

Resonance 541

Chapter 0541: Qin Yue, Zhao Beili

The two squads landed swiftly in front of Li Luo's squad.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the point leading squad. What an honor," laughed a handsome youth. He had a long spear in hand and was paying special attention to the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e.

Li Luo checked the school badge on his chest.

North Sea Sage College.

The white clothing and well-dressed bearing of the silent student beside him caught his eye. Li Luo realized that it had to be Ao Bai, the winner of the Two Star Hall's strongest student title.

As though sensing Li Luo's stare, Ao Bai turned his head slightly towards him and nodded in acknowledgment.

"Why, if it isn't Qin Yue from the North Sea Sage College." The First Princess smiled at the handsome youth who had spoken.

Qin Yue was the best of the North Sea Sage College's Four Star Hall. The First Princess had met him in the hall-level competition previously. He was roughly a five-pearl Heavenly Pearl cultivator. He was weaker than her, but still very strong in his own right.

"And this must be the Heavenly Inferno Sage College's Zhao Beili?"

The First Princess looked over at Lu Ming's squad, headed by a gaunt youth.

Zhao Beili was slightly more effeminate, but handsome in his own way. He had a slender longsword strapped to his waist, and his long hair was neatly parted behind him. He was the Heavenly Inferno Sage College's strongest Four Star Hall student, and about Qin Yue's equal.

He cupped his fists towards the First Princess in respect. "Greetings, Your Highness. I saw you in the hall-level competition from afar. I was lucky not to meet you then, or I would have been left with my face in the dust."

Both Qin Yue and Zhao Beili were very polite towards the First Princess purely because of her strength. Her status as royalty held no sway outside of the Xia Kingdom.

The First Princess had not won the strongest student title, nor was she even considered the strongest Four Star Hall student from the Astral Sage College. Even so, there were not many who could beat her.

"Brother Zhao is too humble," the First Princess said with a gracious smile.

"It seems like both of your squads were notified of the emergency mission as well?" she enquired of them.

Both Qin Yue and Zhao Beili nodded. "We were coming for the Thunderpeal Mountain objective, then this emergency mission popped up. Not sure why a squad disappeared."

"Keke, since we're all here for the same reason, won't you join forces with us, Your Highness? Safety in numbers," they both said openly.

The First Princess did not immediately answer, but turned to Jiang Qing'e. Jiang Qing'e turned to Li Luo.

Li Luo didn't know where to turn. He started to sweat. What was a scrub like him supposed to do?

But since the plump swan was giving him such an honor, Li Luo had to step up to it. "There's no requirement to finish the mission alone," he said affably. "Many hands make light work."

The First Princess turned to Qin Yue and Zhao Beili. "Then it would be our pleasure to work with you gentlemen."

Qin Yue and Zhao Beili nodded and smiled, but now they looked at Li Luo differently. Of course they had heard of the strongest One Star Hall student Li Luo, but this was the mixed-level competition... One Star Hall students were usually here as helpful, little fleas, and Li Luo was going to be no exception even as the strongest of the fleas.

It made sense that the First Princess would check with Jiang Qing'e. Even Heavenly Pearl stage cultivators like them would not dare take her lightly. Her strength would be a huge asset.

But Li Luo... was still far from useful. Why would they all look to Li Luo for the final decision? It was vexing.

Their conclusion was that the First Princess was being polite to Jiang Qing'e, and rumor was that Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo... had a special connection. Could it be real?

Still, they let none of this confusion show on their faces. They simply nodded and carried on as if it was the most normal thing in the world that the point leading squad was being led by a One Star Hall mouse. They introduced their squad members around and made some icebreaker conversation.

Li Luo watched on quietly as the squads conferred. He could sense that the North Sea Sage College's Qin Yue had some sort of special interest in the First Princess. That was not surprising. She was beautiful, but not a delicate ornament to be left in the display case. When the situation called for it, she could roll up her sleeves and wade in with the rest of the Four Star Hall elites. There was definitely much for Qin Yue to appreciate there.

While the three squad leaders conferred, Li Luo strolled up to the girl who was glancing at him once in a while. "We meet again. And this time on the same side."

Lu Ming folded her arms, drawing her clothes even tighter around her beautiful figure. "I still can't believe you actually beat Jing Taixu. I thought he would make mincemeat out of you."

"It's because I didn't have to spend too much energy fighting you," Li Luo answered seriously.

Lu Ming glared at him. Was he trying to say that she was a pushover? Easily passed?

"Hmph, if not for your poison tricks, I would have had you then," she sniffed.

Li Luo chuckled and stopped teasing her. "Well, if we meet a strong enemy later, think of how we can cooperate, huh?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "As if we One Star Hall students could contribute anything. We're just here as a formality. Or did you think you were going to be the star of the show again?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that..."

Lu Ming was glancing over at Jiang Qing'e occasionally as well, and she finally lowered her voice. "Hey, Li Luo. Is Senior Jiang really your fiancée?"

"So you're one of the gossipy ones too," Li Luo said irritably. He had thought the cold and aloof Lu Ming would be beyond that.

Lu Ming flushed a little. "Anyone would be interested in such news!" she blurted. "She's the most outstanding girl here at the Holy Grail Meet, and all of us are proud of what she's done for female students. To think that you and her..."

"How did you get so lucky with her anyway?" she demanded.

"Lucky? Inevitable, I'd say." Li Luo shrugged. "Beautiful girl, handsome man, how could we not be together?"

Lu Ming almost gagged at how brazen he was, then she settled for a derisive cluck of the tongue.

"What are you guys chatting about?" a cheerful voice asked. It was the Heavenly Inferno Sage College's squad leader, Zhao Beili. "I thought Junior Lu Ming would be a little sore after the hall-level competition and refuse to work with Junior Li Luo, but it seems like you guys are really getting along here."

"I wouldn't be so petty, Senior Zhao," Lu Ming said stiffly. "Both wins and losses are normal in competitions."

"Indeed," Zhao Beili agreed amiably. "Anyway, this foray won't be easy. Junior Lu Ming, please be careful. Of course, I'll be protecting you."

Li Luo understood now that Zhao Beili was interested in her. No wonder he would inject himself into the conversation when they seemed chummy.

But seeing Lu Ming's reaction, the interest probably wasn't reciprocated.

"Keke, Junior Li Luo, the three of us have finished discussing our next move now. You should rejoin your squad quickly and prepare to move out," he said with a cool smile.

Li Luo was just too handsome, and any girl would fall for him. He had better watch the silver-haired devil carefully. Li Luo sensed the coolness from him but could not fathom why. "Zhao Beili surely doesn't have any brains. Can't he see Jiang Qing'e watching them like a hawk already? Would I really dare to try anything with her around?"

"Besides, am I really that kind of playboy?"

He felt a sudden urge to kick the floor childishly, but instead, he waved to Lu Ming like a gentleman and returned to his squad.

In any case, the three squads had their basic communications down, and together they headed into the thunder-filled mountain range.

Chapter 0542: Thunderpeal Fruits

The thunder rumbled ominously above the advancing squads, amplified and echoed by the steep mountain walls that crowded them in on all sides.

Although the corruption was much weaker in Thunderpeal Mountain, the three squads did not ease up their guard. Rather, they were even more cautious than ever, on the lookout for whatever had taken down the missing squad. None of the students who had made it here were weak or foolish by any measure. They were the best of their schools, elite students that had survived and honed their skills through many battles and other dangers.

The fact that one squad had disappeared was a huge worry for all of them.

The three Heavenly Pearl Stage leaders escorted the entire group. The First Princess took point, the vanguard breaking the way for them. Qin Yue remained in the middle, watching their flanks. The Heavenly Inferno Sage College's Zhao Beili was the rearguard. With this, they moved in a formation of maximum safety.

And this allowed them to move at maximum speed.

They traveled deeper into the mountain range, and yet there were no signs of Others at all.

It was probably the cleanest region in the whole Red Clay Province.

This was good, but an unnerving good. They proceeded with caution.

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In a dark corner of the mountain range, somewhere else.

Corruption was dense enough to drip off the walls as sludge here, even thicker than it had been at Riverguard City.

On a stone dais in the darkness.

A black knight was lighting a stick of incense that burned with a wicked, red light. The rising smoke formed a screen.

The black knight sank to the floor, prostrating himself. "Great One, more squads have come to Thunderpeal Mountain," the black knight said in a voice muffled under the visor.

A shadowy, red figure laughed coldly from within the smoke. "More runts from the Academic Federation with no desire to live? Clean them all up. These are new elite students from all the schools. Destroying them will be painful for them."

"It's odd that they would not utilize the neighboring powers. Why redirect the Holy Grail Meet here.... I don't think things are as straightforward as they seem. They must be up to something else."

"But regardless, I am in charge of the Red Clay Province, and I will not let them do as they wish here. Thunderpeal Mountain is an important position for me, and it must remain unmolested. You failed to keep Riverguard City safe, but if anything happens at Thunderpeal Mountain, you know the consequences."

The black knight sank even lower to the ground. "Do not worry, Great One. Thunderpeal Mountain was specially chosen and prepared by you yourself. There will be no accidents!"

The red shadow nodded harshly, then disappeared with the smoke.

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"Well, this is Thunderpeal Mountain."

The three squads stopped before the one mountain that towered above the others. They were in the heart of the mountain range now.

"The journey has been too quiet," the First Princess said, frowning.

The others nodded. It made them extremely uneasy to stumble across an Other-free oasis when they were in the middle of an Other Disaster.

"If this place is really so safe, then where the hell did the missing squad go?" Qin Yue said exasperatedly.

The squads looked around at each other, then they began to charge their resonant powers quietly in preparation.

"Let's head up the mountain and take a look," the First Princess decided.

There were no objections, and they were at the top two hours later, looking upon the majestic Thunderpeal Tree.

The silver trunk seemed to be made of metal, and its glamor was odd to behold, given that it stood at the center of the massive shadow cast by its branches and leaves.

Even for the Astral Sage students who were familiar with their own Tree of Resonant Power, this was breathtaking to see up close.

"Still nothing odd..." Zhao Beili said, scanning their surroundings. The lightning flickered out above them, absorbed by the crown of the Thunderpeal Tree.

There was no sign of Others.

They scratched their heads in puzzlement.

Jiang Qing'e was examining the tree carefully. She was looking particularly near the center of the crown, where two silver fruits hung quietly on a branch. Lightning marks covered the fruits, and electricity crackled over them.

"These are Thunderpeal Fruits?"

The others came over, hearing her words. They all looked at the fruits with interest.

Of course, all of them had come to Thunderpeal Mountain initially because of the temptation of the Thunderpeal Fruits. It would at least strengthen their bodies, and if they were talented enough, it would even grant them the Thunderpeal Avatar through proper refinement.

Even someone like the First Princess would be interested in this prospect.

The First Princess carefully raised a hand, using a tiny slice of green power to cut down the two fruits. She lowered them gently before the group.

Everyone crowded in for a closer look and heard an electrical hum buzzing from them.

"How amazing," the First Princess marveled. "But there are only two here, and we are many. How should we divide them?"

The students' eyes lit up, especially Qin Yue and Zhao Beili. As Heavenly Pearl Stage cultivators, they were both interested and worthy of contesting it.

However, neither spoke recklessly.

They found the number of fruits suspicious.

The First Princess raised her eyebrows at them knowingly. "An interesting number, is it not? Three of us, and two fruits. Is this a coincidence or someone's design?"

Qin Yue and Zhao Beili frowned.

"Your Highness, do you mean someone has done this on purpose to incite internal strife?" Qin Yue asked.

"Perhaps," she said.

Jiang Qing'e was looking at the fruits closely. "Your Highness, pass me one for a look."

The First Princess handed one over quizzically.

With everyone watching, Jiang Qing'e held the Thunderpeal Fruit in both hands, then violently twisted, opening it up.

A blast of lightning energy was released from within.

Jiang Qing'e's movement saw Qin Yue and Zhao Beili wince as though she had twisted them by the balls. Both made inadvertent movements towards the fruit.

But they pulled themselves up short.

Jiang Qing'e held out the halves to them, and they could see that the lightning within was black in color, with a strong stench of corruption within.

These fruits... held a seed of corruption!

They gasped and shuddered to think of how their greed had almost laid them low.

There was definitely something odd about this place!

Chapter 0543: The Thunderpeal Tree Attacks

Under the great Thunderpeal Tree, the students stared at the swirling, black mist rising from the seeds of corruption and shuddered.

Who would have thought that the greatest temptation was actually holding such evil?

If they had really consumed this fruit whole for refinement, they would have been completely corrupted, heart, body, and mind.

"That was close," Qin Yue hissed.

They had thought the evil plot was the number of Thunderpeal Fruits, but now they realized that it was merely the first layer hiding a much more tragic end for whoever took the fruits.

Besides, given how precious Thunderpeal Fruits were, virtually no one would have the presence of mind like Jiang Qing'e to tear one open.

Which meant that they would likely have fallen into the trap if not for her.

The First Princess' elegant face was drawn and tight as well. Not even she had anticipated this level of trickery. The Thunderpeal Fruit was produced by the Thunderpeal Tree itself. If there were problems with the fruit, did that not mean that the tree itself was not as benign as it seemed?

What was wrong with Thunderpeal Mountain?

And there had been so little corruption up till now...

"There's something odd about the tree," Lu Ming said, raising her resonant power defenses as she stepped away from the trunk.

She had come to the same conclusion as the First Princess.

The others turned back to the trunk of the tree, their respect now replaced with caution. The cool shade of its leaves had suddenly turned chilly.

"If the corruption in this mountain range is so faint, why would there be problems with the tree?" Zhao Beili asked, frowning.

"What if," Jiang Qing'e said quietly, "the Thunderpeal Tree absorbed all of the corruption?"

Suddenly, all of the students felt an urge to run as far as they could.

If Jiang Qing'e's guess was right, then this tree was a ticking bomb of corruption.

Li Luo licked his lips nervously as well. So much for peace and quiet.

"Well, what do we want to do now?"

The one who had asked was Ao Bai, the Two Star Hall winner. He had been quiet so far, understanding that his quasi General Stage strength could not contribute much before his betters.

But now that they were in grave danger, he thought it better to speak out and clarify.

Jiang Qing'e looked around them. "It's not about what we want to do anymore," she said calmly.

"Haven't you noticed? The lightning is picking up in intensity." The others looked up to see forks of lightning flash down almost constantly now, gigantic bolts that sizzled with menacing power.

"The Thunderpeal Tree!"

The First Princess had noticed that the silver leaves were arching downwards at the edges now, intending to trap them within a dome-shaped prison on the mountain.

"It's going to capture us!" Zhao Beili yelled.

"Get out!" the First Princess cried, leading the way towards the nearest edge.

Boom!

But a blinding flash of lightning crackled from under the boughs, and a thick, silver vine lashed out at them with the speed of a striking viper.

Bzzst!

It was not just one vine, but an entire bunch of them. Each was crackling with enough power to make even the three Heavenly Pearl Stage cultivators blanch in fear.

"One and Two Star Hall students, get back!" the First Princess shouted. The power here was not something that the junior students could handle.

The First Princess, Qin Yue, and Zhao Beili put up powerful defenses, their heavenly pearls winking into existence. Under their combined defenses, they were able to repel the vines.

Jiang Qing'e had the back covered, her ninth-grade light spirit avatar standing like a guardian angel over them, and her heavy sword held in a defensive stance.

The suddenness of battle could have unnerved inexperienced students.

The three Heavenly Pearl Stage students were unfazed, calling forth enough power to shake the mountains.

In the wake of the attack, wooden splinters wafted down to the ground.

The attack had been stopped, but the edges of the tree's crown had finished forming its prison, and they were trapped within.

Lu Ming and Li Luo were placed at the rear, protected by their stronger companions. Thanks to the quick actions of the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e, they were well covered.

Lu Ming looked out at the dome of boughs all around them. "We're trapped," she hissed.

"The calm before the storm, huh," Li Luo said glumly.

"This is not good. We have three Heavenly Pearl Stage experts, but the environment is not favorable to us. The Thunderpeal Tree can constantly harness lightning from around it to attack us. If this keeps up, we will run out of resonant power eventually," Lu Ming assessed.

Li Luo nodded. Still, this was something that the First Princess and the other experts knew. They were probably testing out the limits of the tree's strength, to see if they could join forces and break out in one punch.

As for the missing squad, they would have to give that up for now.

While Li Luo was thinking this, he suddenly felt the ground beneath him sag.

His eyes narrowed. "Beware below!!"

Boom!

Just as he yelled this, the ground gave way, revealing another batch of electric vines that swept out at their feet.

The attack was too fast and too furious for Li Luo and Lu Ming to react properly.

At the crucial moment, Li Luo slammed a hand into Lu Ming's back, pushing her out of harm's way. One injured person was better than two. With his other hand, he formed the strongest defense he could muster against the vines.

Bang!

A muffled crash.

Li Luo was sent flying, his hair standing up from the electrical power and sizzling with white smoke. He coughed out enough blood to stain both his hands.

He was seriously injured, but his arms were wrapped in a bear hug around the vine, preventing it from attacking them further.

"Li Luo!" Lu Ming screamed as she watched him sail through the air.

Swoosh!

A powerful sword sliced down, severing the electric vine in one clean sweep.

Jiang Qing'e to the rescue.

At the same time, more and more vines came out from underground.

Jiang Qing'e's beautiful features were tight with cold fury. The Thunderpeal Tree was trickier than they had expected, to be able to pull off sneak attacks like this one.

The situation was chaotic, and she had no time to coddle Li Luo. Her sword slashed out with frenzied light, clearing the vines.

Lu Ming hurried to Li Luo's side. "Are you alright?" she asked urgently.

Li Luo waved weakly, then coughed and wiped the blood from his mouth. "The First Princess and the others have drawn much of the Thunderpeal Tree's attacks, or I'd be dead already."

Lu Ming hesitated. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

If not for Li Luo pushing her out of the way, she'd be badly injured now as well.

Li Luo smiled at her. "Ah, to let such a beauty see me in such an ungainly position. It is a crime."

Lu Ming immediately felt a smile coming upon her, but she forced it back down.

"The last time we fought, I didn't expect someone who poisoned girls to have a gentlemanly side to him as well."

"You were an opponent back then. Of course I had to do everything I could," Li Luo said defensively.

"I'm kidding. Heal yourself. I'll watch you." She smiled. Her hand was on the slender weapon by her side, and she turned to watch their surroundings.

Li Luo nodded, then he lowered his head to the severed vine he was still holding. The electric energy had faded from it, but he looked at it worriedly nevertheless.

He had sensed a weak and vague signal coming out of it when his blood-stained arms were tightly wound around it.

That signal...

It seemed to be a call for rescue.

Chapter 0544: A Special Signal

The frenzied battle on Thunderpeal Mountain raged on.

Mighty blasts of resonant power sheared through electric vines that came at the students from all sides. Even when the vines were repelled, the electricity caused them to explode, keeping the students on their toes.

Most of them were being defended against by the First Princess and the other Heavenly Pearl Stage cultivators.

They were tanking most of the damage.

Jiang Qing'e and the other two Three Star Hall students were helping them out. They were also in charge of sweeping away the electric vines that came at them from below. The entire situation was very disorderly.

Li Luo, Lu Ming, and Ao Bai were gathered in a small circle of their own, trying to ward off any attacks that came their way. Li Luo was recovering at good speed, and he felt the tingling numbness begin to fade away from his body. His resonant powers were kicking in with good effect, and he sighed in relief.

"Are you better?" Lu Ming asked.

Li Luo looked over at the aloof girl with a hint of concern in her eyes.

He smiled and nodded.

His blackened face and frazzled hair were both comical and pitiful to look upon, but he was only this way because he had saved her. "Watch yourself, then. The electric vines sprouting up from the ground are only getting more numerous."

Li Luo nodded, keeping his eyes low.

That special signal... had he imagined it?

What could it possibly mean?

Li Luo was quite curious. He felt that it could be an important message.

If it were real, why was he the only one who had sensed it?

The First Princess, Jiang Qing'e, and the others were in the thick of battle, and each had cut down dozens of vines. And yet none of them had shown the slightest awareness that any message was being sent.

Li Luo desperately wanted time to think. He stared hard at the other combatants, turning his thoughts inwards as he watched the colorful blasts of resonant power fly past without thinking too much...

"Color!

"Resonance affinity!

"Wood resonance!"

No one else here had a wood resonance!

Wood resonant power lent him a unique sensitivity with the plants of the world, and even those that were strangely otherworldly... like the Thunderpeal Tree. Perhaps this was a reasonable explanation for why he had sensed something that the others had not.

If that was so, had the cry for help come from the Thunderpeal Tree before them?

He thought it a plausible notion. The Thunderpeal Tree was a wonder of the world. It had a tremendous reservoir of energy that it filled constantly. Perhaps it had some degree of sentience.

Was it asking him for help?

"Li Luo, what are you daydreaming about? Did your injuries worsen?" Lu Ming saw that there was a vague, dreamy expression on Li Luo's face, and quickly poked him with her sword hilt out of concern.

Li Luo shook his head. "I'm fine... Lu Ming, can you help me?"

She looked at him strangely. "What sort of help, at this time?"

Li Luo hesitated, then he said, "I need to lure an electric vine to attack me, but the electricity is too strong for me to tank alone. I need you to help me relieve some of the attack."

Lu Ming stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Get an electric vine to attack you? Have you lost your mind? The first one almost killed you. Are you a masochist or something?" she blurted out embarrassedly. Lu Ming herself had the dual resonances of illusion and lightning, so she was familiar with the unique experience of pain and disorientation that her opponents were often subject to. Sometimes, there were odd ones who enjoyed the pain... was Li Luo one of those? He scowled at her. "I do NOT like being struck by lightning!

"I just have some insights that could change our situation!"

"Suuuuure....." Lu Ming said doubtfully. But in the end, she agreed to cooperate. Surely not even a mad masochist would indulge in his fetishes at a time like this.

"You don't even believe me..." Li Luo muttered, half to himself. He looked over to Jiang Qing'e, who was scything through the electric vines like a wheat field. She had attracted the bulk of the vines to her already.

"Qing'e, send one of the weak vines my way!"

The trust between the two was deep enough that she would not question his strange request.

Hearing his shout, Jiang Qing'e pulled a face, but she removed the light resonant energy from her blade for a second and twisted it expertly so the flat side faced one of the vines. With a tremendous swing, she batted it expertly over to Li Luo's position.

The electric vine flailed around in a frenzy, uncaring of where it was. The crackling and popping electricity was soon in Li Luo's face.

It hissed and crackled like a dragon, burning even the air around it.

Lu Ming screamed inwardly when Jiang Qing'e batted the vine their way. The Three Star Hall girl might be able to deal with it easily, but the two of them were different—she was only a Resonant Master.

She did not dare to slack off. Her slim hands gripped her sword and channeled the full extent of her dual resonant powers, holding nothing back.

Weng weng!

The thin sword formed its own lightning veil that shot out towards the vine and wrapped around it. Unlike other powers, her lightning was able to land on the electric vine without causing an explosion. Rather, she could mute some of its power.

The ground beneath the vine turned black from the reverse flow of electricity.

Lu Ming's move soon fizzled as her sword's energy ran out. She was sent stumbling backwards a dozen steps, her sword now glowing hot from the attack.

"Li Luo, watch out!" she cried.

Even with her full strength, she had only been able to weaken the electric vine a little.

Li Luo nodded grimly. He watched the vine approach, and he took a deep breath. He channeled his own dual resonances and then stepped out with both palms towards his opponent.

He grabbed it with both hands.

Bzzst!

The electrical energy flooded through Li Luo like a raging river. He again felt the numbing energy take him, and he gritted his teeth and held on grimly. More. He needed more information.

The electric vine thrashed in his hands like a python struggling to get free, unleashing violent bursts of energy that cooked the flesh on Li Luo's palms.

But there was no repeat of the special message.

Li Luo's heart sank. Had he really imagined it?

He continued to hold on, even though the skin on his hands was starting to char.

Just as Li Luo felt like he could hold on no longer, a pair of cool hands pressed onto the sides of his own, and the relief was immense as the electrical flow was partially diverted.

"Li Luo, are you mad?!" Lu Ming screamed in his ear. "Do you not like having hands?!"

He saw that she had rushed over to help him hold the vine and divert some of the energy flow and heat to her own hands.

"Tha... nks," Li Luo choked out. "A little more...!"

Lu Ming gritted her teeth and nodded.

With the two of them holding on, the electric vine started to die away. And the moment the vine's power ran out, Li Luo again sensed the message.

This time, it filled his head with a strange image.

A vision of darkness, dripping with sludgy corruption.

There were silver tree roots coated in the thick, purplish sludge that seemed to be sucking away at the tree's life. It crawled up the roots, was absorbed, and then finally turned the silver to black...

Li Luo heard the moan of the tree come to him from below.

His eyes flew open, regaining normal sight.

No wonder they could not see a single Other here at Thunderpeal Mountain. They had all burrowed down to the base of the tree and to work their corruptive magic from the roots instead.

Chapter 0545: Tempting Lu Ming

As the information flashed through his mind, Li Luo's eyes flew open, and he was firmly back in reality again.

"Li Luo, are you alright?" Lu Ming asked concernedly.

Li Luo nodded to reassure her, then he tossed away the limp vine.

"What the hell was that all about?" she demanded.

"I told you—finding a way out of our situation." Li Luo grinned.

"And... Did you find it?" she asked doubtfully.

"I did. I also learned why the Thunderpeal Tree is attacking us," he said.

She stared at him. That seemed too good to be true, but his expression was utterly serious. It did not seem like he was joking, so she swallowed her skepticism for the moment. "And why is it attacking us?"

"Because it has been corrupted," he said. That was nothing new—the seeds of corruption in the Thunderpeal Fruits had proved as much.

The bigger question was how. The corruption here was faint, and there were no signs of Others anywhere. Plus, the Thunderpeal Tree was a miraculous existence with incredible energy of its own. How could it be so easily corrupted?

"The reason why the corruption here is faint is not due to its absence, but because it's all concentrated at the base," Li Luo explained patiently, pointing at the foot of the mountain.

From the image he had seen in his mind, it seemed like the Others were all gathered at the roots of the Thunderpeal Tree, and doing their evil work from there.

Lu Ming considered his words. They seemed logical enough.

"And what do you plan to do? We know the tree is corrupted, and it's attacking us. But truthfully, I don't think we have enough power to cleanse something of this magnitude," Lu Ming said.

The Thunderpeal Tree had power that might well surpass a Heavenly Pearl cultivator, not to mention its magical ability to absorb a constant source of energy from its environment. It was barely using any power to deal with the three Heavenly Pearl experts currently.

And such an existence had been corrupted. How difficult would it be to cleanse?

They would need a Duke for this.

"Perhaps it is possible," Li Luo said. "The distress signal I received came from the remaining traces of sentience that the tree holds on to. It proves that the tree is not completely corrupted yet. If we can just help it out, it should have some ability to cleanse itself. Don't underestimate the old, wooden thing."

Lu Ming was really hoping that what he had said was true.

"One more problem—if you want to help it, where would you even start?"

"The image showed me what I should do," Li Luo answered. "But... it will not be easy."

Lu Ming's eyes flickered. "You mean to go down? To the roots?"

Li Luo nodded slowly.

Lu Ming's heart sank. At the base of Thunderpeal Mountain, where the corruption and Others were rife... such a place would be extremely dangerous.

"This sort of mission must be entrusted to the Three and Four Star Hall seniors, right?" she said reasonably. "We're not strong enough to deal with it. The only reason we're in this part of the competition is to raise the headcount."

"They can't go." Li Luo sighed.

"Why not?"

Li Luo raised a finger. "Firstly, the remaining consciousness of the Thunderpeal Tree can no longer control its actions or strength. That is why the corruption can force it to attack us. We need the First Princess and the others to help distract the corrupted part of its will.

"Secondly, we are already trapped in the tree's prison. It is not likely that we can break out of this trap and then re-invade from a different point. Which means that the only solution is for the Thunderpeal Tree to teleport us directly in with its last vestiges of strength. However, this strength is very limited, and can only send us Resonant Masters down. It cannot teleport anybody too strong.

"Because of these reasons," Li Luo concluded with a wry smile, "it's going to be us headcount-fillers that will do the dirty work."

Lu Ming was silent for a moment. "Well, Li Luo, you got your chance to be a hero again. I'll stay here and pray for your success. All the best, good luck, come back safe!"

"I'm not the only Resonant Master here, you know..." Li Luo said meaningfully.

Lu Ming's eyes widened. She knew what he was implying. "Li Luo, you might want to be a hero, but I have no such inclination! I have no interest in such things!" She was a rational person who had weighed her odds against the rewards and her power against the challenge. She did not see how their limited strength would be of any use.

Although they could break the spirit mirror and save their lives, that was no guarantee either. Hadn't they just lost a squad who had that very same safety measure?

Although they were trapped in the Thunderpeal Tree's jail, they were not panicking yet. When they had no other option, they could still choose to be eliminated—a small price to pay compared to their lives.

"Well." Li Luo sighed. "Can't say I blame you. I see your logic. I just thought that the great Lu Ming was a woman to walk the world with, a fearless Amazon and a fine warrior. I guess I was wrong."

"That taunting isn't going to work," she snorted at him. "And it means nothing coming from a poison-using weasel."

Li Luo rubbed his chin. "Actually, I thought of something else also. The Thunderpeal Tree is a gigantic treasure. If I help it out, it'll be indebted to me, right? Perhaps it'll give me a few Thunderpeal Fruits in gratitude—uncorrupted, of course—and then I'll have the Thunderpeal Avatar, right?

"But of all the people here longing for the avatar, you're probably the one who wants it most... right? I mean... you have a lightning resonance, so you can use the Thunderpeal Avatar best.

"Right?"

Lu Ming's eyes flickered anew. Their squad had come to Thunderpeal Mountain largely because of her suggestion. And of course, she had wanted to come here for the Thunderpeal Fruits. She had been the most devastated one when they had realized the first two fruits were corrupted.

And now Li Luo was suggesting that there might still be a chance at getting some good fruits if they helped the tree out...

A sentient tree would definitely pay its debts.

Lu Ming struggled with herself for a while. "Damn! Damn you, Li Luo, tempting me like this!"

"There's nothing much to worry about, actually. I think the most likely reason why the other squad disappeared is that they ate corrupted Thunderpeal Fruits and were unable to break the mirrors in time. We just need to be a little more careful, and we won't wind up the same way.

"With the spirit mirrors, our safety is guaranteed," Li Luo said, giving her one final push as he smelled weakness.

Lu Ming gritted her teeth and glared at him.

"Fine! We're going! I'm going with you!"

Chapter 0546: Silver Tree Core

Li Luo grinned when Lu Ming finally agreed to come. He was not trying to force her into danger, but there was safety in numbers in an unknown situation, and they could look out for each other. If anything bad happened to one person, the other could quickly break their spirit mirror and take them both out.

Even the spirit mirrors were stronger in numbers.

Still, they had to let Jiang Qing'e and the others know about their plan before they went in.

Li Luo was not shy about it. He gestured to Jiang Qing'e, who let the other Three Star Hall students pick up the slack while she hurried over.

Li Luo explained his discoveries and plan to her.

"I see... so you want to get to the root of the problem. That's risky," Jiang Qing'e said with concern clear in her voice. It seemed like they were going into what could be a thick cluster of Others. Could two Resonant Masters really handle things?

"Well, we're not going to deal with all the Others directly," Li Luo reassured her. "That would be impossible for us. We're really just going to help out the Thunderpeal Tree so it can cleanse itself."

Jiang Qing'e nodded decisively. "If you think it's worth a try, then go ahead. We're stuck in a stalemate here, and our opponent has unlimited energy. It won't stay a stalemate for long."

She was worried about Li Luo's safety, but she had no choice but to trust the spirit mirrors.

She took down a silver rope from around her neck. It had a milky-white, tear-shaped stone in the middle, and she handed it over to Li Luo. "This is a light jewel that I made with my own light resonant energy. If you are corrupted or controlled, it will provide you a few moments of clarity to break your spirit mirror."

Li Luo took the necklace, still warm from her body heat. She clearly wore it at all times.

Li Luo nodded gratefully, then wrapped it around his wrist.

"I'll clear the electric vines in the area and escort you to the base of the Thunderpeal Tree. Prepare yourselves."

Li Luo and Lu Ming nodded solemnly.

Brandishing her sword, she cut a fiery path through the electric vines, with the two first years following cautiously behind.

The vines lashed out like a pit of angry vipers, but none could even get close to Jiang Qing'e.

"Senior Jiang is truly a rock of reliability. Li Luo, you have to work hard," Lu Ming said in admiration.

Li Luo had no reply to that. "I'm a Resonant Master for goodness' sake. Are you really comparing me to a Fiend Finisher Tier cultivator in terms of safety provision?

"Irritating."

Before long, the trio made it to the tree. They looked up at the huge trunk, far wider than their arm spans. They felt very insignificant.

The silver bark glimmered with a faint, neon light.

Li Luo did not hesitate, stepping up and putting his palm on the rough bark.

The tree sensed his presence and shot a small burst of silver energy that enveloped him.

Li Luo reached his hand out to Lu Ming, and she took it after a moment's hesitation.

The silver light covered both of them.

It waxed for a moment and then waned, sucking the two in with it.

Jiang Qing'e watched the space for a moment more, then turned back to join the fray against the electric vines.

Meanwhile, Li Luo was being teleported, the roar of electricity loud in his ears.

It was over very soon, and he regained his sight again. The sudden silence after the roaring electricity was deafening. He snapped his fingers experimentally.

Looking around, he saw that he was in a pitch-black, underground area, and he and Lu Ming were currently perched on a thick root. The roots here were still glowing silver, which meant that they had not been corrupted.

He looked above him. This root compartment seemed to have been enlarged by an external force, and there were things jumping down at them from above.

"Li Luo, are those Others?" Lu Ming looked up at the grotesque figures.

He nodded.

"Others, dangerous and twisted as they come... but they seem to be moving with some sort of clear purpose." Lu Ming frowned.

"You mean... they're being controlled?" Li Luo asked, surprised. "Who would have the power to control Others? They're not some sort of farm animal that can be trained."

"It's not easy," Lu Ming responded. "But perhaps it is possible to manipulate them or lead them to certain courses of action."

Li Luo recalled the black knight in Riverguard City. Could he be behind this as well?

But this was no time for meaningless speculation. "Come." Li Luo waved.

He had started to feel a curious pull from the moment they arrived, which was the remaining sentence of the Thunderpeal Tree communicating with him.

He led Lu Ming onwards as they made their way over the roots, which were thick enough to be bridges.

They continued for a few minutes until they reached the end of the root. There, they saw a faint door of light that drew them in.

They stood before the door and shared a look, then charged their resonant powers and jumped in together.

The light dazzled them for a few moments, then the scene before them was clear again.

Both gasped in wonder.

Before them was a large, silver heart, pulsing gently.

There were many branches leading out of it that then extended into other parts of the tree.

This was the core of the Thunderpeal Tree.

It had actually grown to such an extent.

But the beautiful heart was currently marred by numerous thick, black thorns that had been buried into its body, leaking black mist.

These black thorns were even timed to release more black corruption into the heart at regular intervals.

Because of them, even the silver branches leading out were gradually turning black.

Li Luo was quite sure that these black thorns were the source of the poison. The heart of the Thunderpeal Tree was being weakened by these things, preventing it from cleaning out the Others...

Li Luo understood why the Thunderpeal Tree had brought them here now.

It wanted them to help it detoxify.

Chapter 0547: Detoxify

"You mean it's telling you to help it detoxify?" Lu Ming repeated in surprise. She looked carefully at the silver tree core turned into a pincushion by the insidious black thorns sticking out of it. Even from a distance, the black mist emitted by it was dangerous to them.

"Look, Li Luo, I'm not trying to belittle you, but don't you think this level of poison is far too dangerous for us?!" she burst out.

The Thunderpeal Tree was many orders of magnitude stronger than them, and even it had been brought low by these poisonous thorns. How was a mere Resonant Master like Li Luo supposed to deal with it? He would be snuffed out in an instant.

Li Luo inched closer, walking up and down to examine the spikes properly. "It's really quite a crazy poison. I'd be a fool to think I could neutralize it. Besides, they're arranged in a special poison formation that completely seals away the tree core and attacks it with rot and corruption. An ingenious setup.

"But I think the Thunderpeal Tree is not expecting me to do all the work. All it wants... is perhaps an opening out of this formation," he mused to himself. As he spoke this aloud, the tree glowed once briefly as if in agreement.

Lu Ming stared on in wonder.

Li Luo scratched his chin. His poison healing skills were quite average, although he had one advantage—he had three resonances that dealt with poison.

Water resonance, light resonance, wood resonance.

These three together combined produced an antidote effect with rare power, something that he had benefited from many times in the past.

It was the most powerful cocktail that blew away poisons. Although Li Luo was not strong enough to get rid of the poison completely, he should be able to weaken it a little at least.

Perhaps the Thunderpeal Tree had only sent the call out to him after contact, when it realized that he had this unique ability to help. It could sense power much more acutely than humans.

"But still..." Li Luo shook his head. "Brother tree, this poison is a work of genius, and I'm a fool. I wouldn't know where to even begin."

The poison formation was of a complexity far beyond his ken. Even looking at it, he was seeing poison being designed and used in ways that he had never even imagined before. It was an eye-opening experience.

He had a feeling that the poison formation was not so easily unraveled. First, he had to identify the logic used, then he could unravel it. Otherwise, he risked making a gigantic mess of things.

As if hearing Li Luo's words, a little spark of electricity popped up on the surface of a root, running down towards where one poison thorn was deeply buried.

It bounced around, throwing itself madly against the poison mist, eating away a bit of the darkness.

"This thorn's the key, eh, brother tree? If the poison's purged from it, you can be a little freer?" Li Luo asked aloud.

The tree creaked and groaned in response.

Li Luo had met many old people in his life before, and that sort of creaking and groaning sounded vaguely like a yes to him. He was convinced now, and he turned to Lu Ming. "I'm going to give it a shot. Help me watch the surroundings... and remember to stay alert."

Her most important role here was to keep her hand close to the spirit mirror so she could save both their lives in case of an emergency.

"Yeah. Be careful." She nodded seriously.

Li Luo took a deep breath and walked up to the poison thorn. Putting his hands together, he dug deep into his reserves of resonant power. Although he was much weaker than the tree itself, perhaps his addition of water and light resonant powers would help the tree's own wood and lightning powers.

A few minutes later, a drop of concentrated liquid was condensed on his fingertip, and Li Luo carefully let it fall on the spike.

The thorn hissed and bubbled instantly, the surface warping and bulging from underneath with a person's face. It screamed at Li Luo in defiance.

Clearly, his one drop of antidote had been useful.

"Did it work?" Lu Ming gasped.

Even without drawing near, she could see how deadly the poison was. Probably not even Heavenly Dipper Generals would dare to approach it fearlessly. And yet this puny, little Resonant Master was neutralizing it?

Although he was not doing too much at the moment, that was because his resonant power was still too weak. If he were a General Stage expert, would that mean that he could easily deal with it?

"Is water and wood really such a powerful anti-poison combination?" Lu Ming wondered to herself. She was a dual resonance user as well, so she understood the resultant power of resonance interactions well. And even so, she was amazed by the effectiveness of his.

What she did not know was that inside the potent mix of water and wood resonant powers was a faint but highly effective catalyst: light resonant energy.

It was the antithesis to poison and darkness, a direct elemental counteract, whereas water and wood worked in more indirect manners.

Regardless, Lu Ming was relieved to see that Li Luo was able to do something here. As long as he could gradually reduce the poison, it was only a matter of time before the formation here was broken and the Thunderpeal Tree would regain volition. At that time, the tide would swing to their side.

"All's good." Lu Ming was just starting to relax when a sudden, loud boom shook the entire chamber.

Boom!

One of the walls had shattered with a shocking explosion, showering them with wood splinters.

"You Academic Federation rats are really everywhere," a voice rasped. A black knight stepped out from the breach, gathering his resonant power to him as he walked towards them.

"Earth Fiend stage?!" Lu Ming sensed his power, her eyes contracting in fear.

An Earth Fiend here in the dark depths of Thunderpeal Mountain where they were far from help?!

Weng!

Just as the black knight appeared, he did not give them much time to respond. Lifting his hand, his black lance exploded with power, and he hurled it towards Li Luo.

Boom!

Faster than the eye could see, it skewered Li Luo clean through his body.

Chapter 0548: Black Knight Again

Weng!

The black lance shot out like a ballista bolt, blasting through Li Luo's body as if it were a frail stick of bamboo, and impaling itself on the silver tree.

"Hmm?"

Li Luo's body faded away, to the black knight's surprise.

"An illusion?" His eyes narrowed. "Sneaky, little rat."

He roared once, unleashing a blast of sound that shook the entire chamber.

Bang!

The illusion was shattered and two bodies were thrown backwards, slamming heavily against the tree.

Li Luo and Lu Ming.

Li Luo wiped blood from his mouth. The black knight's attack had been too sudden. If not for the precaution that they had taken just in case, they would not have had time to build an illusion when he showed up, and Li Luo would have been skewered for real.

"Thanks," he coughed.

Lu Ming had her slender sword in hand, and she faced the black knight. "Never mind that now. What's with this guy? Why would there be other people here?"

"Just like elder Ling Yu said, the Blackwind Empire's Other Disaster might have been caused by people. If my guess is right, this black knight belongs to one of those nasty organizations. Perhaps they were the ones who sabotaged the Thunderpeal Tree in the first place," Li Luo said.

"How does causing an Other Disaster help them?" Lu Ming asked, appalled.

She too had seen the devastation that the Other Disaster had caused across the land.

"You ask me, I ask who?" Li Luo muttered.

"I recognize your little, rodent face, rat. I didn't manage to kill you back at Riverguard City, but now you've come calling again I see." The black knight closed his fist, and the lance flew obediently back from the tree wall to his hand. He pointed it menacingly at Li Luo.

"Ah, it's you again," Li Luo said blandly. He could feel a familiarity in the signature of this person's power. It was the same black knight that he had faced at Riverguard City.

"The other time someone saved you. You won't be so lucky this time," the black knight hissed viciously.

He charged his power again, pulsing powerful waves of energy that blew towards them like a hurricane. They could barely stand straight before any attack even came their way.

The disparity was just too huge.

"Ah, Li Luo. I knew following you was going to be trouble." Lu Ming's hand was already reaching for her spirit mirror.

Two Resonant Masters were not going to be of any use against an Earth Fiend expert.

"Don't panic," Li Luo said calmly. The black knight before them was probably at the Fiend Palace Tier. It was frightening, but not impossible to overcome.

He looked down at the crimson ring on his wrist. It was about time to use it, after holding it for emergencies for so long.

Lu Ming shivered a little at his fearlessness. "Is he insane? Or does he really have something to deal with an Earth Fiend Stage expert?"

"You don't frighten me," the black knight sneered. His black lance thundered out again, roaring like an angry dragon.

This time, the lance seemed to swim towards them, fluid as liquid mercury, where it was stiff before.

There should have been no way that Li Luo and Lu Ming could deal with an attack of this level.

Lu Ming's hand tightened on her spirit mirror.

Li Luo's hand tightened on his crimson bracelet, resonant power bubbling.

Boom!

Just as both were about to act, a screeching burst of lightning crashed into the lance from above, sending it skittering across the ground.

Li Luo and Lu Ming blinked in amazement.

The tree was rapidly growing thorns of its own, aiming them at the black knight.

"This..." Lu Ming was stunned.

"The tree's saving us," Li Luo exclaimed in wonder. "Looks like the healing just now gave it some strength back!" he cheered.

He put his crimson bracelet down.

The Thunderpeal Tree joining the fray was an unexpected boon.

Weng!

Lightning cracked out at the black knight from all sides, whipping him with sizzling bolts of energy.

The black knight was forced on the defensive, creating whirlpools of resonant power that absorbed the lightning and turned it to dust.

"Hmph, Thunderpeal Tree, you're just acting tough. If you were at full power, I would not have dared to stay. But if you think this little bit of leftover power can defeat me, then you're even more naive than I thought."

Each time his lance swirled, he created a new whirlpool of power, and soon he was getting used to the lightning attacks.

"Your power's running out, tree!" the black knight hooted. "And then I will crush the rats. You will never escape the Great One's power!"

The silver tree seemed to be straining to draw on its power now. The black thorns buried in its body glinted maliciously.

"Li Luo, it can't hold out much longer. Can we help?" Lu Ming asked urgently.

"The black knight is not spending all of his energy on defense. He's kept some reserved for us. If we charge in recklessly, that'll be exactly what he hopes for," Li Luo warned her.

He thought for a moment, then pulled out his bow.

He charged an arrow of light and fired it out at the black knight.

Ding!

It was stopped by the black knight's armor, a clear peeling sound as the arrow of light scattered like a sunbeam.

The black armor was completely unscratched.

Li Luo cringed in embarrassment.

This guy was just too strong, and his black armor was clearly no ordinary equipment either. When put on such a strong opponent, it was like giving a tiger wings.

But it was just like the black knight had said. The Thunderpeal Tree was running out of energy here, and its attacks were getting weaker.

It would not last for too long.

And then they would be back in danger soon.

Just as Li Luo was thinking about how he could best cause problems for the black knight, a silver tree branch grew out of the ground beside them. It cracked to reveal a coarse, wooden arrow, silver in color. They marveled at its beauty.

It looked old and was free of any runic markings and power augmentations, but the silver color was extremely pure. Li Luo could feel that it had extremely pure lightning energy inside.

"The power inside is amazing," Lu Ming marveled. As a lightning resonance user, she was clearer than he was about the deadliness of this arrow.

Li Luo took it up, delighted. The Thunderpeal Tree was entrusting this one to him to finish off the black knight.

What a clever tree this was.

Chapter 0549: Who's Who

"So you want me to get rid of the black knight with this arrow, huh..."

The unremarkable-looking arrow was the secret weapon of the Thunderpeal Tree.

It was obvious why the tree had handed it over to him.

The tree understood that their fates were tied together now. Li Luo was its only hope. If it missed its chance with him, there would be no way to escape the corruption.

Nothing could be held back at this point.

Li Luo was happy to be entrusted with the secret weapon. He too understood that they were on the same boat. The black knight before them was a common enemy, and he would use anything available to him to ruin his day.

He reached out eagerly for the lightning arrow and gave it a tug.

He winced. He could not lift it.

This was very embarrassing.

Li Luo took a deep breath and channeled his resonant power into both arms, reaching for it again.

This time he could lift it, but barely. His face was red and contorted from the exertion, and he looked extremely foolish holding an arrow with both arms trembling.

Lu Ming understood immediately. "This silver arrow is made of pure lightning power. Since you don't have a lightning resonance, it's taking you an enormous amount of physical and resonant power to lift it."

Li Luo huffed and nodded. He was only a Resonant Master. This tree was really asking a lot of him.

Lu Ming laughed. "The smartest thing you've done so far is bring me along," she said proudly. Lu Ming laid her palm on the back of his hand, sending lightning resonant power to him.

"Don't reject my energy. I can use you as a conduit so you can lift it."

With the rush of lightning power from her, he reached out for the lightning arrow again.

He still felt the same heaviness from before, but it was much more bearable.

He felt a rush of gratitude that he had brought Lu Ming along. It was as she said. He had thought two people would be able to look out for each other, but she was proving to be a real asset, creating illusions to save his life, and now providing lightning energy that allowed him to lift the arrow.

Li Luo had already fitted the arrow to the Lambent Hawkeye, and he tried pulling the string. It would not budge.

He knew that he was not strong enough.

He gripped the Onyx-Elephant Blade with one hand and activated his Divine Elephant Power.

Level One Divine Elephant Power!

Li Luo's arm bulged, his veins like earthworms under the skin. At parts, it was stretched so tight that it split.

Li Luo sat with this new strength for a moment. It was not enough.

He notched it up again.

Level Two Divine Elephant Power!

Another hit of energy flooded his arms from the Onyx-Elephant Blade, and now his skin and flesh were peeling badly.

"Wood resonance art, Spirit Vine Threads.

"Light resonance art, Healing Sprites.

"Water resonance art, Spirit Water Art."

Again, he brought out his best combination of resonance arts to heal his arm even while it was broken down by his skill.

Even though he was physically able to carry on, the strange feeling of having his arms destroyed and healed at the same time was not a comfortable sensation.

He took a deep breath and drew his bow again. This time, he could slowly do it with great effort. The arrow quivered on the string, like an electric dragon ready to strike.

Or maybe it was quivering from Li Luo's trembling arms.

Without Lu Ming's resonant power removing a large part of the burden for him, his arms would have split apart from the effort.

Li Luo aimed it carefully at the black knight.

With the lock-on of the arrow, the black knight sensed danger.

The Thunderpeal Tree was really out to get him.

He could sense an itch of trouble tingling. His instincts told him that he could not deal with the power in that arrow!

Li Luo was already struggling to get the arrow in place. The black knight knew that he just had to avoid this one, and there would be no chance for a second arrow. The situation would turn to his favor again.

The black knight turned into a streak of black light and fled.

"He's getting away!" Lu Ming yelled.

A canny fighter, he was retreating to wait out their attack.

Clearly, Li Luo had sacrificed much of his power to prepare this one attack. If the black knight got away, he might not be able to pull it off again.

Li Luo looked at the fleeing black knight.

His eyes narrowed, then he shouted, "Commander Huang Lou, do your brothers and mother at the hamlet know what you're doing?"

The black knight froze, his eyes narrowing.

A chill ran down his spine.

How did Li Luo know his identity?

He froze in a moment of shock and indecision.

Li Luo saw his chance and let fly, his bleeding finger gratefully straightening.

Boom!

A bolt of lightning, faster than the eye could see.

It cut through the air faster than the air itself realized, sizzling belatedly in the arrow's wake. The arrow thudded into the black armor.

BOOM!

The package of electric power was unleashed all at once.

Chapter 0550: Huang Lou

Boom!

The arrow buried itself deep in the hip of the black knight's armor, which exploded with a cloud of black light around the opening, fighting against the attack.

But the damage was too great.

Along with the emotional shock, the black knight had totally been caught off guard by Li Luo.

The black light began to fade away, until the lightning finally won out over it. The armor cracked.

BOOM!

With enough cracks spreading across the armor, it finally shattered, and the person inside was smashed heavily against the tree from the explosion.

"Eurrgh!"

The black knight coughed up a heavy amount of blood, disbelief in his eyes.

He had never imagined that he would crumble here.

He was an Earth Fiend expert... beaten by a Resonant Master!

Mustering his last ounce of strength, he tried to flee.

Swoosh!

A tree branch caught him heavily across the chest, bringing his scurried escape to a halt.

His body slowly keeled over, the strength leaching out of him.

Suddenly, the tree root chamber was empty.

Li Luo lowered the Lambent Hawkeye, his arms throbbing painfully. His eyes never left the black knight, watching for any signs of sudden movement.

Lu Ming's lips were tightly pursed as well, watching tensely.

She could not believe it... Li Luo had taken down an Earth Fiend expert.

Of course, much of the credit had to go to the arrow from the Thunderpeal Tree, but ultimately, Li Luo was the guy who had made it happen.

This guy was truly something else.

She looked at his badly bleeding arms and felt respect well within her. This guy had become the strongest student not by luck. A cool head, split-second decision-making—he was better than Jing Taixu by far.

Li Luo himself was looking rather calm. From the way his opponent's chest rose weakly and his ragged breathing, he could tell that he was still alive, although the complete lack of resonant power aura meant that he might not live for long.

Satisfied that it was safe, he took a step forward and sliced away the mask with his Onyx-Elephant Blade.

The familiar face of a middle-aged man was revealed to him. Huang Lou, who Li Luo and the others had met back at the village.

Blood poured down his face, his eyes hazy with death.

"Commander Huang Lou, I didn't expect to meet you here," Li Luo said mildly.

Huang Lou's lips moved, gray eyes on Li Luo. "How... did you know it was me?"

"I guessed at Riverguard City. The black armor hid your resonant power affinity, but not the way you used it. I only had a hint of suspicion then, until I saw you at Thunderpeal Mountain.

"I remembered that you were the one who gave us information on the Thunderpeal Tree. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but I also suspected... that you were trying to lure us here to finish us off?

"Of course, all of that was speculation. I did not dare to confirm it. It was a risk when I shouted. If you had not reacted then, it might have confirmed a negative for me. It was a lucky break." Li Luo grinned.

Huang Lou grimaced. So he had given himself away after all.

He had tripped himself up over Li Luo's wild guess, and suffered a grievous wound for it.

Huang Lou's eyes went calm again. "My little friend Li Luo, I have no other request but that you do not tell this to my brothers and mother back at the village."

"You know that the Others destroyed the Blackwind Empire," Li Luo said sternly. "And that they were let out by these unknown powers. Why did you help them?"

"Do you think I could defend my village for long otherwise?" Huang Lou choked out.

"What about the people farmed like pigs at Riverguard City?" Li Luo demanded coldly. "Were they not deserving of your protection? Were you not the commander of their city's defense?" Huang Lou only replied with a bitter smile.

Li Luo watched the life fade from the befallen man's eyes. "I can choose to honor your final wish, but what will you give me for it?"

Huang Lou was silent for a while, and then he closed his eyes. "Li Luo, there is a crimson knight-general overseeing Russet Rock City. Only death awaits you there. Thunderpeal Mountain fell to his machinations as well. I advise you to give it up. The Blackwind Empire is not a place that youngsters like you can mend."

His head drooped now, the final breath of life gone.

Li Luo looked at the lifeless Huang Lou one more time and then sighed.

"Did he say crimson knight-general? Is that his superior?" Lu Ming asked.

"Probably. I wonder how strong a crimson knight-general is, to be able to sabotage the Thunderpeal Tree... he might well be a Heavenly Resonance Stage expert," Li Luo said gravely.

Heavenly Dipper Generals were divided into the Heavenly Pearl stage and Heavenly Resonance stage.

Even the strongest Four Star Hall students like Lan Lan were only at the Heavenly Pearl Stage. If the crimson knight-general had Heavenly Resonance power, then they were in deep trouble indeed.

It might seem like only a single sub-stage difference, but the disparity in power was like heaven and earth. Besides, who knew if the crimson knight-general had other greater Heavenly Disaster-class Others serving him?

It was a level of power that made him shiver.

This mixed-level competition was getting way beyond their pay grade.

Li Luo put those thoughts aside. This was no time to be thinking of that. He turned to the silver tree core again. Now that the interruption had been taken care of, he had to continue helping it remove the thorns and complete his mission.

Perhaps the Thunderpeal Tree would give him some juicy rewards for his troubles?

After all, he had risked his life to save it. Surely the rewards would be very juicy, right? Full of juice?

Li Luo's eyes shone with greedy anticipation.