

Resonance 531

Chapter 0531: Four-Limbed Demon-Eye Serpent

"Heavenly Disaster-class?" Li Luo asked sharply. "Please, tell us more. What did it look like? What abilities did it have? Any defining traits?" This was very important information. A Heavenly Disaster-class Other was huge trouble for them.

"It's quite a coincidence... I was tasked to oversee Riverguard City's defense before our empire was lost," Huang Lou said with a bitter laugh.

"Ah, a commander of defense. Our respects," the First Princess said pleasantly and respectfully.

"Just a humble soldier," Huang Lou said, quickly shaking his head. This girl might have a warm demeanor, but he had his suspicions that she might come from royalty, just from her regal bearing.

"Riverguard City is considered a big city in these parts. Back when the Other Disaster first broke out, it was one of the central locations to which the Others swarmed. There was one Heavenly Disaster-class among their numbers, which we called the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent."

"That's four more limbs than snakes usually have," Li Luo quipped.

"Those four limbs have the power to move mountains, it felt like," Huang Lou said soberly. "Most terrifying of all was its single demon eye. All who looked at the eye would be left bereft of any intelligence, reduced to nothing more than a corpse."

"Back then, the Riverguard city lord was a Heavenly Pearl Stage cultivator with three pearls. That was enough to buy enough time for the citizens to escape, but he was eventually defeated as well. That vile beast ate the city lord before the rest of the city." Huang Lou shuddered to himself. He was clearly still badly traumatized by those memories.

Li Luo felt the hair on his arms stand. Eating a Heavenly Pearl Stage expert before the entire city... It must have been extremely demoralizing.

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e looked unmoved. "Truly a savage monster," the First Princess sympathized calmly.

Her reaction alone was enough to tell Huang Lou that she was definitely stronger than the city lord. And to accomplish that at her age spoke of staggering talent.

"From your description, that seems to be a Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class; otherwise, a three-pearl Heavenly Pearl cultivator would not be able to hold it out for long. But after it ate the city lord, it should be stronger than a five-pearl Heavenly Pearl cultivator now. And in the last few years, it has probably gotten stronger still," Jiang Qing'e said neutrally.

"Still, as a Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class, it should not be beyond us."

Li Luo nodded. The First Princess herself was a seven-pearl Heavenly Pearl cultivator. She alone might well be a match for the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent. With Jiang Qing'e's help, the fight should be well in hand.

"Besides the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, are there Others at a similar level?" the First Princess asked.

One Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class was manageable, but if another showed up, they would be in trouble.

Huang Lou hesitated. "I have not been back to Riverguard City since we fled," he admitted. "But I occasionally heard from refugees that the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent is ferociously protective of its territory. All threats within its domain were killed and eaten, both human and Others."

"That's why I think it is likely that the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent is alone. Of course, it might have other strong underlings with it as well. They will not be easy to deal with," he warned. "I really do not advise you to go there."

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e did not reply. Riverguard City was their compulsory objective—it was only a matter of time before they would have to go, or they would face a point penalty that might well cost them the championship.

Li Luo smiled at him. "Many thanks for the warning, Commander Huang Lou. I wonder, do you have any other advice to share? Like about this region, and perhaps any notable Others?" Huang Lou considered it for a moment. "A little. We've been here for two or three years after all. The Other distribution is one topic that we track closely to avoid surprise attacks like what you just saved us from..."

He fished out a rough map from his pocket and wrote some information on it. It looked simple and sparse, but even Jiang Qing'e showed some life in her eyes when she saw it. It would save them a lot of precious time and energy.

Li Luo peered at the map. It corroborated the rough guide that their spirit mirror conveyed, so it was probably pretty accurate.

Huang Lou handed the map to the First Princess. "Thank you, Commander Huang Lou. This is very important information for us." With this, they could plan an efficient route to collect points.

Huang Lou waved it away. "You've saved our village, and this is a small repayment. And if you can really clear out those Others, we'll have many less threats to worry about in the future."

"Oh, yes... if you really can clear out Riverguard City, you could go to Thunderpeal Mountain for a look. It's about 150 kilometers southwest of Riverguard City."

"Why?" Li Luo asked.

"There are Thunderpeal Fruits there... one of the famous produce of the Blackwind Empire. Thunderpeal Mountain used to be owned by royalty only, and commoners were forbidden near it. Thunderpeal Fruits were royal treasures, and they bestow mystical properties when refined. It's said that the most talented of cultivators could even create Thunderpeal Avatars from it, which was the mark of royalty back in the day."

"The Thunderpeal Avatar strengthens one's body tremendously for a short period of time with the electric power that the Thunderpeal Fruit grants. Now that the Blackwind Empire is completely ruined and the royal family no longer exists, Thunderpeal Mountain is sure to be an owner-less land. You three

have the strength to go there. You can definitely give it a crack. An opportunity, perhaps," Huang Lou said respectfully.

Li Luo made a silent note of this.

The three of them chatted a little more and then prepared to set the cleansing measures.

The three worked separately to lay down other safeguards and then used the special method to plant shining drops of cleansing dew at various points around the village.

The droplets formed a faint barrier of light around the village, and the green-gray mist within it started to dissipate.

With the last drop of dew in place, the entire village was now protected.

The relief was immediate, and the villagers cheered gustily. Some of the elders were so moved that they got down on their frail knees and kowtowed to the three. Only after the terrors they had experienced would they know how precious a free and clear environment was.

Li Luo and the others heaved sighs of relief when their work was done.

"Points are in," the First Princess said, checking the spirit mirror. "Let's go."

Their mission was long and difficult. There was no time to linger here.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e nodded, then they cupped fists in farewell to Huang Lou and took their leave.

Li Luo was too slow to keep up, and so the First Princess carried him.

The villagers waved furiously long after they were gone.

In a dim room inside the village, a person lit a joss stick.

The pleasant smell of incense filled the room, and the thin thread of smoke formed a screen.

Within it, figures seemed to be moving.

A whisper of a voice, conveying information.

A moment later, the smoke screen dissipated.

The person who had lit the joss stick folded their arms, and a low voice filled the room.

"The genesis of light and dark are one, good and evil cease as one."

Chapter 0532: Riverguard City

After leaving the village, Li Luo and the squad hastened along their journey to Riverguard City.

The dark sky and gloomy fog depressed their spirits along with the neverending whispers in their ears that spoke to the uneasiness within them.

It was hard not to be tense in such an environment. It started with keeping one's guard up, and then soon it reached a state of constant anxiety. Before you knew it, you would be seeing knives in shadows, reaching a state of hysteria before your mind snapped and you became a walking zombie.

Fortunately, the three of them had trained in the Umbra Cave before. The First Princess was the strongest of them, and her wealth of experience made her a seasoned veteran against corruption. Jiang Qing'e had a ninth-grade light resonance, so corruption evaporated away before her like morning dew in sunrise.

The purification power of light resonant energy was indeed perfect to counter the corruption.

Li Luo was the weakest and most susceptible. Therefore, he had come up with the brilliant suggestion that Jiang Qing'e should hold his hand throughout the trip, to grant him the protection of light resonant energy.

Jiang Qing'e dearly wanted to ignore him, knowing that the rascal had light resonant energy within him in his secondary resonance. Although it was weaker than his water and wood resonances, it was enough to protect him from corruption.

He was suggesting hand-holding for personal reasons.

Still, she went along with it. This was an even more dangerous place than the Umbra Cave, so it was still better to err on the side of caution.

The two clasped hands as they traveled.

The First Princess was a little pained as they traveled.

“These two are really enjoying themselves out here, aren't they?”

The three passed by several more villages, also inhabited. Many of them were old and infirm, eking out a meager and precarious existence and praying that the harsh environment would not crush them.

It was a painful and slow death.

With the miasma of corruption constantly hanging over them and weighing on their minds, even the Resonant Master cultivators would turn irate and aggressive after a long time.

Larger and larger changes to personality would follow, until their reason was completely gone.

At that time, the person would still technically be alive, but they would be no better than a corpse.

Which was why when Li Luo and the others passed, it was like a ray of hope in an ocean of despair.

They were always immeasurably grateful when the cleansing objects were set, providing them reprieve from the corruption. They would no longer need to live in fear that they were all falling prey to corruption.

By the time the group reached the vicinity of Riverguard City, five days had passed.

They had obtained 65,000 points.

On a slope outside Riverguard City.

Li Luo and the squad were hunkered down, observing the large city from a distance.

Of course, it was significantly larger in terms of buildup, and the corruption was proportionately deeper here.

Where there had only been black mist previously, there were black clouds here that hung above the city, darkening the sky at a much higher altitude. Even from the distance that they were at, they could feel the concentration of negative emotions within.

The whispers that ate away at one's sanity and reason, testing one's mental fortitude.

"That's as dark as I've ever seen," Li Luo said seriously.

"There are many signs of Others here. It won't be easy to cleanse this city," the First Princess said.
"Looks like we're in for a tough battle."

Jiang Qing'e looked as calm as ever. She turned to Li Luo. "What's our ranking now?"

Li Luo fished out his spirit mirror and checked. "Fourth. That's not too bad."

"First is... the Enlightened Sage College's Lan Lan's team, at 80,000 points. Hmm, seems like the point difference isn't that big yet. No one's met any tough fights so far."

"It's not surprising." The First Princess shrugged. "But I think the first wave of real tests will arrive any time now."

Li Luo nodded. They had all been cleansing some easy villages so far, where the Other levels were not high. From now on, they were moving one step deeper into the Red Clay Province, and places like Riverguard City would be more common.

More Disaster-class Others would appear as well.

Some of the weaker teams would be stopped here, and the point gap would widen.

"What should we do next?" Li Luo asked, looking at the two stronger girls.

The First Princess smiled at Jiang Qing'e. "Qing'e, what do you think?"

"The situation here is complex," she said neutrally. "We don't even know if the four-limbed demon-eye serpent is the only Heavenly Disaster-class here. I don't think we should rush into things. I suggest we sneak into the city and scout for information. Act when we have a better grasp of the enemy's size and disposition."

The First Princess nodded in agreement. "Wise plan. Information is always king, and will save us from greater problems later."

Li Luo swallowed hard. They really knew how to make tough decisions. There were black clouds blooming like a mining compound, and they were casually discussing a sneak-in as if it were choosing an inn for afternoon tea.

But since the two carries had decided as such, a little flea like him couldn't say much about it. He nodded obediently.

The First Princess pulled out three black talismans from her pocket sphere.

"These are cloaking talismans. When attached to your body, they can hide your presence even from Others," she said, handing them out to Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e.

Li Luo examined the runic markings in wonder. "These are pricey things, Your Highness. Very generous of you."

"I have no choice but to break the bank when two eminent students decide to favor me by letting me join their team," she said teasingly.

The three shared a laugh as they attached the talismans. Immediately after, the resonant power aura around them was dampened significantly. Even though they could be spotted with the naked eye, resonant power-based senses would come up empty.

Preparations ready, the three set off again.

For Li Luo's safety, Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess flanked him, keeping him safe in the middle. They descended the slope together, then moved swiftly and silently along the broken-down road to a breach in the city wall, clearing the rubble and stepping into the corrupted Riverguard City.

Chapter 0533: Farming

The darkness in Riverguard City was immune to the wind, and yet one could almost imagine it as being tangible enough to breathe in. It entered any soul unfortunate enough to be nearby with every breath. It would be absorbed until it coated every inch of the victim's insides, turning them to its side.

The trio walked through broken streets lined with dilapidated buildings. Some were completely smashed, leaving only waist-high walls behind. Li Luo wondered what had destroyed them so thoroughly.

It was hard to imagine that this was once a bustling city, prosperous and lively.

With the power of the cloaking talismans, the three exuded no resonant power signature. They moved like silent wraiths through the city, penetrating deeper in.

Ssss.

They turned the corner to a different street and halted. There was a building before them with red snakes covering the floor, writhing and hissing.

A closer look revealed a lack of scales, which made them look more like red, fleshy worms.

They had no eyes, their mouths were full of sharp teeth.

Others.

They were not of a high level, probably White Eroders at best.

The three paused for a moment but did not kill them. There was a strange sound that rattled the walls coming from the shabby building they had crawled out of.

A few moments later, a strange snake slithered out of the darkness, roughly a dozen meters in length.

This snake creature was also made out of flesh and blood only, lacking scales. It left a trail of rotting red behind it that ate away at the ground.

It had eight legs sticking out of its body, some sort of bizarre cross between a spider and a python. Worst of all was its human head with completely white eyes that was terrifying to look at.

This was a much stronger creature with corruption levels far exceeding its little worms.

The trio watched from a safe distance as the snake creature left the house and moved away.

"That one should be an Earthly Disaster-class," Jiang Qing'e murmured. "Stronger than the two-faced man-wolf we saw the other day, I think."

"That's the third one we've seen since entering the city." Li Luo bit his lip. They had underestimated the number of Others here. Ignoring the Eroding-class Others, which were too numerous to count, there had been three exact copies of that snake so far.

And that was clearly not going to be all of them.

By his rough estimate, there were at least ten of the bastards around the city.

Ten Earth Fiends to take on? They judged these snakes to be at most at the second Fiend Body Tier, thankfully.

There was also the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent to contend with.

"These were probably made by the Heavenly Disaster-class Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent. All the Others we've met in Riverguard City have had a similar form. This is no coincidence," the First Princess pointed out.

Li Luo grimaced. If the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent was making minions and playthings, then it had probably developed quite a respectable amount of sentience.

"There are a lot of Others around. If the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent can control them all, that would be very problematic. There are only three of us. If we're busy dealing with the minions and the boss strikes, we could be in grave danger." Jiang Qing'e looked very concerned.

The First Princess nodded. She was about to speak, but then she suddenly whirled around to look at the west side of the city.

"That corruption!" she hissed.

Jiang Qing'e turned as well. There was some drastic movement in the black fog in that direction, indicating a presence many times stronger than the snake creatures.

"Should be the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent," Jiang Qing'e said softly.

"Should we go take a look?" the First Princess asked.

"We can. With the cloaking talismans, it should not be able to detect us. We need to know what class it is in before we can make a plan," Jiang Qing'e answered.

The two were decisive personalities, and they moved immediately after their discussion.

Li Luo followed closely. This place was freaking dangerous, with Disaster-class Others sprouting up like mushrooms on a farm. A puny little Resonant Master like him was in constant danger.

The three moved through more broken pavement. Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess finally stopped after a tense half an hour. They both looked at a multi-storied inn and the uncommonly wide thoroughfare leading up to it.

The black fog swayed again, and a five-meter tall figure appeared.

It was a white human-snake with four limbs, with a fat snake body slithering lazily along behind it. It was covered in milky white scales. Li Luo looked closer and almost vomited when he realized they were bleached human fingernails, sharpened to triangular points.

Above the snake body was the naked torso of an extremely beautiful woman, her long hair seductively draped over her chest. She had a single red eye that glinted sinisterly. This Other looked like a beautiful lamia... except for the damned fingernails.

Li Luo did not dare to look too long. He was afraid of the red eye, instinctively sure that it would hypnotize him.

The white lamia was probably the strongest Other here in Riverguard City, the same one that had swallowed the city lord.

It moved languidly across the street, but one swing of its tail carried it dozens of meters across the pavement. It made its way over to a large garden.

The trio quickly scaled the tall inn for a better look at the garden, and they were horrified by what they saw.

There were many humans in the garden.

So many live humans?!

The humans were lying down like corpses, although they could detect some faint signs of life in their bodies.

Regardless of gender, the humans' stomachs were horribly distended.

The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent made a leisurely round to inspect them, then it made a strange hissing sound.

Immediately after, the stomach bulges began to stretch and warp, as though something within was stirring and trying to break out. The humans' mouths opened, but no sound came out.

And then their eye sockets burst with sickening pops, oozing with black blood. Two black snakes came out of each human, swallowing the eyes before slithering out of the eyeholes. These meaty, black snakes swam quickly towards the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, who snatched them up and stuffed them into its mouth, chewing with sickening crunching sounds. Fresh, black blood dripped from its mouth, making the demonic face look even more frightful than before.

On the ground, the humans deflated into nothing more than empty skin. It was as though their insides had been completely devoured.

When the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent finished its meal, it shot jets of black light back into the humans. Small worms landed on each body and then quickly burrowed their way back into the defenseless people.

Afterward, it slithered away again.

Li Luo and the others were speechless.

They all looked a little green in the face.

This Other was farming humans as food for its brood!

Chapter 0534: The Plan

"That son of a bitch! Or is it the daughter of a bitch?!" Li Luo swore. Watching the human vessel farming going on before him was gory.

The humans could only lie there numbly as their stomachs were repurposed for another round of farming. They had become desensitized to such horrors after many cycles.

They had lost all hope, all resistance. They simply lay there, resigned to their fates.

"An abomination of a bitch." Li Luo concluded his swearing.

It made his skin crawl.

It was the first time he had seen this level of cruelty and gore from Others.

People being used in factory farming.

Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess were looking a little ill as well. Despite their strong constitutions, this was truly a little too unpalatable. Not even in the Umbra Cave had they seen something of this level.

The First Princess took a deep breath to steady herself. "From what I sense, the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent is indeed a bit stronger than what Commander Huang Lou told us. By my estimation, it is probably a seven-pearl Heavenly Pearl in strength. That's about as strong as I am. I would be able to hold it down, but beating it will not be easy."

"The problem is the army of Disaster-class and below minions that are ready to jump on us." Li Luo frowned. "The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent is no fool—it will call reinforcements to overwhelm us."

The First Princess nodded uncomfortably. There were only three of them. It was not a good situation.

Jiang Qing'e was silent for a moment before she said, "The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent is the key to control the entire city. If we strike, we must strike at the head, swiftly and with deadly force. If we can just take down the head, the rest will not be a problem."

"Strike at the head..." the First Princess repeated doubtfully. "It will require you and me to go all out.

"But if we're dealing with the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, what about the rest of the minions? Without you on crowd control, they'll come for us very quickly." She looked over at Li Luo. "We can't really leave it to this guy," she said jokingly.

Li Luo wanted to feel angry at being dissed, but there was indeed no disrespect in the remark. It was a fact that he couldn't even beat a single snake creature, let alone multiple of them. Unless he pulled out the three-tailed heavenly wolf trump card.

"We might really have to leave it to that guy," Jiang Qing'e said with a small smile.

"Eh?" The First Princess stared at her.

"I have a plan," Jiang Qing'e explained calmly. "Your Highness, you will fight the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent first and hold it fast. I will use World of Light to control the field, trapping the Earthly Disaster-class creatures within. Li Luo will place the cleansing dew and form a barrier that should hold down the Others for a while. When that is done, I will come to you and we will take down the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent together.

"If we can use that window of opportunity to take down the boss, then the rest of the cleanup should go very smoothly. Of course, the difficult part of this plan is that I can only trap the strongest snake creatures within my World of Light. I cannot possibly capture all the Eroding-class Others as well. Li Luo will have to deal with them by himself.

"Also, there is a time limit to how long my trap will last. The snake creatures will gradually shrug free of my World of Light. Before that happens, Li Luo must successfully establish the cleansing barrier, or we will be overwhelmed."

"Sounds like a good plan," the First Princess said with admiration. "Li Luo, can you do it?"

Li Luo turned to Jiang Qing'e indignantly. "Qing'e, she thinks I'm a baby!" he whined.

Jiang Qing'e rolled her eyes at him. "Well, if that's settled, let's give it a try. Li Luo, if you cannot finish the cleansing in time, retreat without hesitation. Her Highness and I will break away and follow."

"We'll give up on it?" Li Luo asked.

"We won't give up," the First Princess answered. "But we would scout for other squads in the surrounding area and work with them to clear this city. We would just have to split the points with them."

Li Luo frowned. If they wanted to win, they could not be running around splitting points. Their plan B would lead them away from championship glory.

"I'll do my best," he vowed.

It looked like the coffee-carrying back scratcher of the squad had an important job after all.

"I believe in you," Jiang Qing'e said simply.

The First Princess' lip twitched. "I believe in you too, Li Luo."

"Don't worry missuses," Li Luo said stoutly. "I will always protect beautiful ladies like yourselves."

"Ah, such a honeyed tongue." The First Princess laughed.

She pulled out a jade-green scepter marked with a golden eye at one end. Gripping it with two hands, she began to gather prodigious power to her.

The jade scepter was a gold-eye treasured artifact, and what looked to be an upper as well.

At the same time, a pale, green battle armor shimmered into view, snug about her voluptuous body. She transformed from an adventuress into a knight in a flash.

"Qing'e, I'm off."

She shot off with an explosion of green energy, propelled by her resonant power.

Straight to where the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent was walking.

The sudden explosion of power got its interest, of course. With a sweep from its powerful tail, it leveled the building standing between them, locking on to the fast-approaching First Princess.

It was not expecting such a strong human to appear in the middle of its territory.

And charging at it.

It could sense that this was a powerful opponent, one not to be underestimated.

Its hiss rent the air, and Riveguard City stirred to life. All forms of Others heeded the call, rushing over to their master.

The snake creatures in particular were the strongest and first to arrive.

"World of Light!

Weng!

The blaze of light spread out around her.

The luminous enclosure sent the darkness scattering, and the entire area around them was purified.

Some of the smaller Others were instantly destroyed.

The Earthly Disaster-class Others were frozen in mid-air, the light holding them firmly in place.

Jiang Qing'e stood on top of a weathered building, her sword held erect as her eyes darted out across the landscape. Once she ascertained that all of the snake creatures had been caught, she gave Li Luo a look.

His stomach lurched with nervousness, but he sucked it up and carried on, sprinting out of the inn and onwards to his goal.

Up next, the Li Luo part of things.

Chapter 0535: Black Knight

Li Luo sped across the expanse of the city like a streak of lightning.

Behind him, the place rocked with gigantic exchanges of energy, and he could feel the prickle on the back of his neck.

The First Princess against the four-limbed demon-eye serpent.

From the intensity, it seemed like the pair were evenly matched. The First Princess could not defeat her opponent in a short time, and Others were generally strong in survival. It was hard to say who had the advantage in a long battle.

To close things, Jiang Qing'e would have to go help the First Princess.

But whether she was free to help would depend on him...

Li Luo poured on the speed, occasionally passing Earthly Disaster-class snake creatures that were caught up in rings of light.

Nearer to Jiang Qing'e, the World of Light had wiped out the lower level Others, making his journey smooth as could be.

He reached the first designated spot in no time.

Taking out a drop of cleansing dew, he charged it with his resonant power and placed it at the top of a building.

Job done, he moved on to the next location without even looking back.

He had to make full use of the time that the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e were buying him.

In the next 10 minutes, Li Luo ran to various points to place drops of cleansing dew.

The city began to light up at many points, and the barrier was close to forming.

But the further he got from Jiang Qing'e's location, the weaker the effect of World of Light. Soon, he began to encounter Eroding-class Others that slowed down his progress.

Sometimes he would dodge them, but at other times he was forced to stop and take care of business first.

Luckily, he was much stronger now. As a Third Changing, he did not fear Eroding-class Others at all. His Onyx-Elephant Blade made quick work of them, and he charged on.

More and more cleansing dew drops were placed.

The city grew ever brighter, and he could see success on the horizon.

"Three more..." he thought to himself. Three more, and the cleansing barrier would be complete.

Things were going smoothly.

But Li Luo did not let his guard down, instead becoming even more cautious. He had no interest in screwing things up now.

Another efficient slaughter through the Other masses.

Two more cleansing dew drops were placed.

The last one now.

Li Luo was headed for a stone tower that was his final stop. This was already at the edge of World of Light, but thankfully, there were no snake creatures around.

Li Luo proceeded with caution and reached the stone tower soon enough. He held a drop of cleansing dew on his palm, activating it. He prepared to fire it out at the position.

But of course, something just had to happen before he completed his task.

Boom!

A powerful presence burst out of a shop window on Li Luo's right, heating the air around him with an explosion.

Behind it, the shop itself crumbled, imploding from the vacuum of energy within.

A deadly and sudden attack.

Li Luo had just been about to place the final drop of cleansing dew.

Even as cautious as he was, still he had let his guard down a little.

But not completely.

Li Luo reacted quickly, abandoning the cleansing dew to pull out an eight-sided shield.

His white-eye treasured artifact.

Boom!

Even a defensive white-eye treasured artifact only blocked the attack for a few moments before it was completely wrecked beyond repair.

Still, it had bought Li Luo some time.

He moved backwards, channeling his resonant power through the Onyx-Elephant Blade.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Thousand Watery Knives art!"

The powerful blades of water and light flashed out.

Bang!

It was one of his stronger moves, and yet the rain of blades were completely vaporized by the attack, winking out into points of light.

Li Luo had already made it out of the area of attack at this point, and before him was a deep ditch, the mark of the attack.

Li Luo stared at the shop before him, which had completely crumpled inwards like a paper house. This was power beyond a Resonant Master, nor did the power seem to have come from an Other...

"Who are you? Why are you attacking me?" Li Luo called out hoarsely.

A pile of earth was moved away from the collapsed shop, and a figure clad in black battle armor stood up. He could see a pair of cold eyes gleaming out from under the visor.

Not an Other!

A jolt of shock ran through him. There were other humans in Riverguard City?

And this person was clearly human. Why would he stop Li Luo from cleansing the area?

"Friend, our job here is to cleanse the Others. What good can come from stopping us?" Li Luo called out clearly. This black knight was incredibly strong, probably an Earth Fiend. Li Luo could not win here.

Which frustrated him. He was on the verge of success. Was this black knight going to ruin everything?

The knight showed no indication of having even heard Li Luo's question. He drew a heavy, black lance and stepped forward. With an earth-shattering thump, he charged forward, lance leveled as though he were part of a cavalry charge.

He thundered through the street at Li Luo with such ferocious power that he shattered the windows of the shops on both sides.

Frightfully strong.

Li Luo's mind raced. The black knight had laid in ambush for some time now, choosing a perfect location just outside of Jiang Qing'e's World of Light so she would detect nothing.

His mission: to stop the cleansing barrier from being erected.

Why? Wasn't eliminating Others the common goal of all humankind?

Did this person not share that goal?

Li Luo's eyes narrowed.

Just as the Academic Federation elder had said... perhaps the Blackwind Empire's Other Disaster was man-made.

Was this one of those unknown enemies?

Chapter 0536: So Strong

Li Luo watched in fear as the black knight continued to charge him, building up energy that tore down both sides of the street.

The one-man rampage had Li Luo's eyelid twitching in nervousness.

A true General Stage, Earth Fiend expert.

The difference between them was insurmountable.

Li Luo gripped the Onyx-Elephant Blade in both hands, yelling as he stepped forward and sliced down.

Boom!

His resonant power sent an arc of powerful water slicing out towards his enemy.

It was as effective as a praying mantis' claws against the wheels of a wagon. There was a glint of mirth in the black knight's eyes as he prepared to charge through the Resonant Master Stage attack.

If not for his fear of the light resonance girl, he would have squashed Li Luo much earlier already, without waiting for this final moment.

It did not matter. Once this kid was finished off, the entire plan would crumble. When the other snake creatures awakened, the two girls were doomed.

His lance crashed into Li Luo's attack like skewering a firefly. He barely slowed in his advance.

“A mere Resonant Master...”

But suddenly, the water attack exploded like a firework before his eyes, causing him to stagger. Then light balls flew straight into his eyes, blinding him.

It hurt like hell.

Such strong light attacks were unexpected. The kid was canny, and the black knight felt a surge of anger at being outsmarted. But what did it matter?

As a veteran of fighting, the black knight did not slow his charge, pressing on despite his impaired vision.

He just had to connect, and the boy would be smashed into pieces. It would be over for him.

At the same time, the black knight began to use his resonant power to recover his sight.

By the time he could see again, the youth's weathered sword had been replaced by a silver bow. The bow was drawn back, locked on to him.

Swoosh!

An arrow flew out and split into five different projectiles in mid-air. They hissed out to him like striking snakes.

“This kid might not have much strength, but he sure has a lot of parlor tricks.”

The black knight frowned. After being hit by Li Luo's light bullets, he was a little more cautious. He jabbed with his lance, summoning several black balls of energy that smashed the arrows mid-flight before they could reach him. In a flash, he smashed all four that were on track to him.

There was one that he ignored, because it was clearly going wide, passing harmlessly a few meters to his side.

The black knight saw the corner of the youth's mouth twitch.

He whirled around in a rage.

The tip of that arrow had a drop of cleansing dew on it, and it was flying straight for the top of the tower. It had all been a distraction!

But how had he not spotted the drop of cleansing dew on it before?!

No, he had looked carefully, but his opponent must have used some sort of concealing trick on it. A low level resonance art, but enough to fool him for a glance.

The light arrow had moved with great speed, and he was too slow to intercept it. It buried itself in the wall.

Weng!

When the last cleansing dew drop landed in place, the entire city brightened up immediately. Lines of light shot up to the sky, joining up to form a barrier.

A powerful cleansing force exploded all across the city like a lantern coming to life.

The black knight roared with fury at having been bested by a puny Resonant Master.

He had actually completed the cleansing right under his very nose!

Killing intent overtaking him, he whirled on Li Luo with his lance, bellowing in anger like an awakened dragon. His shout echoed all across the city.

He was closing in on Li Luo now, deadly intent unmistakable. At this speed, there was no way to avoid it. Li Luo calmly lifted up his hand, moving his other hand to the red bracelet.

Just as he was about to activate the three-tailed heavenly wolf's power, he spotted a familiar figure in the distance.

He went limp with relief.

Weng!

The lance issued a black dragon's roar, but it was still a few meters away from Li Luo when a barrier of light shimmered into existence between them, blocking the lance. It could not penetrate the wall.

The wielder of that light barrier was incredibly strong.

The black knight's eyes widened. "The light resonance girl."

"She is here!"

The black knight scrambled away, fleeing over the rubble. The plan had failed. It was time to get out.

"Flee?"

The familiar figure bore down on the black knight with cold fury in her golden eyes.

She had already sensed something very wrong the moment Li Luo began fighting, but she could not leave her position. She had been torn with indecision when the cleansing ward had kicked into effect.

She had gone to him immediately.

Jiang Qing'e reached out to grasp the lance buried in her light barrier. With a blast of power, she imbued it with light resonant energy, turning it from black to white.

"Take this with you!"

Jiang Qing'e hurled it like a javelin, and it shot out like a torpedo but stronger, because it was punching through buildings with ease.

The fleeing figure turned back desperately, but the power of the white lance could not be denied.

Boom!

An epic explosion.

The black knight was skewered by the lance, nailing him to a stone wall that collapsed from the impact. He was buried underneath the collapsing rocks.

"So strong!" The black knight thought to himself as the giant rocks buried him.

Chapter 0537: Girl Power

The pile of rocks over the black knight looked satisfactorily like a grave mound.

Li Luo puffed air to his cheeks and then out. That attack from Jiang Qing'e had been godly. The Fiend Palace Tier black knight had been completely wrecked.

Her resonant power faded away, and she turned to him in concern. "Are you alright?"

Li Luo smiled and nodded. "I was almost not alright. Damn, that guy was dangerous. He was waiting to ambush me here."

Luckily, he had not panicked.

"We were careless. We didn't check to see if there were other humans in the city," she said.

"You did very well. You actually managed to get the cleansing barrier up while fighting against a Fiend Palace Tier expert," she said approvingly. She had watched the later half of the battle as she approached. Li Luo had played it to perfection.

He had not tried to escape, but faced the problem head on, playing on his opponent's thought process perfectly to get the last drop of cleansing dew in place.

Li Luo smiled in gratitude, then he looked over at the rubble heap. "I'm more worried about who this guy worked for. Why would he try to stop me?"

Jiang Qing'e nodded as well. A concerning point.

She gestured with a hand, using light resonant energy to lift the rocks away. Both of them inhaled sharply.

Underneath was the crushed suit of black armor, but the man wearing it was completely gone.

"Like a cicada molting," Li Luo said.

Jiang Qing'e lifted up the armor with the tip of her sword and examined it. There were strange, sinister runes on it.

"He's gone. These indicate a powerful escape resonance art was imbued in them. He must have gotten away the instant before the rubble crushed him. But he couldn't have gotten far," she said, looking alertly around.

"Forget it," Li Luo said, putting a cautionary hand on her shoulder. "We don't have time to waste hunting him down. The mission calls." The most important thing here was still the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent.

Jiang Qing'e nodded reluctantly. She knew he was right. The cleansing barrier would only hold the Others for a limited time. They had to get rid of the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent as quickly as possible before the minions were mobile again.

As for the black knight, he might have escaped, but he was likely seriously wounded from his own spear that Jiang Qing'e had skewered him with. Hopefully, they had scared him enough that he would think twice before showing up again.

Perhaps he would make an attempt to break the cleansing barrier after they had moved on, but there was no need to worry about it. They would be underestimating the Academic Federation if they thought it would be so easily broken.

"I'm going to help the First Princess. Take care of yourself." Jiang Qing'e shot off like a streak of light across the sky without a backward glance.

Li Luo scaled the tall tower while keeping a watchful eye on his surroundings. He wanted to watch the fight too.

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e together? A rare combination.

They were probably the two most outstanding female students of the Astral Sage College presently.

With Jiang Qing'e entering the fray, the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent felt the odds turn against its favor, and it hissed desperately, the single demonic eye darting around in fear.

"Qing'e, you're here!" the First Princess cried out.

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "I'll help you to hold it down, Your Highness, but you'll have to do the bulk of the work."

The First Princess' face lit up with joy. "You're truly something special."

Jiang Qing'e was only an Earth Fiend, and theoretically much weaker than both the First Princess and the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, yet she was strong enough to hinder their opponent. If she hadn't known Jiang Qing'e before this, she would have thought she was boasting.

Jiang Qing'e just smiled, putting her hands together to form a seal.

"World of Light!"

This time, the skill prioritized strength over coverage. The resultant field was small and rapidly shrinking.

In a few moments, it shrunk from hundreds of meters to tens of meters.

From afar, it looked like a halo of light descending from above.

And at the center of the ring was the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent.

Light resonant energy continued to gather within the circumference, so dense that it almost seemed to form liquid light that rained down inside.

Caught in the field, the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent screamed in anger and pain. The drops of light burned it like boiling oil, and the corrupted air began to evaporate.

"What a powerful World of Light," Li Luo marveled from his spot.

World of Light was a middle grade dragon-general resonance art, but it could well be mistaken for a high-grade one.

Li Luo remembered that his parents had gone to great lengths and cost to find this for Qing'e. Dragon-general resonance arts were not cheap, especially such high-quality ones.

Jiang Qing'e had worked relentlessly to perfect it, and now she had it at an extremely high level of mastery.

Augmented by her ninth-grade light spirit avatar, the strength was truly awe-inspiring.

That was why a mere Fiend Finisher Tier cultivator like her could pose a serious threat to the Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, along with the added bonus that light resonant energy had against their enemies.

It was not just Li Luo who was admiring her feat—the First Princess' phoenix eyes were glowing as well. Jiang Qing'e's suppression was even more effective than she had imagined, and her admiration for Jiang Qing'e only grew further after witnessing her in action.

"Thanks, Qing'e. Leave the rest to me," the First Princess said confidently. She was the equal of the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent, and now that it was severely weakened, it would be an easy win for her.

Her jade scepter summoned seven heavenly pearls behind her, worldly resonant energy flowing into them and shifting into robust resonant power that flooded into her body.

The concentration of energy was enough to rattle all of Riverguard City.

After seeing Jiang Qing'e's performance, the First Princess was motivated to go all out as well.

She formed a seal with one hand and brandished the jade scepter with the other. Using it as though it were a brush, she drew inscriptions in the air.

Resonant power was poured into the drawing.

With each stroke, the sky filled with a little more green light, until two green-colored light scaled-dragons swam in the air before her.

The low roar of dragons rang out.

And following that, the First Princess' clear voice.

"High-grade dragon-general resonance art, Green Scaled-Dragon Scissor."

The scaled-dragons shot forward, smashing into the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent from each side.

Chapter 0538: Beauties and the Beast

Weng!

The colossal, green scaled-dragons flew out like a pair of scaled boomerangs, slicing the buildings in their wake clean in two.

At the meeting point of their trajectories was the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent.

Although it had sensed the danger, it was helpless before the nemesis to its red, corruptive power.

Jiang Qing'e's World of Light was the perfect counter that leached away at its energy, eating away a huge part of its foul, red energy even as it tried to marshal its defenses.

The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent's single red eye widened in fear as its energy seemed to slip out of its hands like running water.

The green scaled-dragons were coming.

The light from its red eye split into two different portions, each facing one dragon.

The red energy shot out as a weak defense, aimed at mitigating the green scaled-dragon attack.

At the final moment, the Other even managed to twist away so the attack failed to behead it as planned.

It merely sliced across the right side of the Other's body.

Swish!

With a sickening sound, the lower right half of the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent was sliced off cleanly. Two limbs landed on the floor with a squishy flop, leaking black blood into the ground.

Its demonic face twisted in pain.

The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent's snake tail began to thrash wildly, shaking the buildings around it. Its eye had gone mad with pain, anger, and fear, and the black liquid on its body suddenly began to burn with a new evil energy.

Its body began to bloat, swelling up with new power.

The students could sense its aura climbing and climbing.

"Watch out, Qing'e!" the First Princess cried. "It's fighting with everything it has now!"

At the same time, she prepared another two scaled-dragons, sending them scything out towards their enemy.

This time, it was not as effective. One of the serpent's limbs began to twist and warp, creating a new layer of hardened flesh-armor that was much tougher than before.

Shing!

When the green light connected, it left a gash deep enough to see bone beneath, but it was not strong enough to cut through completely.

Evidently, the evil energy that it had just burned had made it much stronger.

It turned its singular berserk eye on them. With a quick twist of its body and a flash of red light, it was in front of the First Princess in a trice.

She was ready, lifting her jade scepter and calling forth powerful storms and a green shield to harry her opponent.

Pssh!

The two clashed in a titanic struggle of energies, their attacks rising to the skies.

The First Princess was sent flying back a few hundred meters, her green feather shield shattered. Some of the evil, red energy spilled over to her body, but it was stopped by her green battle armor, which corroded slightly.

"How vile!"

The First Princess was surprised by how strong the serpent's final struggle was.

Still, she understood that the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent could not keep this up forever. All they had to do was hold out and sustain. Once the energy was burnt away, their foe would crumble of its own accord.

"Qing'e..."

Just as she was about to convey this strategy to Jiang Qing'e, the younger girl stepped up, pressing both hands together in a seal. Pure light resonant energy rose up and turned into five nails of light that burned with fire.

Middle grade dragon-general resonance art, Demonbane Nails.

When this resonance art was perfectly mastered, one could produce seven nails that would severely handicap the victim's resonant power when they all landed.

This and World of Light were Jiang Qing'e's best dragon-general resonance arts.

One defensive, one offensive. A perfect duo.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

Five nails embedded themselves deep in the tail of the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent.

Their bright flames caused the serpent to thrash reflexively, but its tail was pinned firmly to the ground, causing its upper body to overbalance. It flailed and went down in a writhing heap.

"Qing'e, you..."

The First Princess was stunned speechless. Jiang Qing'e really fought with a battle style like no other.

She was only a Fiend Finisher Tier cultivator, but she showed no fear even against a Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class Other. In fact, she was fighting even more aggressively than the First Princess herself.

Of course, this was enabled by the fact that the Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent was mostly focusing on the stronger girl, but Jiang Qing'e was truly punishing it for this target prioritization.

Of course, light resonances were especially effective against Others, especially a super rare ninth-grade one.

The First Princess understood that Jiang Qing'e wanted to end things quickly, worried that they were taking too long and the snake creatures would be free soon... and when that happened, their dear little boy spectator perched on his tower would be in danger.

"What a guardian," she thought to herself, then she blasted out with her seven heavenly pearls again. This time, she reinforced the green scaled-dragon attack with an additional edge of razor-sharp scales to make it even stronger than before.

She sent it arcing out with a flick of her hand, and this time, the buildings that she had cut through had their upper floors completely destroyed.

Total destruction.

The Four-limbed Demon-eye Serpent writhed desperately, but the green power sliced through its neck clean and true this time. Its head landed on the ground, body still spasming.

Splat.

The head fell with a limp thud, oozing out black blood.

Its body began to steam, then it split apart, revealing a horde of little, black snakes that wriggled away.

"Qing'e! All of them! They can't be allowed to escape, or it can reform!" the First Princess yelled urgently.

Jiang Qing'e nodded, then she used World of Light again. This time it was executed at its normal scope and power, and again all the corruption within its influence was wiped out.

Soon, the ground was fresh and clean again, with not a single snake to be seen.

And with that, the terror that had taken over Riverguard City was finally overthrown.

The First Princess heaved a sigh of relief, then a slow smile of triumph spread over his face.

At this time, the spectator, Li Luo, approached cautiously, giving his two squadmates a big thumbs up. "Tough fight, epic fight. If I could draw, I'd make a Beauties and the Beast drawing as commemoration, or something."

The First Princess sat down on a broken stone column. "Cheeky fellow."

Jiang Qing'e smiled at him. "Any changes to the points?"

Li Luo pulled out the spirit mirror and grinned when he saw the results.

"Thanks to you two... we're temporarily in first place."

Chapter 0539: Number One in Points

We got 50,000 points for successfully cleansing Riverguard City, and then another 40,000 because this is a compulsory task. The lesser Heavenly Disaster-class also gave us 50,000, so including what we had previously, our total is roughly 200,000."

Li Luo was grinning from ear to ear as he danced a little jig with the spirit mirror. They had shot up like a rocket, and even the Enlightened Sage College's Lan Lan squad had been left far behind in the dust.

"That means we're the first squad to complete the primary mission from the Academic Federation," Jiang Qing'e noted.

Li Luo nodded. The primary missions were the difficult ones. When other squads cleared them, it was likely that they would meet Others of similar difficulty too, and also be awarded the additional boost that would even out the score.

"Sooner rather than later, I'd think," the First Princess said. "Lesser Heavenly Disaster-classes won't stop someone like Lan Lan. They might just be a bit slower than we are to clear it."

Li Luo agreed. Lan Lan was insanely strong, and his squad was made up of elites as well. They could not underestimate him.

"That's right," Jiang Qing'e suddenly said. "When Li Luo was setting the cleansing barrier just now, he was ambushed by a black knight, roughly Earth Fiend in strength."

"Black knight?" the First Princess asked, startled. "Not an Other?"

"Not an Other." Li Luo shook his head firmly. "Flesh and blood."

The First Princess looked grave. "Seems like Elder Ling Yu's warning was not just blind speculation after all. Maybe someone was behind the fall of the Blackwind Empire."

There was no other reason why the black knight would come to stop Li Luo otherwise.

"But you actually managed to get the cleansing barrier up while being attacked by an Earth Fiend expert? That's impressive," the First Princess stated with a small shiver. If the assailant had managed to stop Li Luo, the cleansing barrier would not have gone up, and today would not have ended with the happy ending that it had.

They might not have been killed, but they would probably have failed the mission.

It was thanks to Li Luo that they had succeeded.

The First Princess' regard for Li Luo increased yet again.

The black knight must have ambushed Li Luo specifically, and yet he had overcome both the surprise factor and the power difference to pull off the cleansing barrier. He was definitely no ordinary Resonant Master.

"Just carelessness on the opponent's part," Li Luo said with a modest shrug when she complimented him.

The First Princess smiled to herself. Mere carelessness was not enough to make him overcome an Earth Fiend. Li Luo was really something else. Although he was only a Resonant Master, he always seemed to have more up his sleeve.

"I tried to check the city just now. No sign of the black knight," Jiang Qing'e said.

"Probably escaped. He's only an Earth Fiend, so he wouldn't dare to face us, especially not when the four-limbed demon-eye serpent has already been eliminated," the First Princess said, unsurprised.

Jiang Qing'e nodded, then turned back to the city. "The snake creatures are awakening."

The cleansing barrier would not hold them forever. The Earthly Disaster-class Others would soon be attacking as well. Still, they were not much of a problem with their leader taken out.

"Let's clean this place up. A few extra points wouldn't hurt," the First Princess said.

"Mm. Her Highness and I will take care of the snake creatures. Li Luo, you're in charge of the Eroding-class Others. Don't stray too far from us, in case of ambushes."

Li Luo nodded. It was a little embarrassing to always be protected, but embarrassment was better than death, with that black knight lurking about somewhere.

The three divided up their zones and began to clean the city.

Without the four-limbed demon-eye serpent spreading corruption, and the cleansing barrier exerting a weakening influence on their enemies, they had the entire city purged thoroughly in just half a day.

The corruptive mist faded away and the air became clean and bright again.

The setting sun hung low in the sky, a lantern of pink held against the creeping navy of night.

After clearing their task, the three sat down for a casual meal.

"Another 60,000 points," Li Luo reported cheerfully.

The Earthly Disaster-class Others had been quite numerous, helping them earn a tidy sum.

"Lan Lan and the others are catching up," Jiang Qing'e said, glancing over. The other team had reached about 230,000 points, only 30,000 points behind them.

At the same time, they saw Gong Shenjun's group in fourth place as well.

"That makes five squads with 200,000 points or more," the First Princess said. "They must all have cleared their primary objectives."

Li Luo agreed. Only those could boost the point score so much. Of course, the strongest teams would be the ones to clear them quickly and pull ahead.

Still, there were only five squads who had done it. This was a lot fewer than Li Luo had expected.

Then again, his squad had both Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess. The two girls had taken down the four-limbed demon-eye serpent very quickly. Not many other squads had that same level of power. They might well be the strongest duo in the whole mixed-level competition.

As for him... an accompaniment here to make music.

"With the Riverguard City mission cleared, we're much more free in route choice now. Any suggestions?" the First Princess asked, poking the spirit mirror to light it up again.

Li Luo shook his head.

Jiang Qing'e pinched a tiny piece of her bun off with her fingers, then popped it into her mouth and munched thoughtfully. "I thought we could go to Thunderpeal Mountain. It's probably a key area of the Red Clay Province, and I'm quite curious about those thunderpeal fruits too."

"Thunderpeal Mountain, eh? It's quite close to Riverguard City, and since we heard that the Thunderpeal Avatar is royalty-exclusive, this is quite a rare chance for us to experience it. I agree," the First Princess said. "Let's not pass up on this chance."

"Wow, the royalty really know how to take all the goodies for themselves, huh?" Li Luo said, joining in the conversation.

The First Princess coughed primly. "Dearest Junior Li Luo, it seems like you have some sort of resentment against royalty?"

Li Luo's smile froze on his face. "I meant it regarding the Blackwind Empire, your most esteemed highness. Everyone knows that you love the citizens like your own children. All of the Xia Kingdom adores you. They would get down on all fours and gallop around if you wished for a horse, Your Highness."

She laughed, mollified.

"If there are no objections, let's go to Thunderpeal Mountain next, then."

Jiang Qing'e looked at her half-eaten bun, then patted her still-flat stomach. Without warning, she crammed the remaining half in Li Luo's mouth, and he swallowed it sullenly. She got up and then her eyes turned serious.

"But before we leave, we should free those people in the garden."

The First Princess and Li Luo sobered up as well, nodding silently.

They could not run away from this task.

Chapter 0540: Emergency Mission

In a large garden within Riverguard City.

Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and the First Princess stood on a high wall, looking down at the mass of human bodies laid out before them. As the corruption level within the city dwindled, these people began to get some semblance of reason back.

But after regaining their minds, they were not celebrating. Rather, they were crying hard.

They were extremely exhausted, but they could not stop the wails, the wracking sobs that shook their bodies.

For the longest time, they had been subjected to the most ghastly of horrors and the most excruciating of tortures.

They had watched their own kin and even children infested with blood snakes, for the four-limbed demon-eye serpent to eat. Their insides had been liquified and their eyeballs eaten out, ending up as nothing more than bags of human skin. That memory would forever be seared into their minds.

They might be physically safe now, but nothing could rescue them from the prison of despair that had a mental hold on them.

There was not much consolation that Li Luo and the others could give them. Some wounds simply needed time to heal.

"The Others are really our greatest enemy, aren't they?" Li Luo asked sadly.

This was the cruelest sight that he had seen to date. Although the Others in the Umbra Cave were evil, they had not been allowed to prey on vulnerable humans. Cruelty was darkest against the weak.

No wonder so many Kings and Dukes had to be chosen via lottery to go to the Nobles' Battlefield.

They had to stop the Others from coming to their world.

It was a noble duty to protect the entire human race. Or perhaps some of them were just doing it for their families.

All who went to that place of horrors deserved respect.

The First Princess was not as affected as the two of them. As the first princess of the Xia Kingdom, she was privy to more, and might have been mentally prepared for such horrors.

"When the cleansing points in Red Clay Province are all established, the surrounding nations might come to reestablish order. Things will be better then," the First Princess said comfortingly to Li Luo.

"Yeah. Okay. Let's go." Li Luo nodded. He had to shake off the melancholy quickly so he could remain in peak fighting form.

Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess took one final look at the hellish garden, then turned and followed their youngest member.

The three left Riverguard City, following their map in the direction of Thunderpeal Mountain and making good haste along the way.

Thunderpeal Mountain was a few hundred kilometers away from Riverguard City, which would usually take them two to four hours to cover. But in the Red Clay Province, the corruption and infestation of Others forced them to proceed cautiously. They did not come across any more Heavenly Disaster-class Others like the four-limbed demon-eye serpent, but the sheer number of enemies slowed them down significantly.

By the time they reached the vicinity of Thunderpeal Mountain, it was already the next day.

They stood on a slope where they could get an unhindered view of the mountain.

Casting their eyes out, they were excited by the prospect of adventure in a new terrain, their youthful optimism asserting itself.

They could see their destination through a V-shaped gap in the mountain range, rising up far higher than its peers. The clouds at its peak crackled with lightning and rumbled with thunder.

Near that peak was a massive tree, completely silver in color. It was far from them, and yet they could see that its crown had expanded out enough to cover much of the peak itself.

Lightning bolts from the clouds cracked down on the leaves and were absorbed by the tree.

It was a magnificent sight.

"That's the Thunderpeal Tree? It'd give our school's Tree of Resonant Power a good run for its money," Li Luo marveled.

"No wonder the Blackwind Empire royalty kept it for themselves," the First Princess said, mouth open in wonder as well. "What a treasure."

Jiang Qing'e was just about to speak, but she suddenly stopped, pulling out her spirit mirror. "Seems like we just received an emergency mission?"

Li Luo and the First Princess checked their spirit mirrors and confirmed what she had said.

"Seems like a squad got lost around here... 50,000 points as reward," Li Luo read aloud. "Since we only got the mission when we arrived here, it's probably region-locked."

"A missing team, huh..." the First Princess said doubtfully. "All of us have spirit mirrors, and if there is any fatal danger, squads can just smash the mirror and escape. Why would a team disappear?"

Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo looked at each other, then shook their heads.

"Looks like Thunderpeal Mountain could be more dangerous than we thought," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo looked up at the mountain range again. The natural thunder and energies here were dense, so much so that the corruption was barely able to enter this area. It was easy to be lulled into a false sense of security.

This mountain range was not as clean as it looked.

"In any case, let's go over and take a look," the First Princess said.

She was confident in her strength, so she was not too afraid.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e nodded. They had come all the way here already, so they might as well poke around. And there was nowhere really safe in the Red Clay Province anyway.

At most, they would meet a strong enemy and fight it.

As long as they did not meet a Greater Heavenly Disaster-class, they should be able to face anything.

Their next course of action decided, they moved out again.

Just as they were about to enter the mountain itself, both the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e suddenly stopped and turned to the right.

"Someone's here."

"Should be other squads."

"So we're not the only ones to get the emergency mission." Li Luo nodded.

He looked up to the right, and sure enough, he spotted a group coming towards them.

Six people, two squads.

Li Luo squinted and then his eyes widened in surprise. A familiar figure.

"Lu Ming?"