse and worse by the moment.

Li Luo counted his seven promissory slips with satisfaction. Three and a half bottles of Royal Sap. 17,500 school points. A big chunk off his 100,000.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu were looking at the new tycoon in awe. He had not only mined the onyx lake for all it could give him, he had gone one step further to mine it for all it could earn him. He was truly the king of business acumen.

"Neatly done." Tian Tian whistled appreciatively.

Qiu Bai too didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Li Luo dusted off his hands, then he sauntered over to Wang Yufeng, Song Qiuyu, and Difa Jingming.

They looked very wary to see him approach.

"Li Luo, what do you want?" Wang Yufeng stepped forward aggressively.

Li Luo smiled cheekily at Song Qiuyu. She'd been bothering him all day, and he always took his revenge.

However, some days he preferred to serve it cold. Like today.

"Want to buy a leaf?" he asked politely.

They stared at him. In truth, they very much wanted to buy a leaf, but their pride had held them back before. They also assumed that Li Luo would refuse to sell one to them.

They watched desperately as Li Luo's seven leaves were traded. Although they stood a chance in snatching free leaves, the timing of their release could vary. More importantly... the people that had just entered the lake were going to diminish the energy within.

So even if they managed to snatch leaves later, their cultivation would be affected.

To them, 2,500 points wasn't a big deal. They would gladly pay it for an early entry into the onyx lake.

"What do you mean? You still have a leaf?" Wang Yufeng asked cautiously, trying hard to keep the hunger out of his voice.

"One last one, yeah." Li Luo nodded with a smile.

Wang Yufeng swallowed. One last leaf... what was Li Luo up to?

Song Qiuyu looked at the smiling man and felt a twang of unease.

"Are you buying it? Half a bottle of Royal Sap, no credit though." Li Luo grinned.

Wang Yufeng was tempted, sorely tempted. Half a bottle of Royal Sap was nothing... but he didn't believe that Li Luo would be so kind to them.

But were they really going to give up on the onyx leaf just because of their suspicion...?

He looked over at Song Qiuyu, and she nodded guardedly.

"Sure," he said. "We'll take it."

Li Luo took out the leaf, then he exclaimed in surprise. "Oh goodness, this onyx leaf seems to be damaged."

They looked closely. Only half a leaf was left.

Half a leaf wasn't enough for three. It was only enough for two.

A squad had three people though.

Li Luo sighed with some regret. "It's a little damaged, but I guess it sort of works."

He lifted it up. "Do you still want it?"

Now the deal was changed, and they stared at it, tormented. So close yet so far.

Song Qiuyu glared at him. Now she understood Li Luo's game.

Chapter 0263: Stirring in the Forbidden Zone

Outside the onyx lake, Wang Yufeng, Song Qiuyu, and Difa Jingming stared at the one battered leaf in Li Luo's hand.

They were not idiots. From the moment Li Luo revealed the damaged leaf, they knew what he was up to.

Sowing the seeds of discord, forcing them to give up one of their members.

No matter how they used this leaf, one person would be left behind. Surely that person would be resentful.

Perhaps someone would step up to magnanimously offer themselves as the sacrifice, but still...

What Li Luo was offering was a poisonous leaf.

He made no attempt to hide it. They could choose not to take the leaf, if they could resist the temptation to cultivate in the onyx lake.

As long as all three could resist the temptation, then Li Luo's plan would be ruined.

As if all three could resist the temptation.

"Hello? Do y'all want it or not? If not, I'm leaving." Li Luo yawned.

He acted like he was about to put it in his pocket.

Song Qiuyu darted forward and snatched the leaf, thrusting a small bottle into his hands. It was half a bottle of Royal Sap.

Li Luo turned and left immediately, uncaring as to how they would use the leaf.

Song Qiuyu watched him go. "You two use the leaf. I'll wait for next time."

"Qiuyu, you don't..." Wang Yufeng protested. "If we divide the leaf, we should use the fairest method: let the strongest take it, so it can do the most good."

Song Qiuyu cursed inwardly. As expected, the silent Difa Jingming's face froze for a brief moment, although he recovered quickly.

"Indeed, that's fair. Qiuyu, you and the leader go ahead to the onyx lake. I'll wait for next time."

"Don't worry, Jingming," Wang Yufeng said apologetically. "We won't let you down. We still have time in the Umbra Cave. We'll find a way to make it up to you."

Difa Jingming waved it off easily.

Song Qiuyu opened her mouth and then closed it again. Difa Jingming had been a friend for many years, and their families were close as well. He was one of her best friends at the Astral Sage College. Her reason screamed out at her to speak up on his behalf.

But that would wound the pride of Wang Yufeng.

Doing that went against her personality too.

Stuck in her dilemma, she remained silent, although she knew that her silence would disappoint Difa Jingming and strain their relationship.

What could she do?

Neither she nor Wang Yufeng could pass up the temptation of the leaf. Neither was willing to wait for the next wave, when the effects would be lessened.

They knew that Li Luo had sold them a poisoned leaf, and they had accepted it gladly.

She had underestimated how sly Li Luo could be. He had used no violence, no intimidation in the form of Jiang Qing'e. He had offered a trade, pure and simple. There was nothing to fault him for.

One simple leaf, and their entire squad was sunk. She might well have lost a relationship that she had spent years cultivating.

A heavy price.

Even Song Qiuyu was regretting her earlier decisions now. Why did she have to cross a guy like Li Luo?

He might not be as strong as Jiang Qing'e, but his methods were even more cutting than anything she brought to the table.

As for Song Qiuyu's regrets, Li Luo couldn't care less. He had grown two stages here at the onyx lake, and made a tidy profit. A respectable haul.

Li Luo went back to his group. "Sorry we took up so much time here," he said apologetically to Tian Tian and Qiu Bai.

They had spent most of the day here doing nothing. In that time, Duze Honglian and Ye Qiuding had been surging ahead, pressing their advantage—they had already cleared a level two purification tower.

Tian Tian's laugh tinkled out. "Sharpening the axe does not delay the chopping of wood. You guys are much stronger now. You'll be of help even when we deal with the level two purification towers."

They owed their leader enough that they were obliged to be gracious till the very end. It didn't really matter if Duze Honglian won once.

Under the banner of their supreme leader, they would have plenty of chances to stomp them again in the future.

Jiang Qing'e pulled out the map and examined it. True enough, two of the level two purification towers were already lit. One of them had Duze Honglian's name on it.

"Don't worry. It doesn't mean we stand no chance to catch up," she said calmly.

Just then, a bloodcurdling howl sounded from the valley beyond, a howl powerful enough to make the trees tremble with its sound waves.

It was met with a mad crackle of energy that leaped up from the lake in response.

A frightened hush fell on the students.

They nervously looked out towards the deep jungle. That was the forbidden zone, where nothing lurked save one...

The Heavenly Dipper General stage spirit beast, that was stronger than all others!

But why would it be roused today? What had happened?

Even Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were looking concerned now. They could see a blazing trail of black smoke and dust in the distance, and something incredibly powerful was stampeding through the forest.

From the thickness of the smoke plume, many trees had to be falling. The thing was huge... and it was headed straight for them?

There were frightened mutterings from the other students as well.

"There's no need to fear," Jiang Qing'e called loudly. "It's said that the principal himself set the runes around the forbidden zone. The spirit beast cannot come out."

This was new information to many of the students, but given Jiang Qing'e's reputation, they simply trusted her.

The students remained, but nervously, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

Li Luo frowned. Somehow, there was a familiarity to this approaching presence.

And then it hit him.

It was the same as the threatening presence he had sensed in the depths of the onyx lake.

It had to be the General spirit beast in the forbidden zone!

Was it coming for him?

Because he had stolen the onyx leaves? Li Luo paled. Surely not. Those leaves weren't that important, especially to a General Stage spirit beast.

He could vaguely sense greed. And hunger.

A desire to swallow him, specifically him, whole.

If it wasn't because of the onyx leaves, why else would it be here?

In the depths of the onyx lake, Li Luo had demonstrated uncommon power...

His eyes widened in realization. The dual resonances.

The mark of a Duke expert. It was said that the General Stage spirit beast was on the verge of the breakthrough to Duke itself. Perhaps it wanted his powers, wanted to eat him to grow stronger?

Truly bestial instincts. Li Luo swallowed hard. Somehow, once he thought of this, he was convinced.

If it were true, he was in great danger.

He prayed that Qing'e's information on the principal's runes was correct. If they had disappeared over time, then he would be target number one today.

He felt his legs go weak with fear.

Rumble!

The churning, black smoke was drawing ever closer, and now even the mountains trembled with the charging thing. Many students were already fleeing for their lives.

Li Luo was contemplating fleeing, when suddenly a mysterious stream of light fell from the sky.

It formed a large, ancient rune symbol.

The seal!

The symbol flashed in the air, and suddenly the presence was halted in its tracks.

Within the rising black smoke, the same bloodcurdling roar sounded again, this time held long and loud in frustration. The mountains themselves shook in fear.

Chapter 0264: Another Other

“Roar!”

Again, the entire place trembled in deferent response to the power that the roar demanded.

From within the rising cloud of black smoke, a pair of feral, crimson eyes stared, maddened with fear and rage.

There was a power stopping it from leaving the forest.

It had thought that the magical barrier would have weakened with age, but it seemed strong enough to hold the creature for now.

It roared again, thwarted. The dual resonance cultivator was just there, so close on the opposite side. And so puny. If it could just get through, it could swallow him in one gulp.

And with the power of dual resonances, it would surge through its current bottleneck in cultivation.

So close... yet so far. The arcane rune that hovered in the air held it firmly.

"Roar!"

It pawed the ground, monstrous claws grating against rock. But in the end, it was still fearful of challenging that power.

Or rather, the wielder of that power.

That was too strong a presence for it to deal with.

It had once seen that wielder, and it learned the taste of fear then, its survival instincts screaming while it trembled and hid.

Finally, it backed away, and soon even the black smoke dissipated as well.

It had retreated.

Accordingly, the protective rune in the air faded and winked out of sight as well. A corresponding flash of energy appeared on the peak of the mountain in the forest.

Everyone at the onyx lake breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Luckily, the spirit beast was still trapped by the principal. Otherwise, they would have had to abandon the lake and run.

Li Luo's sigh of relief was just a little deeper than the others. If the spirit beast had really broken out, he would've been in the hottest of soups. He was so sure that it had come for him.

A Heavenly Dipper General spirit beast—perhaps not even the Seven Astral Pillars could take it.

The strongest here was Jiang Qing'e, and she herself was only a Fiend Body, the intermediate Earth Fiend Stage. She was far from the beast's strength.

So luckily, all had ended well.

"If it had gotten out, there would've been a lake of blood to rival the onyx one," Tian Tian observed quietly.

Qiu Bai nodded. The spirit beast was as strong as a Heavenly Disaster Class Other... which should not appear at the periphery of the Umbra Cave.

Even the Four Star Hall squads would flee before one!

"The principal is super strong. Just one rune was enough to hold the spirit beast back," Li Luo marveled.

"That word holds a shred of the principal's will. Which means that it has some sentience... And a piece of a King is far beyond our ken. It's a great power indeed." Jiang Qing'e agreed.

She looked out at the mountain peak and bit her lip. "One day," she said so softly that only Li Luo could hear, "you and I will be there too."

"Eh? Me as well?" Li Luo teased. "Not everyone's a ninth-grade light resonance overachiever, you know."

"Oh? As if your dual resonances aren't just as valuable." She smiled back. "I get the feeling your limits haven't even been tested yet."

Li Luo looked away so she wouldn't be able to see his eyes. Somehow, she was really sharp today. Indeed, two resonances was not all that he had...

When he reached the General Stage, he would be able to put a real fear even into Dukes.

Just dual resonances?

Behold a General with triple resonances!

"Let's go. Our cultivation sidequest here is done. We'll aim to take down level two purification towers now," Jiang Qing'e said before turning away.

There was unspoken enthusiasm from the three newcomers, who were itching to test out their new strength.

Level two purification towers were much more difficult to clear than level one towers. White eroders were everywhere, and there were even considerable numbers of red eroders. And where the corruption was thickest, there might even be Disaster Class Others.

That was equivalent to General Stage cultivators. Those would have to be left to the Black Swan Squad.

Of course, the first years would give those a wide distance, but with their increased strength, they could polish off the white eroders with ease, and even the weaker red eroders could be taken down with good strategy.

Jiang Qing'e pointed at a few level two purification towers, indicating the route they would take.

And at the final stop...

The ominous red signal that indicated a level three purification tower.

If they could clear that, then their purging mission would come to a sweet close.

...

A towering mountain, shrouded in soot-black smoke.

The mist hung especially low and thick here, as if the humidity was higher. It was all an illusion, of course. Within the mist hung dry, parched branches, drooping like the dead arms of a scarecrow.

Chittering, whispering voices.

Occasionally, a shadow would flit through the black mist, only to be met with a powerful burst of evil energy. A scream, a crunch, and then it was gone.

In the abyssal cracks of the mountain, a heap of white bones lay.

On the heap was a chair of bone, padded with flesh. There was a long figure coiled up on the ghastly throne.

Its body was that of a centipede's, its limbs clicking and clattering restlessly, but its head was human.

The evil in its eyes was enough to inspire despair in weaker-willed humans. This was an Earthly Disaster Class Other!

It had six eyes, and all of them were fixed on the courtyard outside. Amidst the littering of bones, many Others were cannibalizing each other.

The human-centipede opened its mouth, wider and wider until it was half the size of its face.

It sprayed a lead-black mist that engulfed the Others and swept them all into its mouth, which bristled with razor-sharp teeth.

They were sucked into the gleaming maw, and suddenly there was only eerie silence in the courtyard.

It opened its mouth again to let out a shrill call. It would attract more Others here, to fight among themselves.

But this time around, no Others responded.

How dare these lesser beings ignore the command of the king of this domain!

The human-centipede gathered up its many legs and crawled to the entrance, ready to bring its anger down on its unruly subjects.

"Hee hee!"

As it started to crawl towards the entrance, it heard a gleeful chuckle that made it curl up defensively.

A sense of dread overwhelmed it.

It knew the feeling of dread well. It was the same feeling that its prey felt moments before it crunched down on them. All Others knew it well, locked in the fierce, desperate struggle for survival.

An even stronger Other!

The human-centipede lowered its head to see a freakish, grinning face form on the surface of the ground itself.

The grin was wide... and persistent. All resistance leached out of the human-centipede, and it unfurled its body and obediently crept into the grinning mouth.

Chapter 0265: Where Are The Others

For the next ten days, Black Swan and Fairness & Justice squads charged ahead at full speed. They cleared three level two purification towers and also made two return trips to the purified spot to replenish supplies.

Clearing level two purification towers was difficult as hell.

The tough opponents meant that the first years could not afford to drop their guard in the slightest, or they would risk being swarmed by white eroders.

Cannibalization was also more rife, which meant that even the surviving white eroders were usually Third Pattern or above in strength.

If not for their huge cultivation increase at the onyx lake, they would have been left cowering helplessly outside.

At the level two purification towers, even the Black Swan Squad switched to serious mode, no longer as relaxed as they had been at the level one towers.

Most of the time, Li Luo's squad was left to fend for themselves against a motley assortment of Others. They didn't want to have to be watched over all the time.

The most dangerous moment had been when they faced a Fifth Pattern white eroder.

It was already showing signs of turning red, and was a few notches stronger than the human skin eroder they had met previously.

They had won through inspired and seamless teamwork, but all three emerged with heavy wounds.

Still, defeating a Fifth Pattern was testament to their growth since entering the Umbra Cave.

Xin Fu managed a breakthrough through one of the battles, reaching the Second Pattern and adding more firepower into their arsenal.

As the three stared at the body of the Fifth Pattern white eroder fading away, their hearts swelled with a sense of accomplishment. Next on the list: red eroders.

Only if they had to. Damn, the Umbra Cave was dangerous...

...

Before a cliff.

Jiang Qing'e stood looking out into the misty skies, her navy-blue shawl fluttering in the wind. Her posture was stiff, weary, and numb from the repeated battles of the last few days.

More Others had fallen by her hand than Li Luo's entire squad combined.

The more Others one killed, the more susceptible to corruption one became. Ordinarily, students would kill until they reached a reasonable limit, then they would return to the purified spot to cleanse themselves for a time before resuming their missions.

With her ninth-grade light resonance, Jiang Qing'e was fearless against the corruptive influence of the dark. Along the way, her brilliance only grew, a warm lamp that guided them through the saturnine and dreary landscape.

The others stood in a loose huddle behind her.

Li Luo's squad had changed as well. There was a grim set to their features now that had been missing before. They had spent about two weeks in the Umbra Cave now, and they had experienced more danger here than in the sum of their entire lives so far.

Mortal peril was a sobering experience. It brought one face-to-face with the harsh realities of life and how fragile it was. It was a potent cocktail of trauma and fear that inevitably changed a person, whether for better or worse.

After all, Others were no kind souls. Once they spotted a weakness, they would make sure you were punished for it as hard as they could.

All of them were looking out past the cliff. Plains stretched out below, and on the grey-green grass lay a woeful ruin. The eerie shrieks that occasionally sounded from within were somehow even more chilling than what they had experienced so far.

This was a level two purification tower, but the corruption was especially dense, more so than the several level two towers they had dealt with so far.

"This tower's outside of the purified spot's range. Completely. It means that if we can clear this tower, our final goal is close." Jiang Qing'e's clear voice cut through like a fresh breeze through the mind-numbing haze and rot, calming their hearts.

"Being outside the purified spot's range completely means that the Others here are stronger as well," Tian Tian warned them.

Jiang Qing'e frowned. "Perhaps it is time for a change of strategy. This time we won't be doing the cleanup before reactivating the tower. We'll focus on pushing straight to the tower and reactivating it."

"Won't that invite an attack from every single Other in the area?" Li Luo asked.

Jiang Qing'e inclined her head. "We're too close to dangerous outer areas. Speed is crucial in this one. Lingering will increase the risk. Of course, our two squads alone won't be enough. We'll need help."

She pulled out a scroll from her pack, made out of the same rough bark as their map.

"This is a boundary scroll. I traded for it back at the purification spot. When we reach the tower and activate the scroll, it will form a barrier that keeps out anything below red eroder class. We only need to clear out the Others within the barrier to buy enough time to get the tower reactivated."

"Once reactivated, the purification light will wipe out the rest of them."

Li Luo nodded. This plan would work. Although it also meant that anything coming through the barrier was going to be a red eroder or stronger.

They were going to deal with the reds for sure now.

A real nightmare.

"When the barrier is activated, we will clear the Others within as quickly as possible," Jiang Qing'e said to them. "The three of you will stand as the final defense around the tower."

Li Luo's squad nodded. Now was not the time for heroics.

Plan explained, Jiang Qing'e's fingers tightened on her sword, and she swept down the cliff.

Behind her, the other five followed.

Soon enough, they were approaching the black mist, now so dark it almost looked like a wall.

They took a breath and headed in, weapons at the ready to cut through anything while they punched their way deep into the heart of the zone.

Yet there was nothing. Not a single attack came.

There wasn't even a single Other around.

The silence was somehow ominous, and the claustrophobia caused by the black mist ate away at their composure.

Even Jiang Qing'e was a little unsure of what to do.

"What's going on? The corruption is so thick here, but there's not a single Other?" Tian Tian said worriedly.

"There must be an unnatural Other somewhere. Stay wary," Jiang Qing'e said. "The plan remains. Reach the purification tower. See if we can reactivate it."

The others nodded as well.

They proceeded with redoubled caution, working their way inch by inch through the condensed mist of corruption.

The two squads moved from drier ground to wetter, swampy mud, but still things were quiet. They were completely unimpeded in their advance.

Which made things all the scarier. Any anomaly in the Umbra Cave was never a good thing.

Finally, they made it to the level two purification tower.

The faintly glimmering tower before them was almost a relief. Almost.

Where were the Others here?

The place was completely deserted.

If not for the unactivated tower before their eyes, they could almost have believed that another squad had beaten them to it.

But if the tower was still dark, where were the Others?

Chapter 0266: Grinnings on the Wall

The two squads stood puzzled in front of the tower.

They were smart enough to know that this could not be a good sign.

If the small baddies were absent, that meant that there had to be a big baddie around...

"The tower, for now..." Jiang Qing'e said after some hesitation. "When the purification light clears the area, we can search it better."

There were no objections. Sure, it was strange that the Others were missing, but that was no reason to abandon the mission at this point.

Reactivating the tower would also give them a measure of safety.

They moved into the purification tower cautiously. Everything looked to be in place, and they began the reactivation.

Hum!

As the purification tower began to glow, the spreading light started to push the black mist back, and their vision improved by the moment.

They all felt a wave of relief. That, at least, was going as planned.

It seemed like they had just gotten a level two purification tower for free. If it wasn't for their worries that this was part of something worse, they would be pretty happy with the result.

After the purification tower was completely activated, Jiang Qing'e gave the orders. "Maintain formation. We will scout the area. Do not be separated."

Although their speed would be limited, this was the safest way to proceed, especially when they weren't sure what was happening.

There were no objections, and Jiang Qing'e hefted her heavy sword and took point, scouting the area for clues.

They moved at a prudent pace. There were many more stone ruins in this area, which used to be a purified spot. However, at some point in history, the dark tide came in a tidal wave and smashed many of the structures here, and it was now merely a purification tower.

The group kept their resonant powers at the ready, but they met with no obstacle more troublesome than broken walls.

This was way too sanitized to be normal.

As they crossed another broken wall, Li Luo suddenly halted. A cold trickle of fear ran down his spine. Things had gone quiet. His comrades' footsteps were gone.

He looked towards Jiang Qing'e's position. Empty. All around him, not a soul was to be seen.

He looked back at the purification tower and saw that it was still glowing. Still, it brought no relief.

Had they walked into a trap?

Weren't the Others gone?

He pulled out his shortswords, running Water Edge over them.

The wall in front seemed to swirl and warp before his very eyes, then a grinning face appeared.

The grin was evil, and the mouth opened unnaturally wide. Inside the mouth was an abyss—nothingness... fathomless.

His fear built up within him, colder and colder, and then suddenly it was gone. Li Luo felt the beginnings of a smile on his own face, a dark urge that twitched his lips up slightly at first. Soon enough, he was grinning widely.

He took a step towards the smiling face.

Just then, the greenwood comforter on his chest released a burst of icy power, and his mind clarified for a moment.

His two resonant palaces roared to life. Dual powers of green and blue surged out of him instinctively, lashing out wildly.

BOOM!

He was himself again, scrambling backwards with a forehead of cold sweat.

He screwed his eyes shut, afraid to look at the sinister smile on the wall.

Shing!

A powerful and familiar power bloomed around him, a comforting light that dispelled the dark madness in him.

Jiang Qing'e's light resonant energy.

Li Luo opened his eyes to find himself in a half-standing ruin. Before him were the smashed fragments of a black wall, which seemed to have just been smashed by Jiang Qing'e's sword.

"Are you alright?"

Li Luo hesitated. He had been utterly manipulated, a puppet commanded. No ordinary Other could have done that. This one was far more powerful than anything they had encountered thus far.

"What... was it?" he asked, voice shaking.

"Corrupting illusion realm," Jiang Qing'e said grimly. "Only a very powerful Disaster Class Other could have made one that strong."

"Corrupting illusion realm? Disaster Class?" No wonder the takeover had been so completely immersive.

"Where are the others?" he asked hurriedly.

His question was answered almost as soon as he asked it. They crawled up from the opposite side of the newly broken wall.

Evidently, they had been taken by the corrupting illusion realm too, and Jiang Qing'e shattering the wall had freed them all.

"That was way too strong," Tian Tian muttered weakly. "Even we were taken without realizing it."

"Are you alright?" Li Luo asked his squadmates.

They shook their heads miserably. "Luckily, Senior Jiang saved us with her light resonant energy before the illusion realm fully took hold."

Li Luo was relieved on their behalf. So they hadn't seen that smile of madness.

He had only managed to shrug free of it by repelling it with his dual resonances.

"There's something off about this place. What was the smiling face on the wall?" Li Luo asked.

She didn't reply, cocking her head and listening intently. Suddenly, she attacked, sending a beam of light straight at Li Luo.

Shing!

It whistled past his shoulder to connect with the approaching Qiu Bai, sending him flying backwards.

Everyone was stunned.

"Nobody move," Jiang Qing'e commanded.

They all stood there, afraid. Surely Jiang Qing'e had her reasons...

Qiu Bai got to his feet, hurt and disbelief written across his face. "Leader, what are you doing?"

Jiang Qing'e moved her hands swiftly, creating a ring of light that expanded into a hoop. She laid it on the floor.

"Qiu Bai, step into the circle of light."

Qiu Bai hesitated, looking at the circle. Then he snickered.

It was a snicker that had Li Luo's scalp crawling. Qiu Bai's mouth was growing wider and wider. It tore his cheeks, and still it was growing, fresh blood dripping down his chin.

It was the same grin as the one on the wall from before!

Chapter 0267: Seeds of Corruption

When a maniacal grin spread across Qiu Bai's face, everyone besides Jiang Qing'e stepped back inadvertently.

Bai Mengmeng was white as a sheet, horror in her eyes.

Li Luo was feeling a little weak in the legs himself. Qiu Bai was probably facing the mad grin within the corrupting illusion realm right now, but his greenwood comforter was not effective enough.

He was being held in the throes of madness.

There was a sick feeling in his stomach. Qiu Bai wouldn't be easy to deal with. He was one of the elites of Three Star Hall, and he was an Earth Fiend General as well. Although far from Jiang Qing'e, he was an experienced opponent.

Even so, he had fallen into the trap?

How strong could the Other that created this be?

"Pssss!"

Qiu Bai hissed at them. His resonant power surged forth with the power of a violent tornado, aimed directly at Li Luo.

Li Luo flicked a Waterlight Bullet in response, even as he turned to flee.

No way was he going to be able to stand up against Qiu Bai. Retreat was his only option.

The Waterlight Bullet blinded Qiu Bai completely, but he did not claw at his eyes in pain as other victims did. He continued forward, a zombie of smiling insanity. A fiery spear appeared in his hands.

Dang!

A green rapier knocked it midair, and the two weapons were locked in a long stalemate before they disengaged.

"Thanks, Senior!" Li Luo yelled as he continued running.

Jiang Qing'e stepped in now, her light resonant energy manifesting in the shape of an arrow that came from above. It shrouded Qiu Bai completely.

Rumble!

The fire spear in his hands moved upwards in a fountain, until it was a flowing veil of lucent fire, shading him from the light arrow.

It was not enough, and the light arrow crushed its way through relentlessly.

The disparity in power was obvious.

Qiu Bai sensed this, and was already turning to flee.

Shoop!

A lasso of light encircled him and tightened. Soon, he was trussed up and completely immobilized.

Qiu Bai struggled violently, but the light stretched and contracted on him like a second skin.

Tian Tian breathed out with relief.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu huddled up with Li Luo. "Leader, what's going on?"

"Did you two see the grinning face on the wall?"

They both shook their heads. Jiang Qing'e had shattered the illusion for both of them before they got that far.

"You're lucky, then," Jiang Qing'e said grimly as she walked over. "The illusion you were trapped in is a corrupting illusion realm. Only Disaster Class Others can fashion such a thing."

"We encountered such a thing before, but..." She looked back warily at the wall she had smashed. "This is the first time I've seen that leaving a simple smile mark on the wall can unleash such power. Even someone as strong as Qiu Bai fell. Something so strong, I suspect it's a Heavenly Disaster Class Other."

"Such an abomination should not appear here."

Li Luo's squad swallowed hard. The Disaster Class was divided into Earthly and Heavenly. Heavenly Disaster Class equaled Heavenly Dipper General. How could something so strong be here?

Hadn't the mentors already swept through?

And there were supposed to be Four Star Hall students forming a defensive perimeter deeper in...

"There are always those who slip the net. It's not unheard of," Tian Tian said calmly. "We were unlucky."

"Then all the Others here..." Li Luo's voice trailed off.

"Yes, probably eaten by the Heavenly Disaster Class." Jiang Qing'e nodded. "Bad news. It's only going to get stronger."

The first years were reeling. They were still struggling with Eroding Class Others. This was way out of their league.

Again, the sheer horror that was the Others was imprinted deeply upon them.

They looked at the trussed up Qiu Bai, still drooling from the side of his lunatic smile. The sides of his mouth had been ripped apart, and the flesh shone red and bloody.

If even an Earth Fiend like Qiu Bai could fall, what chance did they stand?

Li Luo absently touched the sides of his mouth. He suddenly didn't feel like smiling at all.

"What are we going to do about Senior Qiu Bai?" Bai Mengmeng asked.

"His condition is fine," Jiang Qing'e replied. "The seed of corruption has been exposed. We just need to bring him back under the influence of the purification tower, and he should recover in a bit."

"What's even more horrifying are the hidden seeds of corruption. They might suddenly come to life like an ambush from within. No one knows if their teammates have been affected. And suddenly, in the crucial moment in battle...

"Like a cold knife in the back."

Li Luo and the other two paled. Seeds of corruption were terrifying to think about.

"Senior Jiang, can you sense them?" Xin Fu asked in a shaky voice. "You managed to hold Senior Qiu Bai after all."

"His corruption is not severe, so my ninth-grade light resonance has some effect. But once the seed of corruption takes hold deep in a person's heart, not even I can sense it," she said.

They looked at each other with uncertainty.

"Let's get Qiu Bai purified first."

Jiang Qing'e flicked a finger, and her heavy sword scooped up the end of the lasso that Qiu Bai hung from. It flew ahead to the purification tower.

With each purifying pulse of energy from the tower, the madness faded from Qiu Bai's face little by little.

A few minutes later, his eyes returned to normal.

He looked around at his situation and grimaced with understanding.

He twisted himself free of the sword and landed on his feet.

"Sorry about that, Li Luo," he said with a wry smile in apology.

Li Luo didn't reply. "Is he really himself again?" he whispered to Jiang Qing'e instead.

She nodded.

Satisfied, he smiled tentatively at Qiu Bai, then sent him a jolt of healing power for his mouth wounds. It made him look like a freak.

Qiu Bai smiled gratefully at him.

"Er, don't.... smile," Li Luo said uneasily. He wasn't over it yet.

Qiu Bai composed himself.

"Qiu Bai, you're a disgrace to our squad. An Earth Fiend falling prey? Even the newbies are fine." Tian Tian chided him.

He hung his head. "Sorry, I got careless. I didn't expect a corrupting illusion realm here at a level two purification tower.

"Leader, we have a huge problem now, don't we?" he said to Jiang Qing'e. "What do we do?"

She looked out into the distance, lost in thought for a while. Finally, she reached out a slim hand, and her gigantic sword came flying back obediently.

"Mission's canceled. We're returning to the purified spot immediately. The school must be informed of this."

Chapter 0268: Decisions

No one challenged Jiang Qing'e's decision. If they really came across a Heavenly Disaster Class Other, they would be doomed.

Heavy injuries at best, death at the worst.

Others of that level were way beyond their league, and they knew it.

Of course, choosing to retreat meant that they would be giving up on the level three purification tower at the end of their planned route. The loss of points was significant.

Still, points could be earned in other ways, life could not.

Perhaps if it had been just the Black Swan Squad, Jiang Qing'e might have chosen a riskier path. But they had the Fairness & Justice Squad with them now.

Against something that strong, Li Luo's squad would be nothing more than a burden, plain and simple.

Their decision made, they headed back the moment Qiu Bai was fully recovered, making a beeline for the purified spot.

However, while they had made their decision, another squad nearby had made a different decision.

.....

In front of a purification tower.

Duze Honglian's long hair was a mess, but she simply swept it tiredly out of her face and turned to regard her team at the purification tower.

One of her group members was hung up on the purification tower, the vestiges of a manic smile still on their face, and the signature lip wounds still bleeding.

A member of Ye Qiuding's squad had fallen to the corrupting illusion realm, infected by the seed of corruption. He had suddenly sprung on them from behind, and they had scrambled to deal with it. Luckily, this person wasn't too strong, and she had managed to subdue the corrupted member quickly.

"Senior Honglian, something's fishy. That corrupting illusion realm was too strong," Ye Qiuding said grimly.

Duze Honglian nodded. "At least a Disaster Class. Maybe even Heavenly Disaster Class."

There was a note of concern in her voice. Why would such a strong Other be in the outer perimeter of the Umbra Cave?

"Should we stop the mission?" Ye Qiuding said hesitantly. A Heavenly Disaster Class enemy was more than they could handle.

Duze Honglian was silent for a beat. "Something that strong is probably cannibalizing everything in its way. Which means... If we can push forward, the level two purification towers ahead are likely all completely clear. A bit of risk could get us those towers for free. That's a whole bunch of free school points just begging to be swept up!"

Ye Qiuding's jaw dropped. "We're not stopping?"

The others turned to stare at her as well.

"If we want to win first place, we have to take some risks," Duze Honglian said firmly. "I have a good plan. We can push ahead cautiously. If that thing has really cleared the way ahead, we can reactivate the purification tower.

"I have a good guess that the Other is deep within the Umbra Cave. It's probably headed for the level three purification tower, where there are stronger Others to cannibalize, those of a similar Disaster Class.

"And... if they are weakened because of their fight, that's our chance, isn't it? Have you all thought about how many points that is?" The others looked tempted.

They had gotten this current level two purification tower for free. If not for the corruption turning their team member, they would have been completely unscathed.

And if the other level two towers ahead were just as smooth, it would be easy points.

Still, the risk was there.

If they did meet the Heavenly Disaster Class Other, they would pay a heavy price indeed.

Ye Qiuding was still doubtful. Tempted as he was by the points, the horror of the grinning face was still foremost and fresh in his mind.

"Don't you want to win this purging mission?" Duze Honglian pressed. "If our risk pays off, Jiang Qing'e will be left far in the dust.

"She'll regret not choosing you."

Ye Qiuding's face twitched at that. A somber resolve took hold, and he nodded with sudden vehemence.

"Let's do this. But if things don't look good, I hope we can retreat without hesitating."

"Of course," Duze Honglian said, clapping her hands together with finality. "I don't want to meet that thing either. We're just following its trail. It can eat the Others, we're just there for the tower. To each their own."

Decision made, they waited for their teammate to recover, then they headed onwards.

Tempted as they were by the points, they still proceeded with extreme caution, and that compromised their pace.

They took most of the day to reach the next level two purification tower.

As they warily approached, they were delighted to find that Duze Honglian's prediction had been spot on. The purification tower was deserted!

Another easy reactivation, and now their spirits were buoyant from their success.

A free meal was always a great feeling.

"We're close to the level three purification tower..." Duze Honglian said, eyes alight. "Shall we press on?"

"If the grinning thing is there, it's probably fighting other strong Others. We might have a chance to sneak in and clean up. A level three purification tower! Just like that!"

Her predictions had been accurate so far, and the others were swayed. A level three purification tower for free?! Too tempting to pass up on.

"Let's just go take a look. If things look bad, we can always run for it," she promised them.

They nodded, then they set off eagerly.

A long time later, they had made their cautious way to the top of a mountain. The blanket of mist ahead was oppressive.

A white tower was poking out of it, breaking the monotonous landscape of grey.

The level three purification tower.

"It's very quiet. No sound, no movement," Duze Honglian observed, her eyes alight with satisfaction. Just as they had encountered at the level two purification tower before.

Did that mean that this level three purification tower was also cleaned out already?

Served up on a silver platter?

They roused themselves and got ready to move out. "Wait!" Duze Honglian suddenly shouted, sensing something.

They all paused.

Her face was bloodless as she pointed one shaking finger in the sky ahead.

The mist was darkening from a stony grey to a dark obsidian in color, and it was moving. Curling upwards like smoke, curling up into... a grin.

Grinning right at them.

Chapter 0269: Transport Tower

By the time the Black Swan and Fairness & Justice Squads returned to the purified spot, two days had passed.

Seeing the huge light barrier glowing strong and impregnable, they breathed sighs of relief, relaxing for the first time in two days. They had been watching their backs and each other constantly, dreading when the corrupting illusion realm would next show up.

They were back at the safest place now, and could finally afford to drop their guard.

They shuffled into the purified spot, which was rather empty. Most of the students were out and about, working on their purging missions.

They did not dawdle, but headed straight to the message tower.

They intended to get word of the Heavenly Disaster Class Other back to the school, where an appropriate response could be formulated.

If the Heavenly Disaster Class Other was out there cannibalizing Others, it wasn't so bad. But if it got strong enough, it could come to the purified spot...

Human flesh and emotions held great temptation for the Others. These things were antithetical to their nature, and therefore they were drawn to it.

If a supremely powerful Heavenly Disaster Class Other came sieging, it would spell trouble for the entire purified spot.

They would be completely massacred, and it would be a huge disaster for the school as a whole.

Even Jiang Qing'e was taking this very seriously. If things got to that stage, not even she would be safe.

"Sister Qing'e!"

A happy voice called out to them, and Jiang Qing'e paused and turned.

It was a familiar figure—Si Qiuying.

It was their first time meeting her in the Umbra Cave so far.

Beside her, both Yi Lisha and Qian Ye gave Li Luo friendly smiles.

Si Qiuying came running over. "Sister Qing'e, I thought you'd be taking down the level three purification tower about now," she said quizzically. "What are you doing back here?"

Jiang Qing'e looked at them. "Are you all about to head out?"

Si Qiuying nodded.

"Don't. Don't leave the purified spot."

She was on decent terms with Si Qiuying's brother, and House Jinque was nominally a friend. They were worth a friendly warning.

Si Qiuying looked surprised, as did the Three Star squad they were working with.

Jiang Qing'e had too much of a reputation for the Three Star squad to think that this was some prank.

"Jiang Qing'e, what's happened?"

"We encountered a roaming Other that's incredibly powerful out there. It's cannibalizing other Others," Tian Tian said, her eyebrows knitted with concern. "At least a Disaster Class, and likely a Heavenly Disaster Class... It must have snuck out from the depths."

Her information was received with alarm. "Heavenly Disaster Class?" Yi Lisha croaked. The other Three Star squad leader was a young man with extremely mature features, called Luo Saihu. He frowned. "Are you sure? You're not pulling our leg?"

"Why else would we be back?" Qiu Bai said irritably. "Vacation or something?"

Yi Lisha paused. "If it's roaming around outside, it won't come to the purified spot, will it?"

"Won't it?" Li Luo said dryly.

Yi Lisha had nothing to say in reply. If something that strong came, there would be nowhere to run for them.

"I think it's recovering its strength with all the feeding right now. When it's back to full strength, it will probably come closer to the purified spot. Be careful; don't make a decision you'll regret," Jiang Qing'e said in parting, then she briskly continued on to the center.

Li Luo and the others followed, leaving Si Qiuying's group looking around at each other.

"What should we do?" Qian Ye said helplessly.

They had already planned out their route to get their next haul of points.

Yi Lisha rubbed his chin. "Points are important... but I think life is importanter."

Luo Saihu let out a long sigh. "If it were anyone else, I'd doubt the truth of it, but Jiang Qing'e... You can't help but believe her."

She had a strong streak of pride and a straightforward character.

Jiang Qing'e was not one to play petty games.

"Let's stick around for a bit," Luo Saihu finally said.

The others nodded.

Yi Lisha looked at the departing squads. "Li Luo's a lot stronger," he said thoughtfully.

Qian Ye's eyes narrowed. "I felt it too. He was never weak, but he was covering his lack of cultivation level with resonance variety. This time... he feels like Qin Zhulu to me."

"He's grown damned strong in the Umbra Cave. Probably first in our year already?" Yi Lisha mused.

Si Qiuying bit her lip. It had just been half a month. It felt like Li Luo was growing every time she blinked.

She had seen how strong Qin Zhulu was for herself. He had taken on both of the guys in her squad alone, and held his own.

Even though Li Luo's squad had won the first ranking battle, Qin Zhulu was still the undisputed individual champion.

They could attribute it to Li Luo's luck that he hadn't met Qin Zhulu then.

But now Li Luo might be stronger.

The way he was growing, no one could doubt it.

Si Qiuying recalled Jiang Qing'e's words, back during her first encounter with Li Luo on the hill...

.....

In the middle of the purified spot was an especially tall stone tower. This was the heart of the purified spot, where the light barrier originated.

Within the stone tower was an ancient tree root that was joined to the tower itself.

The intricate, swirling runes on the floor were a transport rune, powering the school's supplies that were sent once every few days.

There were some ordinary school mentors here who were in charge of maintaining order.

They found one mentor and told him the news.

"What? Heavenly Disaster Class, you say?!" the mentor exclaimed, white as a sheet. The other mentors came crowding over when they heard his cry.

Immediately, the mood got tense.

These mentors were not fighters. They were just in charge of administrative supplies.

"Mentors, this is not the time to panic," Li Luo said calmly. "We need to inform the school as soon as possible, so they can send reinforcements.

"If possible, I suggest we should also send out an alert to the squads who are out, and recall them back to the purified spot. It's even more dangerous outside, and it's better if we can join forces here to defend if the thing comes."

The mentors nodded fervently and gratefully for the voice of reason.

"When is the next activation of the transport tower?" Jiang Qing'e asked urgently.

The transport rune was not always available. There was a cooldown time, and it roughly recharged every week or so.

The mentors looked around helplessly, then gestured to the heap of resources nearby.

"We just completed the last transport two hours ago..."

Chapter 0270: Arguments

The mentors' admission was greeted by a gloomy silence, and they all looked at the generous pile of resources lying before them. They wished they were not there.

Delivered just two hours ago...

Which meant that they would have to wait seven days for the next opportunity?

So many things could happen in seven days!

What if the Heavenly Disaster Class Other came? How would they defend themselves?

Despondent curses were muttered, and the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty was thick in the air.

"We should have come faster," Qiu Bai said, frustrated.

"We came as quickly as we could already," Tian Tian said impatiently. "We didn't stop to rest at all. And who could've guessed that it was going to be a two-hour margin?"

"Shame..." Xin Fu sighed.

Jiang Qing'e recovered quickly. "First, we should get the news back to the school. Hopefully, they can think of something." The other mentors nodded.

One of them pulled out a bright, green leaf and offered it to Jiang Qing'e. She clasped it flat between her palms.

Closing her eyes, a thin wafer of light was soon imbued into the leaf, along with a message that would be transmitted back.

This done, she walked to the ancient tree root in the middle of the stone tower and pasted the leaf firmly against it.

Gradually, the leaf faded into the root and disappeared.

The news had been sent, but it would take a while for it to arrive back outside.

"I just hope the thing is out there eating its fill and doesn't come here," Qiu Bai prayed fervently.

"Best not pin our hopes on our enemy's failures," Li Luo said. "Mentors, can we send out a warning to call back all of the squads still out there?"

They hesitated. "Well, the warning call has a limited radius, and only those nearby will hear it. Also...

"Only you six know about the Heavenly Disaster Class Other. The other students might not believe it. And if we call them back before things are confirmed, and nothing happens to persuade them, I'm afraid..."

His voice trailed off in a silent plea for them to understand. They did. If nothing happened, the students would be outraged, thinking that Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were playing some sort of prank to obstruct them from getting points.

That was an understandable opinion to hold. After all, each squad only left once they had made plans down to the very last detail. No one would appreciate such meticulous plans being dashed.

"I will do what must be done," Jiang Qing'e said quietly. "Sound the alarm. I will bear what responsibility I can."

She did not care whether they believed her or not. The more stragglers there were out there, the more easy prey there would be for the enemy. They would be turned into puppets under its control, and turned against the humans.

The mentors were persuaded, and they activated the tower. A high-pitched keening sounded, then energy waves began to fly out far into the distance.

The energy waves were invisible to their eye, but they felt it on their greenwood comforters, which turned warm in response.

Any student that the energy could reach would feel the same warmth.

It should send all of them running back to see what had happened.

The more squads gathered here, the better their chances of success if the Heavenly Disaster Class attacked. Safety and strength in numbers.

As Jiang Qing'e's group walked out of the stone tower, they saw that the students within the purified spot had all gathered. They were looking at her curiously, wondering why the alarm had been sounded.

Yi Lisha, Si Qiuying, and Qian Ye were among them, but they knew what had happened. Still, they were surprised that Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo had managed to convince the mentors to sound the alarm.

It meant things were serious.

The squads were crowding around, trying to demand an explanation from the mentors at the stone tower, but they refused to answer, saying that they would explain once everyone was gathered.

The squads stood there, hungry for answers and unhappy about it.

Half a day passed.

The crowd was swelling now, more and more squads returning. At the same time, the unhappy muttering was growing louder.

They questioned each other in belligerent tones, loud enough for the mentors to hear. Why were they back?

Jiang Qing'e judged the time to be right. She signaled to Li Luo, and the two of them stepped out.

Her reputation was enough to silence them, and they gave their full, rapt attention to the undisputed goddess of the Three Star Hall.

She looked at each of them deliberately, her honey-golden eyes setting hearts racing. The tilt of her chin was a cool, unspoken challenge to each of them, and none of them dared to think themselves worthy of this proud girl.

They looked away before she did, bashfully, before they lost control of themselves.

Li Luo was quite a looker himself, but beside Jiang Qing'e, he was overshadowed by a considerable margin. Where he was usually dazzling, he was now barely a spark of interest shining in some of the girls' eyes. Everyone else was looking at his fiancee.

"We met a roaming Other in the outer regions. It is likely a Heavenly Disaster Class, so we sounded the alarm. We suspect that it will eventually move towards this location. All those outside are in grave danger."

Jiang Qing'e spoke in an even tone, laying out the facts simply. Here, the facts were all that were needed. They were shocking enough without any dressing up.

"Heavenly Disaster Class?!"

"Why would something like that appear here?!" A loud clamor began, disbelief thick within the voices.

If not for Jiang Qing'e's incredible reputation in school, she would have been jeered away already for causing a needless panic.

Even as it was, there were many not ready to believe her.

"I hope that all of you can remain here at the purified spot and not go out for missions. Wait for the school's support," Jiang Qing'e said.

They looked at each other. Staying at the purified spot was worth zero points. That was going to be a hard loss to bear.

A Three Star Hall student finally spoke up. "Jiang Qing'e, are you saying that you saw that Heavenly Disaster Class with your own two eyes?"

"We did not," she said, shaking her head. "We came across a corrupting illusion realm that it left behind, and judged from its strength that the creator must be of that class."

"But there are Disaster Class Others who are good at corrupting illusion realms. They might have misled you. And an ordinary Disaster Class is not enough to warrant this extent of precaution," the Three Star Hall student countered reasonably.

Others nodded in agreement. No one wanted to waste their time growing old here.

"Senior Jiang, you wouldn't have failed to clear the level three purification tower and then cooked this up to hold the rest of us back, would you?" a voice shouted in accusation.

Song Qiuyu.

"What are you on about? Would someone of Jiang Qing'e's strength and character do that?" The Three Star Hall students turned on Song Qiuyu in an instant, defending their queen.

"Am I unreasonable to doubt? Staying here is a waste of time. We haven't even seen any sign of that Heavenly Disaster Class Other. How do we know it's real?" Song Qiuyu defended herself furiously.

There were a few slow nods in her favor, and angry voices started to argue urgently.

"Peace," Jiang Qing'e called, and there was silence. "Firstly, I am not stopping you from leaving if you wish.

"Secondly, I don't think we are the only ones who have encountered its traces already." Her cool, golden eyes roved through the crowd, and a fearful silence greeted her.

"Perhaps some of you have met it already.

"Perhaps some of you... are already corrupted."