

Resonance 51

Chapter 0051: The Three Zeros

The situation in the hall was as sloppy as a bowl of porridge.

All of the students were fighting and dodging as best as they could, but the sheer number of bats soon wore them down. They were riddled with bloody scars from the bats' claws and teeth, and the crystal tiles on their chests glowed with red light each time they were struck.

Only a few stronger students had the presence of mind to join forces, and they suffered only minor losses.

While everyone was busy fighting the bats, no one noticed that there were three twinkling silhouettes off to the side, casually dodging the bats as they chatted about the others.

"Haha, look at that guy, his face was almost torn off."

"Damn, that was unlucky. His face was savaged. Probably a bad case of psychological trauma in the future?"

"Pity."

"..."

The three watched on with sympathy, and also a little regret that they had forgotten to bring snacks. Munching on melon seeds, Li Luo suddenly shot Yu Lang a look, frowning. "Can you not come so close? It's gross, you know?"

He was holding Li Luo's hand tightly, and also constantly edging closer. The sour stink of sweat was repulsive.

Yu Lang jabbered, "You're a bad guy. What if you throw me away? Of course I have to hold on tightly."

Li Luo was speechless. If not for Yu Lang hiding information about him, he would really have kicked him out...

"Brother Luo, is this not a perfect performance? I feel like this deserves nothing less than full marks." Zhao Kuo's smile could not be any more smug.

Li Luo nodded. They had avoided all the bat attacks. In terms of points, no one could beat them.

The three relaxed and watched. After about half an hour, the bats seemed to follow some invisible command and turned away, flocking back to the two yawning black holes in the ceiling.

Evidently, the first test was over.

Many bleeding and battered students slumped to the floor.

From above, a crystalline light beamed through, passing through each student.

They saw numbers begin to appear on their crystal tiles.

"Oh? I have a foundation score. 46 points!"

"I've got 50 here."

"Damn, just 20 for me!"

"..."

A mixture of celebration and sadness rang out through the hall.

In the midst of these medley of emotions were a completely devastated Li Luo, Zhao Kuo, and Yu Lang.

Their crystal tiles showed a score of 0.

"How is that possible?!" Zhao Kuo's jaw dropped.

"We perfectly evaded the four-winged bats!" Yu Lang shouted angrily, feeling cheated.

Li Luo pondered it for a moment. "Could it be that the Water Shadow Art was too good, and even blocked the light? So we were overlooked?"

Zhao Kuo froze. Could it be? Was the Water Shadow Art really that strong?

"It seems like that searching light didn't land on us at all." Yu Lang agreed after recalling the moment.

The three looked at each other, still dispirited.

Who would have thought that this would be the outcome... They had been eagerly awaiting their full-mark distinction, but they had hidden so well that now they were left with zeros.

That was too much!

"I won't accept it! I'm going to complain! This is their mistake!" Yu Lang burst out.

Li Luo screwed his face up thoughtfully. "If we leave now, we'll be forfeiting the exam entirely. Forget it. Zero be it. In any case, the foundational score is just for skirmishing. And there's one more round, right?"

Yu Lang calmed down a little at this, subsiding to an angry mutter under his breath.

Li Luo dispelled the Water Shadow Art, and the three appeared. Many turned to them at the flash of light, and there were expressions of shock all around to see the three zeros.

Even the worst besides them had a few pitiful points. That was as bad as it got. No one else had gotten zero.

What had these three done?

Sniggers of laughter soon rang out across the hall.

The three of them took it stoically. They were done here, so they moved briskly towards the wooden door that had just opened up at the other end of the hall.

Damn, they had been laughing hard a few moments ago, and now the tables had been turned on them. Fate was one fickle mistress.

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As the trio turned to the next stage, there was a commotion at the foot of Whitespirit Mountain as well.

Because on the huge crystal wall, numbers were jumping, and names appeared one after another. All eyes were on it, and exclamations and gasps could be heard periodically.

The numbers jumped on for a while, and then finally stopped. Those at the top had a full score of 100.

That was the maximum score of this trial.

Unsurprisingly, Lu Qing'er, Shi Huang, and a few others were all ranked at the top.

The many pairs of eyes continued scanning the list downwards. Suddenly, someone gasped. At the bottom were three strange scores...

Even the worst among the students had 1 point, a participation point. 0 meant that they had never even been seen.

Therefore, these three zeros immediately sent the spectators into an uproar.

Especially when they saw the three names.

Southwind Academy, Li Luo.

Wasn't that the Young Lord of House Luolan? He had quite the reputation within the Tianshu Province. How had he fallen down to zero?

What was going on?

"Hey, the zero wouldn't be the Young Lord, would it?" Cai Wei's cherry lips parted in surprise upon seeing the glaring score.

Yan Lingqing frowned. "Who else in Southwind Academy is called Li Luo besides him?"

"How could it be zero?" Cai Wei did not know whether to laugh or cry. What was happening?

Yan Lingqing shrugged. "How would I know?"

"But it doesn't matter. These two rounds are just for foundational points. The real decider is the elimination match later on."

Irritated, Yan Lingqing said, "This Young Lord sure knows how to make others worry."

...

Within the central pavilion.

The old dean, Governor Shi, and Mentor Anlie were also caught off guard by the three zeros.

Governor Shi smiled. "Old Dean, your Southwind students are truly something special."

The old teacher frowned as he looked at the three names. He felt the beginning of a headache. What on earth were those three pinheads doing? They were an embarrassment.

Irritated, he ignored the governor's taunts. This was just the first round. It did not matter that much.

However, he hoped that the three hooligans would cut it out in the next pat. Or did they think he was too old to beat some sense into them?

Chapter 0052: Spectral Face Demon Ivy

When the three walked out of the tree-covered hall, the scenery before them changed drastically. It was a sinister, gloomy forest with huge trees that stood tall. The dark branches were dense enough to hide the sky and gave one a foreboding feeling.

Li Luo and the others looked around them and very quickly spotted a crystal wall before them. This was clearly new.

Faintly glowing words flowed across the crystal wall.

When they read it, their faces turned serious.

"This stage is about harvesting Spectral Face Fruits."

A special type of plant known as the Spectral Face Demon Ivy grew in the dark forest. It had an aggressive, violent nature and loved to strangle any life form that drew near to it. It would bury the corpse in its roots and feed on the meat to nourish itself.

After a Spectral Face Demon Ivy matured, it would bear a Spectral Face Fruit. The goal of the second round was to gain a Spectral Face Fruit. Those who obtained one would be awarded with foundational points.

"The Spectral Face Demon Ivy is not easy to deal with. The demon ivy is covered with poisonous thorns and is a vicious foe. Realistically speaking, even an eighth-grade resonance user would be hard-pressed to take a Spectral Face Fruit alone," Zhao Kuo said worriedly.

On the verge of slipping away, Yu Lang froze mid-step. "I suggest the three of us join hands and get Spectral Face Fruits. What do you say?"

"You looked on the verge of taking off. Don't let us stop you," Li Luo snorted.

A little embarrassed, Yu Lang denied it. "Impossible. We have just been through life and death together."

Li Luo shook his head. This weasel was hard to trust. However, he did not reject Yu Lang's suggestion. Although he might not be able to get a Spectral Face Fruit himself, having more people might help.

If many hands made lighter work, why not?

"Let's go," Li Luo said. He led the way deeper into the dark forest, with Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo following close behind.

The three walked on deeper into the forest. Several dozen minutes later, they heard a disturbance far away to the right.

The three looked around at each other and then headed forward with tacit understanding. Parting the shrubbery, they saw that there was a large, black tree in a muddy patch just ahead. A black vine was

coiled around the tree, bristling with black thorns. It thrashed and whipped around like a shadowy python, with enough force to produce a whistling sound.

The visage of a sinister face could be vaguely made out on the rough bark of the coarse trunk. It made them uneasy.

A Spectral Face Demon Ivy.

However, there were already about six or seven figures around it. Clearly, they had joined forces against it. Jets of resonant power flew through the air as they battled the Spectral Face Demon Ivy.

The demon ivy was giving as good as it was getting. The poisonous vines whipped out again and again with terrifying strength, and they were frequently rewarded with miserable yelps.

"A sorry sight."

Yu Lang stared at them. These people were only around the Sixth Seal Stage. Even with numbers, they were still outclassed by the demon ivy.

Each time the tendrils hit them, the sickening, whip-like cracks sent prickles of fear down their scalps just from listening. This sound brought back memories of the stick their parents used to beat them with.

In just a short amount of time, the group was badly wounded and fled in a wretched state. Luckily, the attack range of the demon ivy was limited; otherwise, they would have been screwed.

The trio shook their heads after witnessing the bad trouncing.

"Quite a thorny problem, eh," Zhao Kuo said worriedly. Although they were stronger than the previous group, it was still not going to be easy to bypass the frenzied and spiky defense to get the Spectral Face Fruit.

"Yu Lang, you go test it out," Li Luo said after a moment's thought.

Yu Lang pulled a long face. "What? Why me?"

"You're a wind resonance user. You're the fastest. Who else?" Li Luo snorted.

Lacking a good response, Yu Lang grumbled and trudged forth. His green resonant power surging forth to bathe his body, he shot forth like a blur, blowing gusts out behind him.

"Oof. Truly the fastest man in Southwind Academy," Zhao Kuo hooted with surprise.

Li Luo stared at the figure ahead, blurry from his speed. The guy was indeed fast. And it was clear that he had devoted much effort to cultivating speed—a shrewd decision.

Sshhh!

As Yu Lang rapidly approached, the demon ivy sensed an incoming presence, and the serpent-like vines began to respond.

He dodged adroitly, but the closer he got, the more vines were turned on him, as though the demon ivy sensed the threat growing larger. Yu Lang's speed slowed in the face of the harassment, his swagger disappearing.

Finally, he chose to retreat. With a flash, he was safely out of its attack radius, back beside Li Luo and Zhao Kuo.

"It's hopeless. I can't even get close, let alone get the Spectral Face Fruit." Yu Lang was panting and wiping the sweat pouring from his face.

"On the contrary, I think it's pretty achievable."

Li Luo smiled smugly. Yu Lang's speed had already pushed the Spectral Face Demon Ivy to the limits of its attack rate. "Next, we will attack together. Zhao Kuo, up front to tank. I'll support him to suppress the frontal attack of the demon ivy. You go in from the flank to get the fruit."

"This means that Zhao Kuo is going to get it real bad."

Zhao Kuo gave a wry smile. "Don't worry. I'm all tough skin and hard bones."

Li Luo nodded in appreciative acknowledgment. Since they were working together, they had to each bring their individual strengths to bear. He was not going to let Zhao Kuo get by without pulling his weight just because he was a friend. Neither would Zhao Kuo accept that sort of favoritism.

"Alright." Yu Lang had even less of an opinion.

Their simple battle plan laid out, the three did not waste any more time. Li Luo pulled out his two short swords, and Zhao Kuo loosened the axe off his back.

"Go!"

At Li Luo's whispered command, Zhao Kuo roared and charged, his powerful frame rampaging towards the demon ivy.

A faint glimmer of silver resonant power covered him. When activated, his Silver Bear Resonance made his body even more durable and expanded it by a significant margin.

Weng!

The demon ivy responded promptly, its tendrils snaking out lightning quick, whistling through the air with their speed.

Zhao Kuo's giant axe swept in beautiful arcs, a whirling storm that cut down all the vines hurtling towards him. Jade-green liquid spurted everywhere after each swing.

Suddenly, the mud below him exploded and vines burst from the ground, binding Zhao Kuo's lower torso.

Almost immediately, a slash of blue light cut them apart.

Close behind Zhao Kuo's muscular frame was Li Luo, wreathed in his own blue resonant power. His two swords never paused, constantly seeking out the next vine trying to tie down Zhao Kuo.

The two steadily drew closer to the demon ivy.

But the closer they got, the more violent the demon ivy became. More and more vines stretched towards them, each one whipped up into a desperate frenzy. Li Luo tried his best to cut them down, but some of the vines still managed to lash themselves around Zhao Kuo. He gritted his teeth, uttering not a single sound as deep and bloody streaks appeared on his flesh. He pushed forward. Another step. And another.

"Yu Lang, go!"

Judging the moment, Li Luo yelled out to their flank.

"Alright!"

Already waiting on the sidelines, Yu Lang shot forth upon hearing the command. His speed pushed to its maximum, he pounced toward the Spectral Face Fruit in a flash while the demon ivy was preoccupied with the pair's attacks.

Yu Lang was extremely fast. He was close to the Spectral Face Fruit in the blink of an eye. But just as he stretched out a hand to grab it, the soil at his feet exploded. A mysterious stranger shot forth, intent on beating Yu Lang to the fruit.

"Fuck!"

Yu Lang's face tightened as he swore. Someone had been waiting to swoop in!

Yu Lang stared, eyes wide, as his prize was on the verge of being stolen from right under his nose. Nearby, Li Luo bellowed, "Yu Lang, shut your eyes!"

He lifted his hand, his face grim. A blue ball of light formed on his fingertip and shot forth.

The blue light ball exploded near Yu Lang and the intruder, shrouding them in an explosion of dazzling light.

Chapter 0053: Earth Resonance Lian Zhong

Hearing Li Luo's shout startled Yu Lang. Closing his eyes would put him in an even more vulnerable state than he already was, with the intruder in his face. But given his understanding of Li Luo, he set his jaw and shut his eyes.

As the dazzling light burst out, Yu Lang avoided the blinding effect. Based on his last mental picture, he reached out a hand for the Spectral Face Fruit.

However, the intruder caught the flash full on. Their eyes burned, and they could not help but recoil away.

The bright light vanished in an instant.

The Spectral Face Fruit was in Yu Lang's hand. His face hard, he pulled out a stiletto from his sleeve and charged it with green resonant power before giving it a merciless flick towards the scrabbling figure.

"Hmph."

Understanding that they had lost, the intruder scoffed and punched out. Yellow resonant power boomed out, clashing fiercely against Yu Lang's attack.

The resonant powers exploded against each other. The intruder was only slightly shaken, whereas Yu Lang was sent flying back, sprawling on the ground nearby.

The moment Yu Lang grabbed it, Li Luo and Zhao Kuo fled from the demon ivy's attack radius. They barreled over to Yu Lang's side, staring down the shadow ahead.

"Keke, quick movements. Can't believe I didn't snatch that." The stranger laughed casually.

They could make out that it was a tall, broad-shouldered youth, with a head of short hair. His well-sculpted body announced his barbaric strength. It was an intimidating physique.

"Eastpool Academy?" Zhao Kuo spotted the crystal medallion on their adversary's chest. The school logo was Eastpool's.

"Eastpool Academy's Lian Zhong. He's second in Eastpool, sixth-grade earth resonance, Eighth Seal," Yu Lang immediately recited. Thanks to his compilation and research, he was very familiar with the elite students from the major schools.

Li Luo's face was rather neutral. "Eastpool kids just love to steal stuff, huh? Sounds like a problematic teaching philosophy, if you ask me."

"The rules don't say anything about stealing," Lian Zhong replied with a cheeky grin.

"Indeed. A hit to your pride though, for sure. You were burrowed for such a long time like a little mole, but you still ended up empty-pawed. Frustrated?" Li Luo mocked.

The cheekiness on Lian Zhong's face evaporated. He had indeed laid in ambush for a long time. He was so sure that he had it in the bag, and had even prepared a few choice taunts. But Li Luo had reacted very quickly to turn the tables on him.

"Li Luo, I've underestimated you."

Lian Zhong's eyes were on him now. He laughed it off. "But this is nothing. No need to get all cocky."

"You mean you have your eye on me now?"

"Can't be helped. Boss sent the word out that he's too busy to deal with you, so he asked us to amuse you," Lian Zhong said with a sardonic smile.

"Shi Huang?" Li Luo probed.

"Not much point in fighting here. There's no points to gain from it. After this stage though, I'll come find you when the eliminations start," Lian Zhong said.

His eyes swept across Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang. "If you two know which way the wind's blowing, stay away from him. Boss has ordered all Eastpool students to target him. There's nothing but trouble by his side."

"Your mom's ass."

Zhao Kuo glared back at him. "Can't wait for you Eastpool mongrels to come and deliver us free points on a plate."

Yu Lang wagged the stiletto in his hand and said in a serious tone "Li Luo and I are bonded in life and death, we go as deep as the sea. I'll never leave him... unless you have money."

"Boring. As you wish." Lian Zhong shook his head and left, vanishing into the dark forest.

"Hey, at least give me a sum to work with! We can negotiate!" Yu Lang called out hurriedly.

He was on the verge of chasing, but Li Luo held him back. "No point tangling with him here. Can't get his points either."

"Damn, that was unreasonable," Yu Lang fumed. They were unsure if he was angry about the ambush, or the lack of an asking price.

Zhao Kuo turned to Li Luo with a worried expression. "Brother Luo, if the Eastpool kids are really after you, let's go assemble a team of our own."

If they did not bring their own forces, they would be overwhelmed.

"No rush. Let's see how it goes."

Li Luo still looked composed. Clearly, Shi Huang was still not taking him seriously, sending lackeys like Lian Zhong. But if that's how he wanted it, it was going to be like attacking dogs with meat buns, all give and no take.

Wait, that wasn't right. He wasn't a dog.

"Well, our spoils." Yu Lang held out the Spectral Face Fruit.

"Give it to Zhao Kuo first. He tanked the most." Li Luo laughed.

Zhao Kuo was still covered in bloody lacerations, a woeful sight. But the wounds were all physical, and his sturdy constitution would soon put those to right.

Zhao Kuo did not comment, reaching out a hand to take the Spectral Face Fruit. Anyway, he was going to help Li Luo and Yu Lang get their own Spectral Face Fruits.

He tore the Spectral Face Fruit apart with his hands, taking out the core within. He squeezed it until a drop of green liquid fell onto the crystal medallion on his chest and was absorbed.

The points on his crystal medallion immediately jumped to 100.

"Let's go. Second fruit," Li Luo said. The two continued on.

In the next hour, the three managed to find two more demon ivies. Repeating their tactic, they were able to get two more Spectral Face Fruits unmolested. Both Li Luo and Yu Lang reached 100 points as well.

Now that they were all done with the task, there was no point in getting any more fruits. The three immediately headed for the third elimination round without delay.

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Foot of Whitespirit Mountain.

The crystal wall was constantly shimmering with updates.

Many were watching the clips with great interest.

The top of the board was filled with full-mark rankers, a whopping 200 points. Of course, it included the likes of Lu Qing'er and Shi Huang.

There had been two particularly sensational clips featured on the crystal wall.

First was Lu Qing'er. She was standing casually on top of a Spectral Face Demon Ivy, the frustrating vines completely encased in ice. Her long hair flying free, that lithe body and alluring face—the scene was a declaration of the Southwind valedictorian's charms.

The second scene was Shi Huang, a smile on his face and a fruit in hand. Behind him, the demon ivy was black and smoking, still sizzling with electricity.

These two had beaten their respective demon ivies with pure strength to take their Spectral Face Fruits.

A worthy score, and support for them increased. Everyone understood that the first place title was probably between these two now.

Cai Wei and Yan Lingqing were not too interested in these two. Their eyes were fixed on the lower half of the board. When they saw Li Luo's points jump to 100, they finally sighed with relief.

Although this was just for a foundational score, two zeros for Li Luo would have been a fiasco.

As more students got their Spectral Face Fruits in their own ways, the mood was starting to pick up here. Everyone knew that these preliminaries were just an appetizer. These foundational scores were for the elimination match.

Therefore, the exam would only truly be underway when the eliminations started.

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Inside Whitespirit Mountain.

Li Luo, Yu Lang, and Zhao Kuo walked out of the gloomy forest. A river appeared before them, and on the opposite bank, there was a complicated terrain of hills and valleys, well furnished with large forests and rocks.

They shared a look. Across the river, the elimination arena.

They did not hesitate, using their resonant powers to cross the broad expanse of the river. They touched down on the other side, signaling the beginning of the elimination.

Chapter 0054: The Three Fishermen

When the three passed the river and set foot on the other side, they saw a few others nearby. However, the two parties made eye contact and then they mutually split away, moving swiftly into the complicated terrain.

Li Luo and his friends plunged into a dense forest, with birdsongs coming from the mountains around. Their faces were all serious.

"What are your plans?" Li Luo asked Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang.

Zhao Kuo smiled. "I initially thought I would get some points first in the elimination round. But now I think I'll stick to you."

"Because of Lian Zhong?"

Li Luo said, "There's no need for that. I'm not too worried."

"Brother Luo, you can handle yourself, no doubt. Of course I know you're not afraid of him. I'm just worried they're going to bring a whole gang against you. Although I'm not as strong as you, perhaps I could share some of the load if it comes to it," Zhao Kuo said.

And then he cracked a bigger smile. "Plus... points are going to come faster with Brother Luo, eh?"

Li Luo smiled back. He knew that Zhao Kuo was looking out for him for the most part, but he did not pursue the matter further. He nodded to Zhao Kuo.

"And you?" He turned to Yu Lang.

Yu Lang fiddled with his fringe, then said soberly, "You know what I'm capable of. I can slip through the ranks of this competition like a fish through water. If you are willing to hire me at a high price, I can give you a discount on behalf of our friendship. Just 1,000 skygol- HEY!"

Before he could finish, Li Luo and Zhao Kuo had already walked on, leaving him behind.

Yu Lang panicked. "500 skygold!"

Li Luo still ignored him.

Yu Lang burst out, "If you're not happy with the price, counteroffer, damn it! Some respect please! I wonder which school you learned those disagreeable manners from."

"Five skygold." Li Luo sketched a careless wave with his left hand.

"Deal!"

Li Luo almost sprained his back laughing. "Scum, you're really scum."

Yu Lang said loftily, "If you dare to ask, I dare to respond. Li Luo, you think you can shame me with five skygold? How naive."

Li Luo shook his head, but the humor was still in his eyes. He knew that both Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang were truly worried that he was Eastpool Academy's target and that they had chosen to follow and protect him.

Despite their vastly different personalities, both were good friends worth keeping.

"I have an idea," Yu Lang suddenly said. "We are too obvious if we move as a trio. I think we should send Zhao Kuo ahead alone. Li Luo will use Water Shadow Art to hide the two of us following behind."

Li Luo caught on. "Fishing?"

The bait was going to be Zhao Kuo, a stolid, honest guy that would catch the eye of every dirty player. They were going to swarm all over him for his points.

"Good idea."

Zhao Kuo chuckled, screwing his face up in an attempt at panicked horror, as though he was properly terrified.

"Zhao Kuo, your acting skills are wasted at Southwind Academy, man." Yu Lang stared at him, mouth wide.

Zhao Kuo gave him an impertinent bob of the head back in response.

"Settled, then," Li Luo decided. The three-man fishing team was formed.

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Deep in the forest, the dappled sunlight filtered through the dense canopy.

A meek figure skulked through the trees, his eyes darting about constantly. He was the very picture of caution.

Occasionally, he would melt back into the shadows and observe for a while before proceeding again.

Truly a meek and scared person.

Behind this cringing figure, Li Luo and Yu Lang stood in the shadows, well hidden. They were lost for words at Zhao Kuo's immersive acting.

"This man's completely in character now," Yu Lang marveled. He thought his own acting skills were quite something, but now he saw that Zhao Kuo was a fellow thespian indeed.

Li Luo nodded fervently. He felt that Zhao Kuo indeed had potential. He put a lot of care into the details.

"But the others are cautious too."

Li Luo looked at one particular shadow. He had discovered some time ago that there were two people watching Zhao Kuo, although they had not made their move. Instead, they had been tailing and observing Zhao Kuo him too.

Clearly, they were trying to ascertain if Zhao Kuo's caution was for real.

Both had tested Zhao Kuo out many times already, but Li Luo's camouflage still held. Unbeknownst to them, they were the ones being hunted.

Li Luo could sense that their patience was waning. Zhao Kuo's acting was extremely natural. He had them hook, line, and sinker.

Just as Li Luo flirted with the idea of a proactive action, the leaves rustled and two shadows streaked forward, landing in front and behind Zhao Kuo, neatly trapping him.

Zhao Kuo paled. He shouted, "What are you trying to do? I'm from Southwind Academy! You dare to test me!?"

His performance was world-class. Li Luo and Yu Lang lapped it up from their front-row seats.

The two who had appeared were from two different schools. They were not at all weak, both Seventh Seal Stage cultivators.

"Man, we followed you for so long. You're Zhao Kuo from Southwind Academy, aren't you? I saw you in the examination intel... Cut the crap. Hand over your points," the two accosters said.

"In your dreams!" Zhao Kuo yelled. His silver resonant power shimmered into view.

Seeing him move, the two did not hesitate in their attack either. Hefting their swords, they shot towards him cat-quick in a pincer movement.

A ruthless attack.

But just as their attack was about to land, a gentle breeze rustled behind the two.

Their hairs prickled. To their horror, the cringing expression on Zhao Kuo's face was gone, now replaced with a smug, mocking smile.

"Damn it, we've been had!"

They realized what was going on and started cursing themselves. They had been very careful in scouting the area. How had they not detected these two?

What sneaky behavior!

A chill ran through them. They knew that they had walked into a trap. Focusing their resonant power, they attempted to take down the actor, Zhao Kuo. At least with a hostage, they would have some bargaining power.

Zhao Kuo saw through them. But he neither hid nor backed down. Instead, a fierce look entered his eyes.

His large axe twirled so fast, it made a wheel, and he charged the pair.

Dang!

The clash of steel sent sparks flying out. Zhao Kuo grunted as he felt the jolt of the shock run through his body. These two were not weak at all. Naturally, came out of the clash in better shape.

Still, before they could press his moment of weakness, the two blasts of resonant power caught up to them from behind.

HACK.

The two spat out mouthfuls of fresh blood and rolled on the floor like freshly plucked gourds.

When they tried to rise again, they found an azure-blue short sword and a stiletto resting lightly on each of their necks.

"Brother, one sudden move and there will be blood," a light voice sang from beside him.

The two looked at each other bleakly. "Damn, you Southwind Academy students really play dirty. Fishing?!"

"Hey, if you didn't bite, we wouldn't have caught you."

Li Luo laughed. He beckoned to Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo to take off their crystal medallions. They cleaned out their points.

When their crystal medallions' points drained to zero, an urgently flashing red light followed. And then a beam of light extended out to truss them up tightly.

Clearly, they had been eliminated. The light's purpose was to bind them and prevent them from interfering with the competition.

After taking their points, the trio did not even bother with parting words, immediately turning to leave. Their conversation drifted backwards.

"Not a bad haul. I wonder who the next unlucky bastard will be."

"Hope they're fatter than these two."

"But damn, Zhao Kuo, you're a born actor. They followed so cautiously for half an hour, but still fell for it."

"Haha, it's nothing. Still some details to polish. I should have added a bit more fear when they appeared to catch me. I think that's more realistic."

"Your work ethic is admirable, Sir."

"Hey, love the work you do, right?"

"Well, yes..."

Chapter 0055: Into the Mist

As the schools moved into the elimination phase, the scores on the crystal wall began to change more and more rapidly, reflecting just how intense things were.

Numerous pairs of eyes were all riveted on the wall. Occasional gasps or groans could be heard as they each monitored their own students.

Cai Wei and Yan Lingqing were also watching their Young Lord's score. When they saw his score increase, both relaxed into a smile.

"The Young Lord is doing his best," Cai Wei said coyly, gently fanning herself with an intricate, flower-patterned fan.

"He probably hasn't met any strong enemies yet. As the round wears on, all that will be left are the stronger survivors. Then his true mettle will be tested," Yan Lingqing reminded her.

Cai Wei's smile was still bright as a flower. "Still, I believe the Young Lord can do it."

"So confident?"

"Because handsomeness is justice," Cai Wei said piously.

"You and your nonsense." Yan Lingqing propped her silver-rimmed glasses higher and turned away.

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In the dense forest.

Ting!

Li Luo and the others had surrounded one unlucky bastard. Before his desperate eyes, they cleaned out his points, leaving a tearful, dejected slump in their wake.

"We're at 1,500 points already."

Li Luo looked at their crystal medallions. They had spent most of the morning gathering these points, farming them off a school of greedy and unfortunate fish.

"Seems like the river's running dry though," Zhao Kuo fretted. In the last hour, that unlucky chump had been their only catch.

"Word of our fishing reputation's getting around," Li Luo said.

Their morning of fishing had not gone without its own hiccups. Some fish had slipped away due to their uncommon ability. They would definitely spread the word about the Li Luo Fishing Company.

Pre-warned students would not take the bait. n//Ov**Elb**In

"Well, fishing was never going to get us the win. As more and more people get eliminated, the time will come when we have to fight," Li Luo said, unconcerned.

Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang nodded. They knew this too.

The three were biding their time, even while on the move. They continued a cautious foray forwards, but they soon realized that there was a thin mist building around them the more they moved forward.

It started to thicken rapidly.

Li Luo paused, frowning. "Something's off. We're retreating."

They turned immediately, retracing the path they had come from.

After a few minutes, Li Luo turned around and saw that Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo had mysteriously vanished.

Li Luo thought for a moment. He searched the nearby bushes and found clumps of a grey mushroom. These fungi were responsible for emitting the disorienting mist.

"Misleading Mushrooms..."

Li Luo gnashed his teeth. The mist from these mushrooms could cause one to confuse directions and even lose track of time and space.

Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo must have stumbled off, and now they were lost.

"What a pickle."

Li Luo stomped down on the Misleading Mushrooms. Although the fog was troublesome, it should be finite. If he waited for it to clear a little, he should be able to find the others.

At the same time, some distance away in the fog.

Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang were together, and they had also discovered that Li Luo had gone missing. Uncomfortable as it was, they could only advance cautiously.

After some time, they heard footsteps from up ahead and perked up happily. Zhao Kuo called out tentatively, "Brother Luo?"

The footsteps got crisper, and soon a figure appeared before them. Their faces changed.

It was not Li Luo. It was, however, a familiar face.

The one who had tried to snatch their Spectral Face fruit, Eastpool Academy's Lian Zhong!

He smiled coldly at them. "No Li Luo, but instead the two lackeys."

Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang wasted no time in beating it. They had walked into his trap, even though it was meant for Li Luo.

But just as they turned, two others dropped down into their path of escape, cutting them off.

There were four others.

And from their crystal medallions, they were all from Eastpool Academy.

"We'll have to duke it out!" Zhao Kuo's eyes flashed.

But Yu Lang raised his hands hurriedly. "Surrender! We surrender!"

Lian Zhong was taken aback, his lips quickly lifting in a sneer. "Are Southwind Academy students all this spineless?"

Zhao Kuo bellowed, "YU LANG! What are you doing?! You think they'll let you off just like that?!"

"Zhao Kuo, Brother, they're targeting Li Luo. That has nothing to do with us," Yu Lang wheedled.

"Damn it, you wretch!"

His face contorted with rage, Zhao Kuo's fist flew out.

Yu Lang dodged it hastily, his face a little troubled. "You're going too far. We're not even Li Luo's actual brothers."

He turned to Lian Zhong, who was enjoying the show. "Come on, let me off."

Lian Zhong snickered. "Didn't you say you and Li Luo were bonded by life and death or something?"

Yu Lang gave him a sheepish smile. "A joke. Rhetoric, is all. But if you're willing to let me off, I can help you find Li Luo. He gave us a special way of communication just now."

Zhao Kuo's eyes bulged as he charged over to bludgeon Yu Lang. But two Eastpool students held him down.

Lian Zhong's eyes narrowed. "And I'm supposed to believe you?"

Yu Lang's eyes were wet. "If you listened out for information, you would know that Li Luo and I actually have a deep enmity. In the Southwind Academy preliminaries, he was merciless, wounding me deeply. I was bedridden for many days, and even now my body hurts when it rains.

"I was unlucky enough to run into them earlier and was coerced to join up. That's all it was."

An Eastpool student whispered to Lian Zhong, "I've heard of this guy before. He's a real money-grubber. He would do anything for profit. He was indeed beaten badly by Li Luo in the Southwind preliminaries. I heard from a friend in Southwind that Li Luo beat him to a pulp. It was so gory, it brought the spectators to tears."

Lian Zhong frowned. Yu Lang piped up again. "Actually, I hinted to you previously."

"Hinted what?"

Yu Lang gave a sly smile. "I asked you to up the price... If you did, I would've helped you."

Lian Zhong started. Indeed, Yu Lang had said that. But how could he have believed it? And yet it was all in character for Yu Lang. Could it really have been a hint?

This guy was truly despicable if it were true.

Lian Zhong crossed his arms. "If you can really lure Li Luo here, I'll let you go," he said casually.

Whether he was lying or not, if Li Luo could be baited here, all was good.

Yu Lang leaped up. "No problem!"

"Zhao Kuo is good friends with Li Luo. We can use him as a hostage. When Li Luo comes, threatening Zhao Kuo will render him helpless."

He was even proactively setting up the trap.

Lian Zhong could not help but reel a little. "Aren't you betraying your teammates a little too easily?"

Another sheepish grin from Yu Lang.

"Yu Lang, you good-for-nothing. Just wait! I'll never forgive you!" Zhao Kuo howled as he struggled.

"Truss him up and gag him," Lian Zhong ordered with a wave.

Four Eastpool Academy students crowded up to tie Zhao Kuo.

Lian Zhong stood beside Yu Lang and placed a chopper on his neck. "Now, use your communication method to get Li Luo here.

"If he doesn't come, you're both eliminated immediately."

Yu Lang thumped his chest proudly.

"No worries, Boss. Li Luo will fall for it for sure! When you catch him, please give him a harsh beating on his face. I've suffered beside that devastating handsomeness for all too long!"

Lian Zhong absently reached up to touch his own coarse and plain features. A wave of hatred rose in him.

He also hated those pretty boys who had the world eating out of their hands!

Yu Lang's words had struck a nerve.

Fights could be lost, but pretty boys had to die!

And the prettiest of boys like Li Luo had to be cut up into a thousand pieces!

Chapter 0056: Lure Li Luo

After Yu Lang and Lian Zhong made their pact, Yu Lang pulled out a bamboo whistle and blew a reedy and shrill sound out into the mist.

Zhao Kuo immediately redoubled his struggles upon hearing the sound. The four Eastpool students struggled grimly to pin him down.

Zhao Kuo's face was red from exertion, his tears streaming from frustration. He stared dementedly at Yu Lang as if he wished he could swallow him whole.

Seeing such a reaction from Zhao Kuo assuaged the last vestiges of Lian Zhong's suspicions. Relaxing, he was sold by Yu Lang's despicability.

That guy didn't have the slightest bit of backbone in him.

Still, that suited him just fine.

"Walk. Slowly."

Lian Zhong ordered. Yu Lang began to shuffle forward obediently.

.....

Within the gradually dissipating mist, Li Luo's eyes flew open.

He heard some whistles.

He frowned slightly to himself, his fingers tapping against the trunk of a tree as he listened to the whistles.

"Five? Probably Lian Zhong? Unlucky for those two," he murmured to himself. Before their fishing commenced, Li Luo had established some simple protocols with the others. One of them was a rudimentary signal system.

If such a situation arose, those still free would embark on a rescue operation as soon as possible. If the enemy was too strong, they would enlist the help of other Southwind Academy students.

"Lian Zhong..."

Li Luo's mouth hardened, his fists curling around the hilts of his swords. A cold look crept into his eyes.

"I let you go the other time. Did you think I couldn't deal with you?"

Li Luo turned, heading towards the direction of the whistle without hesitation. He vanished into the fog.

.....

Within the fog, a few figures were slowly moving forward.

In front, Lian Zhong was pressed up against Yu Lang. Behind, the four Eastpool students with Zhao Kuo wedged between them.

The whistle continued to ring out.

Lian Zhong scowled. "Where the hell is he?"

"The fog's so damn big," Yu Lang grumbled back irritably. "Maybe he ran really far away?"

"Hurry up, then," Lian Zhong snapped. "You're wasting our time."

Yu Lang hurriedly complied, blowing the whistle as hard as he could.

Unnoticed behind them, something stirred in the mist. A faint blur of watery light. While all eyes were forward, a palm stretched out from the mist and clamped down over the mouth of the person furthest back. A fist crashed into his temple and then unconsciousness followed.

The other three Eastpool students reacted immediately. "AMBUSH!"

Ahead, Lian Zhong whirled about, angry and fearful. He turned straight into a blue ball of light sailing into his face.

Peng!

It exploded in a blinding light.

Those caught by it cried out and shut their eyes, feeling as though their eyeballs had been stabbed.

Zhao Kuo, who had shut his eyes in time, barged his way past three others and disappeared into the fog.

"Fuck, we've been had!"

Lian Zhong swore. In his rage, he swung his cleaver down at Yu Lang.

But a slight push off the balls of his feet, helped along by his wind resonant power, and Yu Lang was clear of the swing.

"Haha, a donkey trying to catch the wind?"

Yu Lang taunted him. He also vanished into the mist.

Lian Zhong's face was ugly to look at. His yellow resonant power exploded from his body, scything out in the direction that Yu Lang had come from.

Dang!

A pair of shortswords imbued with blue light countered in response.

Lian Zhong gripped his cleaver tightly, staring deep into the mist.

Li Luo emerged, twin swords in hand. He was smiling straight at him, Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang flanking him.

"You dare to trick me?" Lian Zhong glared at Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo. He knew now that there must have been messages hidden in the whistles. He had come, but he had come forewarned, rumbling their ambush and turning the situation.

Yu Lang sighed softly. "Brother, it was not deception. It was just... business!"

He batted his eyelashes at Lian Zhong meaningfully, "You wanna... up the bid?"

Lian Zhong's face was red, his breathing labored and his eyes wild.

"Hey, this guy is pawing like an enraged bull. Should we retreat? The mist is going to fade soon," Yu Lang said anxiously.

Li Luo did not budge. "Retreat?" He laughed. "I took great effort to get this big fish to bite. I'm not about to release it."

Yu Lang's jaw dropped. "Did you smear lard all over your eyeballs? Are you seeing this guy? Eighth Seal, and he has three helpers with him."

"You two handle those three. No problems, I assume?" Li Luo asked.

"You're for real?" Yu Lang was sobering up real quick.

Li Luo's eyes were locked on Lian Zhong. He nodded lightly. "He's worn on my patience long enough. It's about time he paid the price."

Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo looked at each other for a long moment before finally nodding slowly.

"Just as well. I've wanted to take down these bastards for a while now." Zhao Kuo's eyes lit up with pleasure. His axe whooshed a few trial swings.

On the other side, the angry Lian Zhong was in disbelief.

"You're not running?" He could not understand it.

Li Luo had gone to great pains to save Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang. They should be fleeing into the mist now, the most rational of options. But Li Luo seemed ready to fight him.

Did his handsome looks absorb all his brain cells?

Hefting his cleaver, Lian Zhong swished it lightly through the air. He turned to Li Luo, and the smile on his face hardened cruelly.

"Li Luo, don't think I won't dare to lay hands on you just because you're the Young Lord or something. If you lose here, the only one that falls is House Luolan."

Li Luo smiled slightly. "Don't be too quick to jump to conclusions. It's embarrassing when the tables turn, you know?"

"Oh? You think you're that good?" Lian Zhong sneered. He beckoned to the other three. "Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo are yours. I'll deal with Li Luo."

The three complied. Seventh Seals, three on two—there was nothing to be afraid of.

"We'll go first. Take care of yourself. Give us the signal if you're out of your depth, and we'll find a way to extricate," Yu Lang assured him in a low voice before bounding after Zhao Kuo in another direction.

The three opponents followed.

As they drew apart, only Li Luo and Lian Zhong were left here now.

Lian Zhong looked at Li Luo with a mixture of disdain and cruel pleasure. This time, he wasted no more words. His yellow resonant power burst forth with the skill of an Eighth Seal cultivator.

An intimidating presence indeed.

"Li Luo, too late to regret now!"

"Watch me turn your face into minced meat!"

As he shrieked his laughter, Lian Zhong surged forward, his blade gleaming with yellow light as it delivered a brutal chop towards Li Luo.

Chapter 0057: Water Edge Art

Whoosh!

Lian Zhong was not holding back. His Eighth Seal resonant power was fully utilized now. A menacing, yellow blade arced towards Li Luo.

Li Luo had no intention of dodging at all. Instead, he lifted himself up to the balls of his feet and darted forth like an eagle. His two swords were in hand, swirling blue with his water resonance power.

Dang!

When the swords met, resonant power boomed out, the aftershock rippling through the leaves.

Lian Zhong's face whitened. Li Luo was completely unfazed by his Eighth Seal power. He could not suppress Li Luo in a clash!

"Impossible! He should only be a Seventh Seal!" Lian Zhong was alarmed!

"Seems like the Eighth Seal doesn't count for much."

Li Luo let a grin show. With his waterlight resonance at the sixth-grade, plus his resonant power at the Seventh Seal, an Eighth Seal would not trouble him as much as Song Yunfeng had during the preliminaries.

"I'll make you eat those words!" Lian Zhong shouted with a vindictive hysteria. His resonant power again surging forth, he chopped and cleaved in a frenzy.

But Li Luo was faster. His two swords in hand, blue light pulsed out as he twirled them, a continuous attack that pressed Lian Zhong hard.

Fury in his eyes, Lian Zhong had his hands full dealing with it.

Dang! Dang!

The two fought for dozens of rounds. The clashes of metal rang out through the forest.

But as the battle wore on, Lian Zhong felt that the intensity of Li Luo's attacks and resonant power only grew more vigorous.

"The Nine Layered Jade Waves? That's a high-grade water resonance art!" Lian Zhong paled. This water resonance art would gradually accumulate power as the battle wore on. Once it reached peak strength, he would be hard-pressed indeed.

Lian Zhong was a veteran in battle. He immediately called upon all his yellow earth resonant power, imbuing his sword. "High-grade resonance art, Earth Slash!"

He brought his cleaver down and split the earth in a yawning gap. But still Li Luo's blades twirled, and waves of sword light continued to wear away Lian Zhong's attacks.

"Trying to stop my Nine Layered Jade Waves? Seems like you're not strong enough." Li Luo chuckled.

Lian Zhong's face was grim now. He could not understand what was happening. Li Luo was clearly only a Seventh Seal. How could he be this strong and hard to deal with?

In their previous clash, he could clearly sense that there was something odd about Li Luo's resonant power. It could stand up against his earth resonance power surprisingly well.

It seemed like Li Luo's resonance was of a high grade.

But from the information he had, wasn't Li Luo's resonance only a fifth-grade? Why was it so hard to deal with?

While Lian Zhong was flustered, Li Luo only grew sharper as time wore on.

Nine Layered Jade Waves' power was built up now. Time to counterattack.

Li Luo's azure-blue power had reached its peak. The light on his Ripple Blade also glowed bright as it chopped down towards Lian Zhong's chest.

A punishing blow.

Lian Zhong had to be wary of Li Luo's explosive counter. The built-up power of the Nine Layered Jade Waves was not to be taken lightly.

He took a deep breath, summoning up his yellow, earthy resonant power. With a roar, he molded it a shimmering armor of light.

"High-grade resonance art, Earth Armor!"

A faint, yellow armor shimmered into existence around him. It looked reassuringly strong—defense was the specialty of earth resonance users after all. Lian Zhong no longer dared to underestimate Li Luo. He had best bring all that he had to the table.

Weng!

The blue slashing attack landed against the armor of light and caused it to shudder violently. Cracks appeared, and Lian Zhong himself was sent stumbling back a dozen steps, until he crashed heavily against a tree trunk.

He felt a stinging pain in his chest, but also relief. Thanks to his sturdy armor, he had managed to defend against Li Luo's attack.

"What a solid shell."

Li Luo marveled. Earth resonance specialized in defense. Lian Zhong had been contesting offense up till now, setting aside his natural strengths. Switching to defense made him an even tougher opponent.

Lian Zhong was all serious business now. Their clash so far had made him understand THAT Li Luo was indeed a good match for him.

He had even been forced to rely on his advantage of defense to sap Li Luo's stamina.

"Li Luo, you're indeed very strong. A Seventh Seal, but able to push an Eighth Seal like myself. Still, it's impossible for you to win." His dull, yellow power continued to feed into his armor.

Li Luo rubbed his chin as he eyed the impregnable light armor with some irritation. "Good man, you're such a coward! Can't win so you're going to turtle up? Weren't you full of swagger just a moment ago?"

Lian Zhong sniffed and ignored Li Luo's taunts. He said, "Well, come beat me, then!"

Li Luo snorted. "What a pervert..."

"But I'll allow it."

"Pfft. All talk." Lian Zhong taunted.

Li Luo smiled slightly. He put away his Flare Blade and wielded his Ripple Blade in a single hand. In the next instant, water resonance power surged up along the length of the blade.

Slowly, the azure power formed a knife shape of its own.

It was like a blade of fast-circulating water.

"High-grade resonance art, Water Edge?"

Lian Zhong recognized it immediately, and he relaxed. The Water Edge Art was one of the more offensive moves available for basic water resonance users. It used rapidly circulating water to bring about a searing effect.

But ultimately, water resonance power was not suited to offense. It was practically impossible for Li Luo to break his armor like that.

Li Luo bent over his water edge and smiled softly to himself. "Perhaps an ordinary Water Edge Art might not work...

"But my Water Edge Art is not ordinary."

As he spoke, a dazzling sparkle of light suddenly shined on the blue edge. Only Li Luo himself knew what was happening.

He had imbued his light resonance power into it as well, creating thin channels through which his water resonance power was funneled.

This meant that the water resonance power was now circulating at a terrifying pace.

Such an unorthodox method would definitely produce a Water Edge Art that was... special.

Li Luo dubbed it... Reinforced Water Edge Art, Version 1!

Lian Zhong was eyeing the water edge apprehensively. Was the color becoming purer? What was going on? He felt a sense of foreboding.

Li Luo did not keep him in suspense for too long. He leaped forth, the Ripple Blade in his hand still pulsing with jade light.

"COME AT ME!" Lian Zhong roared. "I'M NOT AFRAID!"

As he bellowed, the water edge in Li Luo's hand cut past his earthy, yellow armor.

Li Luo landed behind Lian Zhong. He did not turn around, but calmly sheathed the Ripple Blade back at his waist.

Behind him, Lian Zhong's face had frozen. The next instant, his armor shattered.

His body keeled over, raising a cloud of dust as it landed.

No one else had noticed this, but there was a crystal winking as it recorded the entire battle, displaying it on the crystal wall at Whitespirit Mountain.

Chapter 0058: Big Developments

Foot of Whitespirit Mountain.

The chatter had swelled to a loud bustle now.

On the crystal wall, names shimmied up and down, and the screens beside it showed off the highlights of particularly intense fights, drawing the occasional gasp from the spectators.

The scene changed. A clip of two people facing off in a forest.

In a pavilion, a bored Cai Wei was carefully peeling a grape. She was just about to pop it into her dainty mouth when her eyes fell on the crystal wall.

"That person looks like the Young Lord." Cai Wei started.

Yan Lingqing perked up as well, looking over at the two figures facing off.

"Indeed..."

Cai Wei sat up straight, the grape forgotten. "Who is he fighting?"

Yan Lingqing did not know either, but she quickly gleaned the news from the whispers all around that were quickly growing louder. "Second place in Eastpool Academy, Lian Zhong. Sixth-grade earth resonance, Eighth Seal."

"Why would Li Luo cross such a strong enemy?"

"It's inevitable in the elimination match. Even if he avoids trouble, trouble will come looking for him." Cai Wei's perfect brows creased slightly. Under them, her beautiful eyes were fixed on the scene unblinkingly.

Yan Lingqing gave it her full attention now as well. Both knew that it would be a tough fight.

As they watched intently, Li Luo and Lian Zhong began their fight. Each thrilling clash drew small, anxious facial twitches from the two women.

But as the battle drew on, their astonishment grew more and more apparent. They saw that Li Luo was not at all at a disadvantage.

He was clearly only a Seventh Seal, but he had an Eighth Seal firmly in hand.

Especially with his final Water Edge skill. When his Ripple Blade sliced through Lian Zhong's light armor, Cai Wei was so excited, she slapped the table.

"The Young Lord is awesome!"

Yan Lingqing was staring too, cherry lips parted slightly in surprise, a look of stunned disbelief all over her face.

She did not think that Li Luo would be able to handle a strong Eighth Seal opponent so handily.

It was a perfect fight, and he played it out flawlessly.

As Li Luo calmly sheathed his sword, she was struck by the contrast to the diligent youth who quietly crafted spirit liquids and purifying lights at her workshop.

He was now brilliance incarnate.

Perhaps this was the real Li Luo. Using warmth and cheek to hide his light...

"Seeing this, I'm starting to believe that he can make it to the top 10," Yan Lingqing said in delight, a spark returning to her clear eyes.

Outside the pavilion, there were also other exclamations. Clearly, they were not the only ones surprised by the outcome.

In the main tent, the dean, Governor Shi, and Mentor Anlie were watching the same fight.

The old dean was all smiles now, unable to hide the grin that was creeping across his face. "The second-placed student at Eastpool Academy was defeated by Southwind's rank 15, Li Luo? Haha, interesting."

"Isn't it very interesting indeed, Governor Shi?"

Governor Shi was shaking slightly as he forced the corners of his mouth up. "He lives up to the title of the Young Lord of House Luolan. Extremely unexpected."

"This is Young Lord Li Luo from House Luolan? The one with a marriage agreement with Jiang Qing'e?" Mentor Anlie suddenly asked.

The old dean nodded, beaming.

"Indeed, he has good looks... Keke, this Li Luo hasn't entered the Astral Sage College yet, but his name is already famous in our school," Mentor Anlie said with a strange laugh.

"Defeating an Eighth Seal doesn't mean his entry is guaranteed now, does it?" Governor Shi said thinly.

"Well, I think you're in for a good show," the old dean said in an unwavering voice as he looked up.

....

Of course, Li Luo himself was oblivious to the sensation his battle was stirring. He was busy dragging a fainted Lian Zhong somewhere else.

As he cautiously parted a bush, he could see that the fight ahead was intense. He was surprised to see that Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang had the battle well in hand, despite the numbers advantage from Eastpool.

Zhao Kuo was faring well as a meat shield, his huge axe swishing through the air as he tanked much of the offense. Around him, Yu Lang zipped back and forth, swift as the wind. His hit and run tactics had three of their opponents down on the ropes.

If things continued this way, it seemed like the hurting would begin in earnest soon enough.

Smiling, Li Luo walked out.

All the fighters froze—not just Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang, but even the Eastpool students stared at him, fear in their eyes.

Their fear only doubled when they saw him dragging an unconscious Lian Zhong with him.

"Damn, Li Luo, you're sick. You actually beat Lian Zhong?" Yu Lang said, mouth agape.

Li Luo nodded, smiling. He threw him to the ground before him, then turned to the three Eastpool students. "Still gonna resist?"

The three of them had lost all will to fight. They turned, preparing to scatter.

But Li Luo was ready. With a flick of his finger, Waterlight Bullet flew out and exploded, rewarding him with three identical, pained howls.

Zhao Kuo and Yu Lang took the chance to redouble their attack.

In short order, the three were also on the ground.

"Let's split their points," Li Luo said.

"Woah, this is a real big fish." Yu Lang's eyes were gleaming now. The four of them all had a generous amount of points, especially Lian Zhong, with a whopping 2,400.

As tempting as the prize was, Yu Lang did not seem inclined to take Lian Zhong's points. Instead, he said, "Li Luo, you keep Lian Zhong's points for yourself. Zhao Kuo and I will split theirs."

The others added up to slightly over 1,000 points. Although it was not as juicy as Lian Zhong's stash, it was a considerable sum nevertheless.

Li Luo was about to say something, when Zhao Kuo chimed in as well. "Brother Luo, you beat Lian Zhong alone. We can't be ripping you off like that. Besides, you have the potential to make it into the top 10. No need to be dragged down by the likes of us."

Li Luo relented under their insistence. Taking off his crystal medallion, he cleaned out Lian Zhong's points.

With smiles that resembled shark grins, Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo did the same to the other three from Eastpool Academy.

"Our boss won't let you get away with it!" they howled in desperation, tears of frustration streaming down their faces.

With this, Li Luo's points reached 3,900, while Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo had passed the 2,000 mark.

Although they could not see the leaderboard, Li Luo reckoned that he would be in the top 30 now, while Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo should be in the top 100.

He grinned. Although the top 10 might still be a ways away, he was closing in.

"Our brothers over at Eastpool Academy are really generous."

"I wonder if any more generosity is headed our way."

Towards the end of the elimination round, the survivors would be tough. Taking points from them would not be at all easy. Therefore, Lian Zhong delivering himself up on a silver plate was highly welcome.

"Let's go. We're probably not far from Whitespirit Ruins," Li Luo said. With him leading the way, the three left.

At Whitespirit Ruins, this elimination round would reach a white-hot climax.

Chapter 0059: Whitespirit Ruins

After defeating the little team led by Lian Zhong, the trio occasionally encountered other tough opponents, but these clashes ended with tears on their opponents' faces, and their points in the trio's pockets.

Two hours later.

They were standing on high ground, gazing out at the expanse of wasteland before them. There had been a castle here once, but the ravages of time had brought it low.

A whole field of broken rubble stretched as far as the eye could see.

There were also huge trees and vines that obscured their view of the rubble.

This was Whitespirit Ruins, and also the location of the final battle of the College Final Examinations.

The three of them stared warily for a long while before closing in. At the edge of Whitespirit Ruins, they discovered a shining crystal wall.

There were letters floating on it, detailing the final rules.

The rules were simple. When there were ten people left in Whitespirit Ruins, the College Final Examinations would be declared over. Points would then determine their placings.

Suddenly, their crystal medallions lit up, then a beam of light projected a translucent screen in front of them.

"It's the scoreboard." Yu Lang gasped.

They could indeed see it here at Whitespirit Ruins.

Li Luo examined it. First place was Lu Qing'er, with 9,500 points.

"Hooo. That's hot. How many did she finish off?" Li Luo marveled.

They had used all sorts of tactics, baiting and even the lucky encounter with Lian Zhong. Even so, he had only 4,000-odd points. Lu Qing'er had doubled his score. She must have been a war goddess, cutting down all in her path.

To no one's surprise, Shi Huang was in second place, with 8,300 points.

Those after him hovered around the 5,000 mark, while Li Luo spotted his own name in 17th place.

As for Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo, they were in the thirties.

"Brother Luo, if the going gets tough, you should split. Our ranking is roughly our limit now. We can go down in a flash of glory—that's probably the last bit of use we can be to you. I think Yu Lang's on the same page, eh?" Zhao Kuo said as he scanned the board as well.

Hearing this, Yu Lang was quiet for a few more seconds. "I feel like I still can go."

Zhao Kuo tsked him, shooting him an angry glare. "Go where? You're done."

Yu Lang nodded glumly. Alright, alright, he was done.

Although Yu Lang was not above getting ahead by hook or by crook, on the whole he was of the same mind as Zhao Kuo on this one. The two of them were Seventh Seals, nowhere near the monster that Li Luo was. If they met an Eighth Seal, they were probably bound to lose. And as the number of tough competitors swelled at Whitespirit Ruins, they would quickly turn from helpers to burdens.

Only ten would remain here at Whitespirit Ruins in the end. They could not possibly dream of reaching the final ten without being a huge source of stress and liability for Li Luo.

Even if Li Luo did not mind, they could not accept such an outcome.

Besides, there was not much point in them entering the top 10. As long as Lu Qing'er took first place, then there would be plenty of entrance placements for Southwind Academy, and they would benefit too.

Li Luo smiled at their words. "We'll see when the time comes."

His only goal was to enter the top 10 and get an entrance placement. Lu Qing'er was already there to secure first place for Southwind Academy as a whole, so there was no need for him to steal the spotlight.

"Let's go. We'll find a place to hole up in Whitespirit Ruins."

Li Luo waved them on, leading the way into the confusing terrain of Whitespirit Ruins.

At the same time, at the opposite side of Whitespirit Ruins.

Shi Huang stood before a crystal wall, scanning the scoreboard with a cool gaze. His eyes lingered on Lu Qing'er's name for a long while.

"Boss, Lian Zhong's name is not on the list. Something must have happened to him!" an Eastpool student exclaimed.

Shi Huang was puzzled by that. He carefully checked the list. Indeed, Lian Zhong's name was absent, although he did see Li Luo in 17th place.

His eyes narrowed. He had sent Lian Zhong to take care of Li Luo. And now Lian Zhong was gone, while Li Luo was sitting pretty on the board?

"He must have been ousted by Li Luo," Shi Huang said coldly.

"Huh? Isn't Li Luo just a Seventh Seal? How's that possible?" those around him asked doubtfully.

"He must have something up his sleeve. Besides, did you all really think Li Luo was useless?" Shi Huang said with a cold smile that did not reach his eyes.

"This Young Lord must have been lying low all this time."

"Should we deal with him?"

Shi Huang dismissed it. "The most important target now is Lu Qing'er. Although Li Luo is a bit of a dark horse, he still doesn't warrant a change in our plans.

"Ignore him for now," Shi Huang said, walking into Whitespirit Ruins. "After Lu Qing'er is dealt with, he'll be as trivial as a clown on the bridge."

Not long after entering Whitespirit Ruins, Shi Huang spotted a fresh symbol carved on one of the ruined walls. He grinned and followed the mark onto a ruined street.

A few minutes later, he ended up in a dilapidated hut.

In the gloom, four people awaited. They were Xiang Liang, Chi Su, Zong Fu, and Song Yunfeng, the four whom Shi Huang had an agreement with.

"Shi Huang, you're still trailing Lu Qing'er in points." Xiang Liang smirked as he walked in.

Shi Huang gave a thin smile. "A temporary lead. It does not matter."

"Speak, then. When do we move?" Chi Su asked.

"The most important thing now is to confirm Lu Qing'er's position and complete the plan. Leave her no room to escape. If she does get away, she will not be so easily caught a second time. And she can also play for time or cut the survivors down to the last ten to force the exams to end," Zong Fu stated clinically.

Shi Huang nodded, turning his eyes on Song Yunfeng. "I'm afraid we will have to trouble Song Yunfeng for this one." He smiled.

Xiang Liang and the others also turned to him. Uncomfortable under their stares, he could also feel a sense of hostility emanating from them.

Xiang Liang and the other two were not from Southwind Academy, so it was normal for them to want to take down Lu Qing'er. But Song Yunfeng was also of Southwind, yet he was helping Shi Huang win against her. That was a little distasteful.

Although for their interests, they were happy to have an inside agent like Song Yunfeng, but that did not curb their disdain for his character.

"I'm ready," Song Yunfeng said, trying to repress his uneasiness.

"Then we are much obliged. In this matter, your contribution is the greatest," Shi Huang said, his face the very picture of sincerity.

Chapter 0060: Ambush All Around

As time passed, more and more students arrived at Whitespirit Ruins. Those that made it here were veterans of numerous battles and had risen above the others. They were more or less the elites of their generation in the Tianshu Province.

Their arrival here immediately shattered the gloomy silence of the ruins, heated battles breaking out all over.

The frenzy was reflected on the scoreboards as well, now visible both in and outside Whitespirit Mountain.

Occasionally, a name would disappear and be replaced by another, indicating an elimination.

As the cutthroat battles continued, all eyes were on the rapidly changing board. The numbers dwindled and the stakes rose.

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In a broken building.

Li Luo listened to the sounds of battle nearby and then looked at the scoreboard displayed by his crystal medallion. He sighed. "It's too quick."

In just over an hour, the 100-odd students had been cut down to just 60.

In this time, he had not met anyone, and his score had not changed. As a result, his rank had fallen from 17 to 23.

"Brutal." Zhao Kuo agreed.

As they spoke, a blur whizzed in. Yu Lang.

"It's chaos out there. Fights everywhere." Yu Lang had been scouting for information. His wind resonance was well suited for it.

"Found anything?" Li Luo asked.

Yu Lang nodded, suddenly sober. "I stumbled upon Shi Huang. And he has Xiang Liang, Chi Su, and Zong Fu with him."

Li Luo looked up sharply. "They're in an alliance?"

"I suspect they're teaming up against Lu Qing'er," Yu Lang said solemnly, licking his lips.

In these examinations, no one but Lu Qing'er could trouble Shi Huang.

Zhao Kuo's face turned grim as well. It seemed like their hopes of getting into the Astral Sage College didn't just lie on Li Luo's shoulders. Perhaps Lu Qing'er was the less certain condition.

Only by winning could she secure their school enough additional placements for them to succeed.

Li Luo was looking troubled as well. "It seems likely. Shi Huang's cunningness runs deep. He must have planned for everything. If Lu Qing'er is truly their combined target, she is in danger."

If such was Shi Huang's plan, then they had to ensure that she remained safe no matter what. If Lu Qing'er was eliminated, then the rest of Southwind Academy would fall like chaff before Shi Huang.

Even Li Luo could not handle Shi Huang, Xiang Liang, Chi Su, and Zong Fu all at once.

Li Luo was quiet for a while, then he let out a deep sigh. "Which way did they go?" he asked Yu Lang.

Yu Lang quickly pointed. "Are you going?"

"You know how important Lu Qing'er is. I have to go take a look. If she's in trouble, we're in trouble." Li Luo sighed.

Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo nodded.

"You two stay here. It's easier for me to get around alone."

"Alright, take care."

They understood that they would be in over their heads in a battle at that level, so they didn't object.

Li Luo nodded, then he turned around without a word. He left without a sound, his azure-blue resonant power cloaking him.

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Somewhere in Whitespirit Ruins.

Lu Qing'er was sitting on a ruined tower, her features fresh. Her white top was clinging to the curve of her chest and her slim waist.

Her long, white pants hugged her firm rump but let loose her shapely and long legs free. It emphasized her figure extremely well.

Her long hair hung at just about the level of that hour-glass waist.

She was a stirring sight, especially contrasted against the dour and woeful ruins.

She pulled out a little cloth bag from the folds of her clothing. There was some dried fruit inside, and she chewed slowly, replenishing the day's exertions.

Suddenly, she jerked, seeing someone approach.

She looked closely and saw that it was Difa Qing.

They had run into each other at Whitespirit Ruins, and of course the latter had been overjoyed to see her. She had wanted to stick together, and Lu Qing'er had no objections. Since they were peers, she didn't mind helping her out.

"Qing'er, you're truly a champion for us girls. All those guys were crushed by you." Difa Qing gushed over her.

Lu Qing'er smiled slightly. "It's not over yet."

Difa Qing nodded. "In these exams, Eastpool Academy is indeed a strong contender. I'm worried about Shi Huang."

"He's very strong." Lu Qing'er concurred. Even she considered him a threat.

"Mm. That's why same-school students should stick together. That's why I left a mark just now—Song Yunfeng told me about it. He said that if I came across you and felt you needed help, I should let him know with that mark. If he saw it, he would help," Difa Qing said in a sunny voice.

Lu Qing'er choked on her dried fruit.

She stared at Difa Qing frostily. "You're saying you left Song Yunfeng a mark nearby?"

Difa Qing was scared at the sudden hostility. "Y-yes? What's wrong?" she stuttered. "Song Yunfeng is the second best in Southwind Academy. If he helps you, there's no need to be afraid of Shi Huang."

Lu Qing'er looked at Difa Qing for a few dozen seconds. She then stowed her cloth pouch, her face stony.

"I'm leaving. Don't follow me."

"Qing'er... You- what's wrong? Did I do something wrong?" Difa Qing anxiously asked.

Lu Qing'er ignored her. Leaning forward on the balls of her feet, she leapt lightly off the tower, landing on a pile of broken rocks and taking off swiftly.

Although she did not know what Difa Qing's mark would bring, she did not want to reveal her location so easily. It made her feel unsafe.

"Hopefully, it's just overthinking," Lu Qing'er thought to herself.

Just as she was about to slip away, her lithe body suddenly seized up, and the rocks under her exploded with a brilliant green light, snagging her exposed ankle.

The attack caught her off-guard.

Even so, Lu Qing'er was not completely unprepared. She remained calm, sending a current of her ice resonant power towards her foot.

The green light was frozen, and materialized as some sort of green vine.

Clap, clap, clap!

Sounds of clapping from ahead. Lu Qing'er looked up and saw a figure standing on top of a broken wall, smiling at her.

Shi Huang.

To her flanks and behind her, others appeared, cutting off her escape routes.

"Got you, Lu Qing'er." Xiang Liang's eyes were gleaming as he laughed.

To her front, Shi Huang. On the flanks and back, Xiang Liang, Chi Su, and Zong Fu. All three were formidable opponents.

Things looked dire.

Not far away, a crystal winked, feeding the scene back to the crystal wall at Whitespirit Mountain.

Back at the foot of Whitespirit Mountain, the audience exploded with excitement.