

Resonance 551

Chapter 0551: Li Luo Breaks the Stalemate

Boom! Rumble!

Thunderpeal Mountain rumbled ominously, electric vines sweeping out in relentless waves towards the three fighters.

The lashes cracked out again and again, and the First Princess, Qin Yue, and Zhao Beili held out grimly. Their faces were pale from fatigue. The vines were no real threat to their lives, but neither could they be ignored with impunity. They were worn out by the sheer length of the battle.

Stuck on the defense, they had been worn down to the point that none of them could even think about counterattacking.

"You two, Qing'e just sent me a message saying that Li Luo's found a lead to break this stalemate. Let's hold out a while more." The First Princess's jade scepter lifted tiredly again, bringing forth the power of her seven heavenly pearls.

"Li Luo?" Both Qin Yue and Zhao Beili were skeptical. "The One Star Hall guy?"

Their spirits only fell further. Three Heavenly Pearl stage cultivators were worn out. What could a mere Resonant Master do about the situation?

The First Princess felt a little sheepish about it. She had her own doubts when Jiang Qing'e had contacted her. She respected Li Luo's outstanding skills, but he was ultimately still a Resonant Master, and she saw no way for his abilities to ever come in clutch.

Still, the boy had a track record of working miracles, and so she still held out a sliver of hope.

Perhaps he had really found something special.

So she stood firm against the skepticism of Qin Yue and Zhao Beili. "Li Luo is not a reckless person. If he has chosen to take a risk, I would back his call and assume that it is a calculated one. He must have his reasons. Besides... we've no other way forward."

This didn't convince Qin Yue nor Zhao Beili in the slightest, but they held on out of respect for the First Princess.

"Alright, we'll try to hold out for a while more, but the Thunderpeal Tree is not growing any weaker. If we don't make any decisive moves soon, the situation will only slip further and further away from us with every passing moment. We should gather our strength while it lasts and punch our way out of this."

They no longer cared about fulfilling the mission.

They just wanted to survive with their squads.

The First Princess nodded. The worst case would be giving up on the mission. They had all underestimated the danger of Thunderpeal Mountain.

This was many levels more perilous compared to Riverguard City.

Nearby, Jiang Qing'e was meticulously sweeping away the vines as they grew out of the ground, her eyes frequently darting to the Thunderpeal Tree.

"Isn't it over yet?

"How are things?"

These thoughts ran through her mind constantly. She had absolute trust in Li Luo, so much that she would let him run off to the heart of Thunderpeal Mountain without asking too much. But she could not help worrying.

Not like worrying was helping. He was in the middle of the mountain, and the only thing that could help him out of deep trouble was his spirit mirror.

"Hmm?" Jiang Qing'e suddenly noticed that the electrical energy on the vines seemed to be becoming weaker.

Some of them even drooped limply back to the ground after growing out, sagging towards the side listlessly as they emitted the odd spark.

The other Three Star Hall students had noticed this sudden change as well.

"The prison's opening!" the Two Star Hall Ao Bai exclaimed.

To their delight, they saw the entire crown of the tree straightening back up, opening a gap of freedom underneath. The malevolent lightning energy had also ebbed away.

"What's going on?!" It seemed too good to be true that the battle was suddenly over.

Jiang Qing'e smiled happily towards the tree. "Li Luo must have succeeded!"

She looked up to see the First Princess and the other Four Star Hall students lower their weapons as well, as the Thunderpeal Tree was no longer attacking them.

The three strongest students cautiously regrouped back on the ground.

"Qing'e, what happened?" the First Princess asked.

"Li Luo must have succeeded. He said that the Thunderpeal Tree was attacking us because it had been corrupted and lost its reason. Now that some of the corruption seems to have faded away, the tree must have regained its will."

"He... really did it?" The First Princess was astounded. This was her first time experiencing a miracle worked by Li Luo firsthand.

Qin Yue and Zhao Beili looked at each other in confusion as well.

They could imagine how deep the corruption had to be to affect an entity as strong as the Thunderpeal Tree. A mere Resonant Master had actually managed to remove that corruption by himself?

That was something that not even they could do.

How had he pulled it off?!

Then again, the silent tree before them was proof enough. They had to believe the reality that was before them.

"Heh. Hehe. Junior Li Luo is really something special, eh?" Qin Yue chuckled.

The three Heavenly Pearl Stage experts were feeling a little chagrined. They were the strongest members present, and yet their weakest member was the one who had gotten them out of danger.

It was, frankly, embarrassing.

The First Princess recovered very quickly. "This is good news. No matter how, we've overcome the problem of the Thunderpeal Tree."

Qin Yue and Zhao Beili nodded fervently. The mission was complete, thankfully.

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"Has the Thunderpeal Tree regained its sentience?" Lu Ming exclaimed.

Li Luo looked at the silver tree core. It was shooting bunches of silver energy at each spike in turn, tearing away the rot from its trunk.

"Almost completely free now. The poison formation seems to be broken, and now it's picking away at the remaining parts like individual domino pieces. With a bit more time, it'll be completely cleansed again," Li Luo explained.

"The Others eating their way in might be a bit more troublesome, but it's probably manageable for the Thunderpeal Tree. With that level of energy, it could sweep them all out quickly enough."

"So it's settled, then," Lu Ming said with great relief.

Li Luo smiled and nodded. Actually, all they had done was tip the balance slightly in the tree's favor, and it had done the rest.

Still, that little push was crucial, and there was no doubt that they had rescued the Thunderpeal Tree.

Rumble.

As the two slumped in relief, they saw a wall open in the root chamber, and a wooden staircase unfurl for them, leading to an unknown area.

The two first years looked at each other gleefully. Perhaps the Thunderpeal Tree's rewards were here.

Both walked forward eagerly.

Chapter 0552: Imperial Fluxpool

Li Luo and Lu Ming ascended the stairs, which seemed to go on forever. When they finally arrived at the top, they spotted a speck of light, and they quickened their pace eagerly.

Soon, they could see their destination.

Both immediately saw a lake of silver a few dozen meters below them.

No, not really a lake.

It was not filled with water, but rather a silvery mud imbued with lightning. Electricity jumped and sparked merrily within, crackling with a cheery sound.

"It's the Imperial Fluxpool!" Lu Ming said in a reverent half-whisper. Her eyes were as round as they had ever been.

"Imperial... Fluxpool?"

Lu Ming nodded vigorously. "I researched the Blackwind Empire's Thunderpeal Tree before. It's said that the Imperial Fluxpool is the true prize of the tree. The fluxpool is made of the concentrated essence of lightning that the tree produces. The royal family can only be awarded Thunderpeal Fruits, no matter how great their achievement. Only the ruler alone can open the tree and cultivate in the Imperial Fluxpool."

"Sounds like pretty obscure information. How'd you know all that?" Li Luo asked admiringly.

"Because I have a lightning resonance, so of course I'm interested in anything that might be useful to me. The Thunderpeal Tree is one of the few rare entities that would benefit me. However, the Blackwind Empire has never let outsiders onto Thunderpeal Mountain, so it was always a faraway dream for me. I heard that anybody who bathes in the Imperial Fluxpool will be able to cultivate the Thunderpeal Avatar!"

Li Luo cupped his fist in gratitude to all four directions. "Many thanks, brother tree."

Clearly, the Thunderpeal Tree was not as fussy as its human guardians. Of course only the best reward was appropriate to repay its rescuers.

Li Luo and Lu Ming immediately moved to the bank of the Imperial Fluxpool without hesitation.

Li Luo squatted down, running his hand through the goop. His palm felt a thrilling tingle, as though his muscles and blood were energized by the current.

"This is some good stuff!" Li Luo exclaimed. Just a simple pass-through, and he could already sense its potency. It would really bulk up his body.

"If I can cultivate properly in this place, I might be able to pull off Level Two Divine Elephant power without my arms turning into mush every time," Li Luo thought happily to himself. If not for his triple-healing powers, he would not have been able to pull off such a physically demanding move.

Still, healing should always be a plus, not the basis of him pulling off his moves. Which was why strengthening his body had always been high on his priority list.

The Imperial Fluxpool would do just that.

"Li Luo, I really have to thank you for this," Lu Ming said a little self-consciously.

She knew that following Li Luo into Thunderpeal Mountain had led her to a big break. The Imperial Fluxpool was a godsend for a lightning resonance cultivator like herself, far outstripping what rewards Li Luo would get from it.

Which was why she felt like she owed him one.

But given her proud and aloof nature, that was not an easy thing to admit.

Li Luo waved it off easily. "No need to feel indebted. You saved my ass back there as well. We made a good team." "But if you really want to thank me, can you forget about that poisoning incident?"

Lu Ming flushed and did not say more.

"I'm going in," she said.

"Wait," Li Luo suddenly said. She turned to him.

"Don't we need to take our clothes off? I mean, it's a bath, right?"

Lu Ming blushed furiously. "In your dreams!"

She waded in and sat down huffily in the lotus position.

The silver sludge leaped up to cover her in strange spikes, almost like a ferrofluid. The electricity crackled deafeningly around her.

Lu Ming looked unaffected, as though there was not much of a sensation.

She looked like she was being deep-fried, but the actual sensation seemed mild enough. Satisfied, Li Luo walked around to the other side of the pool and hopped in.

Plop.

The silver sludge came surging to him as well.

And then he felt the sizzling power attack his pores like a swarm of miniature bees, their stings relentlessly drilling deep into his flesh. He cramped. He spasmed. He yelped.

It was a titillating feeling, a shocking sensation that left him feeling more alive than ever. But damn if it didn't hurt like hell.

"I've been pranked!"

As he squirmed in agony, he inwardly cursed Lu Ming.

Meanwhile, she had cracked open an eye to look at him. "Strange. Why does the guy look like he is in a pot of boiling oil or something?" She only felt a pleasant tingle on her skin.

"But from the way he is screaming, it doesn't seem like he is faking it."

Her lightning affinity gave her the answer. She could see the flow of energy—most of it was going to Li Luo's position.

It made a gradient in the electrical intensity, and Li Luo's side was much richer than hers.

She understood, looking over at Li Luo enviously.

"The Thunderpeal Tree is really a discerning one," she thought to herself. The tree was the only one that could control the energy flow in the pool. It knew that Li Luo had done the heavy lifting in this rescue, and so it was sending more of the reward his way.

"This guy really doesn't know how to appreciate a good thing," she grumbled to herself. Although Li Luo might feel like he was currently being tasered, she would switch places with him in a heartbeat if she could.

It was a rare privilege to be granted that pain.

Lu Ming contented herself with her own reward, closing her eyes again to focus on her own cultivation.

Chapter 0553: Lightning Forge

When Lu Ming opened her eyes again, the electric mud had receded. She could feel that her body had become more supple and stronger.

Lifting a hand curiously, she flexed her fingers. The faint lightning power shot down her bicep and flared up on her palm with a hum.

Lu Ming lowered her head to look at her reflection in the pool.

"Thunderpeal Avatar..."

She pressed her hand to her chest, and she could sense what felt like a lightning chamber within her.

This lightning forge was the source of the Thunderpeal Avatar's power.

Once it was activated, the lightning forge would send a pulse of energy through the user's entire body, spreading through the muscles, veins, organs, and bones, granting a sudden surge of superhuman strength.

Lu Ming walked out of the Imperial Fluxpool, and the lightning mud fell away from her body.

She looked over at Li Luo's side and saw him still cocooned in the mud. He was glowing brightly.

The purity of the lightning energy made her sigh with envy.

The Thunderpeal Tree was extremely clear with its reward. It had probably given 70 to 80 percent of the energy to Li Luo. Probably not even the rulers of the Blackwind Empire had experienced this sort of treatment before.

He would definitely benefit greatly from such pure energy.

Lu Ming did not disturb him, instead waiting patiently by the banks of the Imperial Fluxpool.

Half a day passed.

Rumble.

Finally, the electric light faded away from Li Luo, and his body was clearly in sight.

There was an afterglow around him that faded away a moment later. Then his eyes slowly opened.

Boom!

A spark leaped out of his eyes, and there was a ray of light shining out on them that landed on the wall he was looking at. After a few moments, that ray of light faded away as well.

Li Luo stood up slowly from the Imperial Fluxpool.

His body had been well-nurtured in the pool, and his skin was dancing with lightning, making him look like a sparkling jewel.

He could feel the changes within, most clearly in his physical strength.

Clenching his fist, he could feel a surge of strength, only this time it was from his actual muscles, and not just granted by the Onyx-Elephant Blade.

After his time in the pool, his physical strength had gone up by more than a notch.

Furthermore, his resonant power had also been enhanced.

He was now properly a Fourth Changing cultivator.

That was a happy surprise. He had thought that the Imperial Fluxpool would only train his body.

On top of all that, Li Luo found something else inside his body.

He saw a lightning forge pulsing with power within him.

The forge was almost like a living being, expanding and contracting gently in rhythm with his breathing. At the same time, the gentle hum of a machine came from within him. Li Luo could feel that it was in harmony with his flesh, veins, and bones, making them tingle with life.

"This lightning forge... does it power the Thunderpeal Avatar?" Li Luo made this assumption based on his senses.

When fully activated, it would grant his body immense strength and speed.

Li Luo was extremely satisfied with the outcome.

It was like a three-for-one sale. Not only was he a Fourth Changing and one step closer to the Earth Fiend Tier, but he had also gotten a physical buff and the Thunderpeal Avatar.

If he fought Jing Taixu again now, he was confident he would crush him easily. "Enough self-admiration, let's get back," Lu Ming called out to him impatiently.

Her voice was beautiful and melodic, but Li Luo sensed a bite of irritation within it.

Regardless, he nodded and leaped out of the Imperial Fluxpool.

"You're a Fourth Changing now?" Lu Ming asked enviously when she sensed his aura.

So he had gotten a resonant power boost as well.

She bit her lip, suppressing her frustration. When she had first met him not long ago, he was behind her in terms of power. But now he was a step ahead.

Still, she was not one to bemoan her fate. She vowed to catch up to him in the near future. "And it looks like you have the Thunderpeal Avatar as well. But let me warn you that the lightning forge is a double-edged sword. The pulse that it sends through your body will make it stronger, but if you overload your body, you will be injured badly.

"That is why the Blackwind Empire's royal family calls the Thunderpeal Avatar the Five Sonic Pulses Body. Of course, we cannot reach the maximum level yet. At most we are capable of using the One Sonic Pulse level."

"Five Sonic Pulses Body, huh..." Li Luo made careful note of that information.

"You can remember the information... but you might not get to use it," Lu Ming said with a hint of sympathy.

"What do you mean?" Li Luo frowned.

"The lightning forges within our bodies have just been constructed. To bring the Thunderpeal Avatar to its full effect, one needs to continuously refine it with lightning resonant power. Otherwise, the lightning forge's energy will be depleted with each use. When all of it is gone, the lightning forge will disappear as well. Understood?"

Li Luo was aghast. This meant that without a lightning resonance, it was a consumable without any real long-term increase to his strength.

"Still, don't be too discouraged. Even though it might be temporary, you've gotten many other permanent improvements here as well," she added hastily, regretting that she might have been too harsh.

He nodded cheerfully. Lu Ming immediately felt irritated again. "Is he not at all discouraged? Or does he simply hide his emotions well?"

In any case, it was not a question she could ask, so she changed the subject. "Shall we go up, then?"

He answered yes, and so she turned to lead the way.

Li Luo followed, watching her lithe form leap up and away. He smiled and opened his palm. On it sat a silver fruit, covered with electrical cracks.

This was the final gift to him from the Thunderpeal Tree, placed into his hand while he was in the Imperial Fluxpool. He could feel a latent and incredibly pure lightning energy within it.

He gently caressed the skin, and a speculative look crossed his eyes.

"Lightning resonant power... lightning resonance, huh." It was not out of the question.

He grinned to himself.

It seemed like he had an idea of what his third acquired resonance was going to be now.

Chapter 0554: Mission Complete

The great battle on Thunderpeal Mountain had subsided some time ago.

Jiang Qing'e, the First Princess, Qin Yue, Zhao Beili, and the others were seated in a tired huddle, recovering as they waited for Li Luo and Lu Ming to emerge.

All of them were in good spirits, because each was clutching a silver Thunderpeal Fruit.

They were gifts from the Thunderpeal Tree after the battle had ended.

A gesture of goodwill, or perhaps an apology for its actions against them from before.

Of course, they had received them gratefully. The Thunderpeal Fruit was one of the reasons why all of them had come to Thunderpeal Mountain.

But after the last close shave with the seeds of corruption inside fake fruits, they were all a little apprehensive about these fruits. No one dared to refine theirs quickly, and everyone was looking to Jiang Qing'e instead.

"Junior Jiang, you have the ninth-grade light resonance. Any signs of corruption?" Qin Yue asked with a tentative smile.

Jiang Qing'e knew what he was asking. She placed her hand on a Thunderpeal Fruit and closed her eyes. After a moment, she shook her head. "These Thunderpeal Fruits should be fine."

They all heaved sighs of relief and smiled more widely, holding on to their fruits possessively.

Except Jiang Qing'e. Her eyes were fixed in the direction of the Thunderpeal Tree. "Why hasn't Li Luo come out yet? Has something happened?"

"Qing'e, no need to worry. Since the Thunderpeal Tree is responding well to us, Li Luo and Lu Ming should be alright as well. If something has happened to them, it must be a good thing," the First Princess said, trying to soothe the other girl's worries.

"We even got Thunderpeal Fruits. Li Luo was the MVP who broke the stalemate. I'm sure the Thunderpeal Tree is richly rewarding him at this moment."

The others overheard this remark as well, and their eyes lit up. They could not imagine what Li Luo and Lu Ming had pulled off to break through this situation for them.

Jiang Qing'e gave a small nod, and she was just about to speak when a flash of silver light appeared from the trunk of the Thunderpeal Tree, and two figures were left in its wake.

Li Luo and Lu Ming.

Everyone rushed over to them.

"Lu Ming, are you guys alright?" The Heavenly Inferno Sage College's Zhao Beili came over, all concerned.

Lu Ming nodded in response to her senior's question.

"Li Luo... you've grown stronger again?" the First Princess asked, looking closely. Indeed, his aura seemed to have made yet another breakthrough.

Li Luo nodded with a grin. "Some good luck helped me get to the Fourth Changing."

This was greeted by general amazement. Jing Taixu was the only One Star Hall student who had reached the Fourth Changing.

But now Li Luo had managed to catch up to him.

Which meant that Jing Taixu would lose soundly in a fight now.

Li Luo had truly made good of his opportunities here at Thunderpeal Mountain.

Jiang Qing'e was checking him from head to toe for injuries, and found nothing serious.

"What happened down there?" she asked. The others' ears perked up in interest as well.

Li Luo and Lu Ming looked at each other, then recounted their adventure without leaving much out.

"What? The black knight? The same one from Riverguard City was here at Thunderpeal Mountain too? And you killed him?! That's a Fiend Palace Tier expert!" The First Princess gasped in disbelief.

The others looked over at Li Luo as though he were some sort of monster, especially Ao Bai from the North Sea Sage College. He was at the quasi General Stage himself, not yet as strong as a true Fiend Palace Tier cultivator, and yet a Resonant Master like Li Luo had beaten one.

"I didn't do the heavy lifting," Li Luo quickly explained. "The Thunderpeal Tree gave me a special lightning arrow that helped me defeat the black knight."

"Even so... it's a very impressive feat," Qin Yue said. Even with external help, it was likely still great work done on Li Luo's part. It would be foolish to believe otherwise.

And they all knew the difference in power between the Evolving Resonance Tier and the Fiend Palace Tier.

The First Princess was looking at Li Luo with wide eyes, and she laid a trembling hand on Jiang Qing'e's shoulder. "Qing'e, the dragon of House Luolan is growing in power by the day. I think he will soon overtake the phoenix."

Jiang Qing'e smiled, a happy and pure smile that made the other male students forget to breathe for a moment. They had not been so struck by her beauty before this.

Everyone could see that she was truly happy.

Was it because she was happy that her husband was growing to become her equal?

Li Luo coughed hastily. "Qing'e, Your Highness, can you guess the identity of the black knight?"

The two girls looked at each other in surprise. After a moment's thinking, they ventured a guess. "The man we met earlier, Huang Lou?"

"You even guessed that?" Li Luo was stunned.

"The tone of your voice gave it away," the First Princess said with a sly smile and a twinkle in her phoenix eyes. "It had to be someone surprising, and we only met one Earth Fiend individual since entering the Red Clay Province," she pointed out.

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "Still, very surprising. Wasn't he the protector of that village? Why would he help the attackers? He should know better than anyone that they were the cause of the situation that the village was in." Li Luo sighed and shook his head. He could not understand it either.

But Huang Lou was dead now, and there was no one to ask. "Oh, do you want a Thunderpeal Fruit? The Thunderpeal Tree gave us some. And you did the most work, so you should get the best rewards," Jiang Qing'e said casually, handing her Thunderpeal Fruit over to him.

"Hey, Jiang Qing'e!" the First Princess cried, waving her hands agitatedly. "You can be fond of this guy, but you can't spoil him rotten! The Thunderpeal Fruit is useful to you too!"

Qin Yue, Zhao Beili, and the others were taken aback by this level of coddling. Were these two that close?!

Li Luo pushed it back to her with an embarrassed smile. "Qing'e, I got stuff much better than a single fruit down there. You keep this."

She took it back without asking more.

"Oh, and there's the mission," Li Luo said, slapping his thigh. He turned around and knocked on the trunk of the Thunderpeal Tree.

There was a flash of light, and then three large cocoons rolled out from within, bundles that were tightly wrapped in leaves. The leaves fell away easily to reveal three unconscious people within.

"The missing team," Li Luo said. "They swallowed the corrupted Thunderpeal Fruits and ended up in a deadly sleep."

"Well, we can just send them out. As for the corruption problem, I'm sure the higher-ups in the Academic Federation can sort them out. It's none of our concern." The First Princess walked up and snapped the spirit mirrors of the team, and they were transported out in a column of light.

At the same time, Li Luo and the others pulled out their own spirit mirrors and checked the points.

Mission accomplished.

Li Luo was feeling quite satisfied. All in all, this Thunderpeal Mountain mission had ended in a fruitful and meaningful way.

Very fruitful. In more ways than one.

Chapter 0555: The Parting Squads

On a mountain slope at the periphery of Thunderpeal Mountain.

The three squads turned for a last look as they left, and they could see thunderclouds descending across the whole mountain, forming a protective veil with the Thunderpeal Tree at its core.

"Looks like no one will be able to get in from now on," Qin Yue said with a satisfied nod.

The veil was powered by the thunderclouds that constantly fed energy to it, and it would probably take a Duke to be able to break through it.

It was definitely engineered by the Thunderpeal Tree, to prevent any more invaders from molesting it.

The tree was sealing itself off from the outside world until the corruption within its territory was completely purged.

Li Luo looked back reflectively as well. The miraculous entity had some sentience, and it would continue to grow with each passing year. Perhaps a hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, it would still be standing, quietly learning and observing the comings and goings of humankind.

He wondered what the tree would be like when he came back again.

He hoped that the Blackwind Empire would be in a better state at that time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we part ways here. It was nice working with all of you," the First Princess said, smiling at each of the squads.

Now that their mission was over, the three squads had no reason to continue traveling together. Each had their own missions to complete and their individual points to chase. Sticking together would cause more problems in terms of point allocation.

Besides, the First Princess was aiming to win first place in this competition. Of course she would not want to split rewards with other teams—that would only drag them down.

Qin Yue and Zhao Beili nodded in understanding.

"It was nice working with all of you. But I think if we meet again at Russet Rock City, we might be working together again," Zhao Beili from the Heavenly Inferno Sage College said. He cupped his fist in farewell.

Russet Rock City was the capital of the Red Clay Province, and also the final stage of the mixed-level competition. They all knew that a powerful enemy awaited them there, and it was on a level of difficulty that far exceeded the power of any individual squad. At that time, there would have to be cooperation.

Besides, there was the information on the mysterious crimson knight-general. Li Luo and Lu Ming had announced it to all the squads. It increased their appraisal of Russet Rock City's danger up a notch.

Qin Yue was quite unwilling to move on. He stared a bit longer at the First Princess and made sure she noticed his feelings for her. He was quite a good catch as well, and it was understandable why he thought he stood a chance to be a good match for her.

Still, he understood that this was not really the time for romance. "I hope to be able to work together again at Russet Rock City, Your Highness."

The First Princess met his ardent look with a polite smile and nod.

Li Luo waved goodbye to Lu Ming as well, and she smiled at him, pearly-whites peeking at him from between her cherry lips. Some of her aloof demeanor had melted away.

"We'll be taking our leave first," Zhao Beili grunted, pumping his eyebrows meaningfully at Li Luo. "That kid is a huge threat. He melted our school's ice queen? In such a short time?" If they spent any more time together, Zhao Beili would be able to see the babies popping up.

He bid a hasty fist-cup farewell to the First Princess, then almost shooed Lu Ming and his other teammate away in his haste.

Qin Yue took the cue and left as well.

"Your Highness, your charm is truly of another world. If you wanted it, I think Qin Yue would happily become your minion and lead the North Sea Sage College behind us," Li Luo chuckled.

"Young Lord, real recognizes real, I see. Your own charm has made that prickly Lu Ming of the Heavenly Inferno Sage College warm to you really quickly. What was the quote? Danger is an aphrodisiac?"

"Your Highness, please!" Li Luo quickly protested. "My relationship with Lu Ming is perfectly platonic!"

"Lu Ming is a talented girl, and she has dual resonances as well," the First Princess said loudly. "Her future is bright. If you could pull her over to House Luolan, maybe Qing'e wouldn't be angry. Maybe she would praise you for doing well instead."

Li Luo looked over at Jiang Qing'e, who was merely watching the banter with a half-amused smile.

Li Luo backed away hastily. "Your Highness, I was wrong to tease you. I surrender."

The First Princess gave him a superior smile, then she patted him on the shoulder. "It's alright, you can turn over a new leaf. That's a good boy." "You little fool. Fencing against me with words?! I was fighting foxy, old politicians since you were in diapers. Don't think your charm against schoolgirls is going to work against me!"

"Our points still put us in first place," Jiang Qing'e said, paying no attention to their conversation.

Their excursion to Thunderpeal Mountain had netted them an extra 50,000 points, and now they had 310,000 points in total. This was only a small lead over the second team led by Lan Lan, who had about 300,000 points.

Only a 10,000 point difference.

"That bugger is really persistent," the First Princess said calmly.

Li Luo pulled out his own spirit mirror and studied the map. Many more cities were lit up now, indicating that they had already been cleansed. It looked like the other squads had been keeping busy as well, pushing ahead with full speed.

"If we continue along this route, we can hit three level three cities before reaching Russet Rock City. There'll also be five level two cities and a bunch of level one cities. That's the highest reward route. Of course, the difficulty is highest too," Li Luo said, pointing it out with his finger. The two girls followed the route he traced and nodded in approval.

"Mm, I think Li Luo's plan gets us the most points," the First Princess agreed.

"Let's do that, then," Jiang Qing'e said decisively. "With full speed." They did not mind the harder difficulty that much. They were a strong squad that could blaze through anything easier than a Greater Heavenly Disaster Class.

The First Princess waved them on as the squad leader, making the final order.

"We go!

"To secure number one!"

Chapter 0556: Crimson Knight-General

In the cold, sooty-black darkness stood an altar-shaped structure. A single person was sitting on top of it in the lotus position.

The person was clad in crimson armor that looked wet, as though it had been freshly dipped in blood. He was merely sitting there, and yet he exuded a presence that would make any passers-by shudder with fear, though they would not be able to explain it. The void around him wavered and flickered.

A pair of cold eyes opened underneath the crimson helm.

In anger.

"Worthless thing!" he roared to the skies, heating up the worldly natural energy around him.

"Years of planning! Damn it! Wretched Academic Federation!" The crimson knight-general's voice trembled with fury. He could feel his formation at the Thunderpeal Tree undone. It had regained sentience.

All of his careful planning, his various methods to poison the tree, undermine its reason, and finally disable it with corruption. *nOVe(lB-In*

It had all come falling down like a house of cards.

He longed to leave his base and roam the lands, cutting down the bastard students where they stood.

But he resisted it.

It was not time yet. Besides, those little bastards would eventually come to him.

"The Academic Federation is cunning. Are they using the Red Clay Province as a testing ground for the Holy Grail Meet? Do they plan on letting their finest students cleanse this area?" the crimson knight-general muttered to himself, eyes gleaming malevolently.

"But they can only send students... which means that their forces are stretched thin as well. The schools cannot properly support the Blackwind Empire. The situation here is not something that a few ordinary Dukes can deal with... unless a King comes. Hmph. As if they could easily summon a King. Such experts are few and far between in the East Divine Continent, and they are all weighed down by their own burdens. As if they could spare the time to come here!"

"Alright then, since these schools want to kill their elites, I'll oblige. I'll make you hurt."

He stood up decisively and made his way to the door, which he flung open.

A ray of faint light streamed in. The crimson knight-general walked out to stand on top of a tall tower. From his vantage point, he could see many buildings that covered the land in a much wider scale than Riverguard City.

There was only one city of this scale in the Red Clay Province, and it was none other than Russet Rock City.

But what was surprising about this city was that it was not broken down like Riverguard City. Russet Rock City was well-preserved, and its red walls stood tall like giants protecting the city.

What was even more shocking was that the city was teeming with people, moving along the streets about their business as far as the crimson knight-general's eye could see. The place looked to be in the height of prosperity, unchanged from how it once was.

"What an illusion," the crimson knight-general marveled, shaking his head. "Truly lifelike. Even an Earth Fiend would lose themselves within it."

Even he, who knew for sure that it was an illusion, could not shake off the feeling of realism. Every last detail was perfect, tempting you to reach forward to touch it and confirm the illusion for yourself again and again.

The illusion before him was crafted by the one above him.

The crimson knight-general looked now to the crimson barrier at the center of the entire city. It was opaque, but he had the power to look within.

Within the crimson light was a demonic woman, curled up comfortably like a fox. She was extremely beautiful, and one would easily get lost in her eyes, which were closed at the moment. Even so, there was something otherworldly about her, an alien allure that roused something hot and urgent within any who looked upon her. But not the crimson knight-general. His eyes were firmly fixed on the large, reddish-brown tail that was coiled behind her.

If one looked closely, one would see that the tail continued to seep blood, and the red hair that seemed to fall softly along the tail was actually as sharp as needles.

From up close, tormented screams came from the blood-red tail.

The crimson knight-general could not take his eyes off it. He knew that every last hair on it was crafted from a human sacrifice. This thing had taken a long time to finish off the million people that had lived in this city.

A ghastly deed.

The crimson knight-general stared and stared, until a vapid, greedy expression spread across his face. He chuckled to himself.

He had to claim credit for this horrific masterpiece as well.

"After all these years, I've finally nurtured it to strength... and yet these Others are really animals. It's started to plot against me as well in the last two years, pfft.

"The Academic Federation's interference will be a great opportunity."

When the students came, they would fight it, and it would be a close fight either way. He could easily mop up the remains then.

"It's time to harvest the fruits... soon.

"It's a pity that the Thunderpeal Tree plan didn't work out," he muttered regretfully to himself again. "But no matter... once I repel the Academic Federation's nosy, little brats, I can go back to deal with it again."

The crimson knight-general laughed to himself again, then he put his hands together and made a sign. On one of his fingers was a dark-red ring with a black eye with a white iris carved on it. "The genesis of light and dark are one, good and evil cease as one," the crimson knight-general murmured.

And then he laughed again maniacally.

"And at the moment they cease, I rise."

Chapter 0557: Meeting Lan Lan

The mixed-level competition carried on at an intense pace.

The Red Clay Province was fraught with dangers that would prevent ordinary humans from moving even a step, paralyzed in fear. Yet the elite student squads were moving swiftly throughout, strong enough to proceed with caution.

They scurried across the land, efficient, little groups that moved to deal with the corruption, turning the land from dark to light as they chased down the objectives and points.

The points were a powerful source of motivation that spurred them on to take down corrupted city after corrupted city.

By the 20th day of competition, the map of the Red Clay Province reflected in the spirit mirrors had already been more than half cleansed, marking the second half of the competition.

...

In the morose ruins of a large city, a cleansing light sprayed upwards into the sky from one point, sending a shower of light-yellow power across the region, purging the corruption within.

Li Luo stood on a broken tower, checking his spirit mirror. He smiled.

"700,000 points. We've really been pushing the pace." It had been about 10 days since they had departed Thunderpeal Mountain, and they had not let up even once. Moving at full speed, they had cleansed every single objective along their way, both big and small.

Including the extermination of every single Other they had come across.

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e nodded in relief after hearing Li Luo's announcement. They had pushed themselves hard in the last few days, and they had shouldered roughly 80 percent of the pressure. They had to fight the Disaster Class Others, including quite a handful of Lesser Heavenly Disaster Class Others.

They had not had a break at all.

Anyone less brilliant than this pair would have crumbled already.

The First Princess was clad in a form-fitting set of purple top and trousers. Her long hair was done up in a simple ponytail, and she looked more like a youthful adventurer than an elegant princess. The fighting had also left some gashes in her clothing, exposing the glowing skin underneath, but the battles had worn down any thoughts of modesty here.

"What about Lan Lan's squad?" she asked, phoenix eyes narrowed.

"They're at 660,000 points, Boss!" weakest squad member Li Luo chirruped dutifully.

"They haven't fallen off a bit either," Jiang Qing'e said. Her heavy sword was resting on her lap, and her long hair had come undone in the last fight, cascading softly around her face. She had her aloofness worn away in the heat of battle too, and was speaking a little more warmly now.

Li Luo nodded. One main reason why they had worked themselves so hard was because of the pressure from Lan Lan's squad. But no matter how hard they pushed, the other squad was right there with them.

Both Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess had strong personalities. Since they had declared their intention to take the championship, they would do their best to live up to it. Neither would give up easily.

"I'm sure they are suffering as well," Li Luo offered.

They had fought many grueling battles along the way. Even the First Princess had been injured a few times. Although the strongest Four Star Hall student was in Lan Lan's squad, he could not possibly be that much stronger than the First Princess, not even with his Duke Art.

And on their side, they had Jiang Qing'e, who was definitely much stronger than Lu Jinci.

All in all, the combination of Lan Lan and Lu Jinci might not be stronger than the combination of the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e.

And if even the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e were feeling exhausted, how much peppier could the others be feeling?

It was a test of willpower and endurance to the end.

Li Luo walked up behind Jiang Qing'e and placed a tender hand on her back, transferring power over.

She froze for a moment, then she relaxed into the warmth of his hand, enjoying the small amount of healing. She half-turned to smile at him, too tired to care about whether he was being truly kind or if he had other things on his mind.

Li Luo avoided her eyes, keeping his face straight as he touched her alabaster skin.

Still, his healing skills were not bad, and Jiang Qing'e felt slightly better.

A while later, she reached around and tapped the back of his hand slightly. He removed it.

"Qing'e, if there's any other place that feels uncomfortable, just let me know and I'll massage it for you," Li Luo said eagerly.

"Oh, Little Li Luo, this big sister over here is feeling the aches all over as well. Can you massage me?" the First Princess called over teasingly.

Li Luo was just about to reply when he felt a sudden death stare from Jiang Qing'e beside him. "Your Highness," he hurriedly called back, "what you suggest is improper between us!"

The First Princess' laughter rang out in sweet peals. She was just joking with him. She wasn't Jiang Qing'e, and if Li Luo dared to actually touch her, she would probably peel his fingernails out. (l/b--1/n)

Li Luo rolled his eyes, but he was actually used to the First Princess' teasing at this point.

"Our high-level fighting is almost at an end now," Li Luo said, pulling out his spirit mirror again. "If we keep going, there'll only be one level three city left, and then we're clear to head to Russet Rock City."

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e looked to where Li Luo was pointing on the map.

"We take down that city and then we'll be at the final stage of the mixed-level competition... but it won't be an easy city to take," Li Luo said. "Many other possible routes converge here. We might run across other squads, which will lead to fights breaking out over the city."

"We'll just fight them off, no different from the other contested cities before," Jiang Qing'e said indifferently.

Although the inter-squad competition was not as strong in the mixed-level competition, it still existed.

For example, a level three city was a big prize worth 50,000 points. No one would want to share it or let it go. Therefore, they would usually fight, and the winning squad won the right to take the city.

It was an unspoken rule at this point.

Li Luo nodded. "Yeah, but I think there's a chance we'll meet Lan Lan's squad here. Given their speed, it's likely our paths will cross there."

"Surely we won't be that unlucky." The First Princess frowned. "They might be coming from a completely different direction."

"We'll meet them sooner or later," Jiang Qing'e said calmly. "If we meet them here, we can see how strong they really are."

The First Princess nodded. She was not afraid of Lan Lan.

"This is just a guess, but maybe we won't meet," Li Luo said with an easy shrug. If they could take the last level three city smoothly and head to Russet Rock City without too many problems, that would be ideal.

"Rest another two hours, then move?" Li Luo asked the two girls.

Both nodded.

After their rest, the squad moved on from their last objective, headed to their penultimate one.

Moving at full speed, they took only one day to reach the level three city.

When they arrived, they spotted a swift movement towards them from another direction. It appeared to be three people drawing closer.

A mere minute later, they appeared in front of Li Luo's squad.

Li Luo grimaced.

The First Princess shot him a dirty look. "Your mouth absolutely sucks. It's too big, and it jinxes us."

Right in front of them was none other than Lan Lan's squad.

Chapter 0558: Fight at the Top

Lan Lan's team stared at the First Princess, Jiang Qing'e, and Li Luo from across the gates of the gray, corrupted city.

All six students had guarded expressions, and even the usually calm Lan Lan had narrowed eyes, making them even smaller than usual.

The two leading squads of the mixed-level competition had finally met.

The tension in the atmosphere was palpable.

"Hello there. It seems like we were the ones who arrived first." The First Princess' opening salvo went out.

"Friend Gong, you know that matters not in this competition," Lan Lan replied tersely.

"Oh? Was it that sort of barbaric competition?" the First Princess asked mildly.

She was the kind of person who wielded both charm and force with equal skill, choosing whichever approach would serve her best. A less experienced opponent would be easily swayed.

Not Lan Lan, master of the Enlightened Sage Scripture. "Friend Gong, your squad is topping the leaderboards," he said with an easy smile back at them. "How about you give this city to us?"

The First Princess' amiability vanished. "An impertinent request. You think the Enlightened Sage Scripture allows you to do whatever you please?"

"I fight for my school and not my pride," Lan Lan said, shaking his head. "If this were anywhere else, I would let you have it without a second thought."

"Pretty words," the First Princess said coolly. "But we are not dealing with anywhere else. The usual rules it is."

Meaning they would fight for it.

"We are not the only ones fighting for this place," Lan Lan said calmly. "Look around you. The cunning bastards are all flocking like vultures." There were many other squads trying to remain hidden while the two strongest squads fought.

"Perfect. Then they will know to fear us."

"Are you that confident?" Lan Lan laughed. "We even fought in the hall-level competition."

"Things are different now," the First Princess replied testily. "Your Enlightened Sage Scripture is very strong, but I can definitely hold you for some time. Then my two squad mates will finish yours off. I'm sure you know what the outcome will be then."

"Hold me for some time?" Lan Lan repeated. "In the time that the Enlightened Sage Scripture takes to prepare? It is such a short time... Junior Jiang might be unparalleled in the Three Star Hall, but I'm not so sure Lu Jinci will hold out for less time than you can. And as for Junior Li Luo, he only clinched a pyrrhic victory over Jing Taixu. I don't foresee a quick win there either."

A threatening edge crept into his voice now. "What I see is that the Enlightened Sage Scripture will be prepared first, and then you will pay the price, Friend Gong."

The First Princess smiled thinly in response, flicking her jade scepter and summoning her resonant power in the form of seven heavenly pearls.

She moved with no hesitation at all, jade scepter flashing out with void-breaking power.

The green resonant power formed the shape of a green luan, soaring out like a star chasing the moon as it swooped down on Lan Lan.

With a soft sigh of resignation, Lan Lan began to gather his own powder-blue water resonant power with almost boredom in his movements. A huge hand rose up from within the ocean of water to face the green luan.

Boom!

The two cultivators met in an epic clash of energies that shook the corrupted energy some distance away in the city.

Jiang Qing'e had moved at the same exact instant, a streak of light bearing down furiously on Lu Jinci.

Lu Jinci paled, focusing all his energy into running away.

Li Luo hefted his Onyx-Elephant Blade and landed lightly before Jing Taixu.

"So we fight again," he remarked casually.

Jing Taixu looked at Li Luo considerably. His loss in the hall-level competition had haunted him until now. If he had just held out a bit longer, it would have been Li Luo who lost.

And he would have been the strongest One Star Hall student.

"Don't waste your strength, Li Luo. We would not fight for long anyway. The key now is if Senior Jiang can defeat Senior Lu before the Three Kowtows of the Enlightened Sage can take effect. We should just watch quietly from the sidelines," Jing Taixu reasoned.

Li Luo stared at him in surprise. "You don't think there's another possibility? Like maybe I could defeat you first and then threaten Lan Lan to surrender?"

Jing Taixu stared at him in disgust. "Looks like someone's gotten cocky after the last win."

Li Luo merely smiled, pointing his Onyx-Elephant Blade at Jing Taixu.

"Alright," Jing Taixu hissed. "Let's see what you have to back up that big mouth of yours!" His green plantain fan swept out, wind roaring to life behind it.

...

While the two squads fought, many eyes were watching them.

Gong Shenjun's squad was one of them.

"Senior Gong, why aren't we going to help?! Together, the two of you can definitely beat Lan Lan!" Duze Honglian said urgently.

"Lan Lan's squad is the greatest enemy of our school. We can't let this level three city fall into their hands, or they'll overtake us."

Duze Honglian regarded all of the Astral Sage College's squads as one and the same in this competition. They should definitely join forces.

Gong Shenjun shook his head slightly. "We can't move. I can sense that the other squads have locked on to our position. If we join the fray, more squads will fight as well. They would rather not have this delicate balance upset."

Duze Honglian hung her head.

"Don't worry," Gong Shenjun said with a reassuring smile. "Luanyu's squad might not lose. If she can hold out for a while, Junior Jiang might well catch Lu Jinci."

"I hope it is as you say." Duze Honglian sighed.

Chapter 0559: A Second Encounter with Jing Taixu

A ferocious battle kicked off in a flash, akin to a spark setting off an explosion.

The majestic brawl occurred right outside the corrupted city, three distinct groups of mighty resonant power igniting and emanating in all directions. novE-18.1n

The most eye-catching sight was the First Princess and Lan Lan's scuffle. The two possessed seven-pearl Heavenly Pearl resonant power, immediately clashing with full force without hesitation, endless resonant power overflowing out of them and into the air.

Although Lan Lan had eked out a victory over the First Princess in the previous round, he would not fall into complacency. Their strength did not differ by much, and his only trump card over her was the Enlightened Sage Scripture.

At the same time, there was an understanding that he had to rely on said scripture to win.

Thus, from the moment blows started being exchanged, he had begun to quietly circulate this technique, taking every opportunity to prepare the Duke Art.

Meanwhile, curious gazes shifted to focus upon Jiang Qing'e and Lu Jinci's battlefield. Everyone knew that the First Princess' aim was to stall for time, to give Jiang Qing'e the opportunity to turn the tables. Once Lu Jinci was captured, Lan Lan's hands would definitely be tied.

Why? Based on the mixed-level competition rules, the moment one member in a team was eliminated, the overall points of the team would also be deducted accordingly.

However, this was an overt ploy that even Lu Jinci was clearly aware of. He had first-hand understanding of the gap in power that existed between the two of them. Even when all of the other Three Star Hall students ganged up upon her, they were only unceremoniously beaten down in the blink of an eye. By his estimations, ten seconds would very possibly be the absolute most he could last against her.

Thus, he chose to race away, helter skelter without any hesitation.

Lu Jinci heroically burst out with all his might, completely ignoring the terror known as Jiang Qing'e, concentrating all his effort into running away.

This was going to be a game of time.

Jiang Qing'e was not surprised as she followed in pursuit. Despite the short distance between the two, bridging the gap would require quite some time. Lu Jinci was also at the Fiend Finisher Tier and thus even someone like her would not find it a simple task to catch this rat.

The gazes of some of the individuals hiding in the hilly forest turned dark. They could vaguely make out that a massive avatar had started to materialize behind Lan Lan, bringing about a sense of indescribable pressure.

Time almost seemed to stop at this very instant.

Weng!

Whilst attention was focused upon the two peak level skirmishes, a certain somebody was being forgotten. The majestic resonant powers that constantly collided with utmost force had overshadowed a much quieter battle between Resonant Master Stage cultivators.

Jing Taixu was brandishing his green plantain fan, summoning countless green wind blades whilst summoning the full power of his quasi ninth-grade spirit avatar. He was basically a force of nature in human form.

Yet for all that disastrous splendor, it fell apart almost as quickly as it started before a rapidly rotating blade, leaving Jing Taixu with an unpleasant expression.

"You've reached the Fourth Changing?" Jing Taixu probed before falling silent.

During the hall-level competition, Li Luo had taken advantage of all kinds of strange tricks to temporarily reach the Fourth Changing. The current situation had changed and he could feel that Li Luo's resonant power had truly become denser and stronger, indicating his breakthrough.

On the other hand, Li Luo remained unfathomably calm in the face of Jing Taixu's question, intensely focused upon him. "Well now, I wonder if the current me can repeat my achievement once again," he quipped whilst tightly grasping the Onyx-Elephant Blade.

Level One Divine Elephant Power!

Li Luo's limbs trembled as berserk power rushed into them. He might have been able to resist the strain in the past, but it would come with numerous injuries that would leave his skin and muscles torn apart. But things were different now. Despite wielding the power, he remained completely unharmed, taming it.

All this was thanks to the benefits borne from the Imperial Fluxpool.

His body had been elevated to a new level.

Feeling the might course through him without issue brought a smile to Li Luo's face. With a thought, he kicked the lightning forge into overdrive as well.

Boom!

Thunderous roars crackled mysteriously within him when the lightning forge ignited.

As the sound of thunder passed through, whether it was his flesh, blood, meridians, or bones, they all seemed to have been awakened by some esoteric power, becoming abnormally active and boiling with vigor.

All of this happened within him, and the only outward sign was that a few ripples of lightning seemed to bathe Li Luo's skin. A glimpse of it could also be seen flickering through his pupils occasionally.

The end result? His body felt invincible!

Thus, with this in mind, he activated the Level Two Divine Elephant Power without hesitation.

Boom!

The Onyx-Elephant Blade trembled and a frightening wave of violent energy exploded outwards and into him, as though an ancient elephant was stampeding directly.

Both of his arms swelled up massively, demonstrating the titanic strength he now possessed.

Blue veins could be seen criss-crossing his arms, throbbing like moving earthworms with every pulse of energy, encasing the earth-shattering power that was ready to erupt at any moment.

With great power came great strain. Tiny blood rivulets gradually started to bead on his arms as his body was stretched a little past its tolerable limit.

Despite feeling the pain, Li Luo was only all smiles at this point.

His arms had not been completely wrecked this time!

With the tempering of his fleshly body and the benefits from the Thunderpeal Avatar, Li Luo had managed to resist the strain of the Level Two Divine Elephant Power without the need for recovery resonant arts.

He was finally ready. A cold gaze focused upon Jing Taixu.

On the other hand, this sight had frightened the crap out of his opponent. Jing Taixu could vaguely sense that Li Luo carried an unfathomable sense of danger!

Furthermore, this far surpassed whatever he had seen in the hall-level competition.

"Just what the heck did this guy do to get so strong?" Jing Taixu's felt cold sweat running down his back, and he immediately started to retreat. Waving his green plantain fan, tons of green resonant power began to agglomerate and even the slight hint of a dragon's roar could be heard.

"Dragon-general resonance art, Wind Demon's Wrath!" With another wave of the fan, the gathered resonant power materialized into an azure-black spear possessing unfathomable power. It flew towards Li Luo, its mere presence causing the space around it to distort.

He hadn't shown a shred of hesitation to bring out his strongest killing move to deal with him.

This very same move had almost disposed of Li Luo during the last competition.

The spear rent the air as it whizzed past, causing a sonic boom with its sheer speed.

Li Luo could see the spear gradually growing larger as it approached him. Without skipping a beat, he braced himself, activating his Water Edge and then directly cleaving towards the attack!

Weng!

A single chop. Terrifying resonant power was emitted from the blow, seemingly warping the space around him. At the same time, a sword gash spanning dozens of feet could be seen arcing through the ground in front of him.

This was the power of a single strike. It had far surpassed anything Li Luo had managed to pull off thus far.

Ding!

The sword light clashed directly with the heavy spear.

A crisp and clear ring reverberated immediately upon contact. Then came a thunderous boom that deafened the corrupted city.

Chapter 0560: The Fastest

Meanwhile, the battle between the First Princess and Lan Lan had reached fever pitch. The two had a good idea of the other's strength and thus there was no need to probe. Every blow they exchanged was full of lethal intent.

"High-grade dragon-general resonance art, Green Luan Sword Technique." The First Princess took the initiative to burst out with her strongest resonance art. With a shout, green light blanketed the skies and a thousand-foot Luan took shape, fluttering its wings majestically, causing nine green feathers to gradually descend.

These nine feathers transformed into sword lights in a blink, each possessing heaven-rending sharpness, warping the space around the Luan. One's blood could turn cold just from seeing it.

Even the ones observing from the side could feel a piercing pain in its presence, testament to its unparalleled power.

One does not simply look down upon the First Princess. She was still a peak contender of the Four Star Hall across all of the Sage Colleges across the continent.

Lan Lan similarly did not take things lightly. Seeing his opponent bring out her trump card, his expression turned grave. In response, he formed a series of hand signs with lightning speed, leaving behind afterimages.

At the same time, the blurry avatar behind him started to take form even quicker.

"Green Luan Sword Lotus!"

Her emotionless gaze was coupled with a green rune soaring out of the scepter in her hand, with the nine sword lights arrayed around it, forming an elegant sight that instilled both awe and fear within the viewers around her.

The green sword lotus exuded terrifying might as it whirled with ferocious intent, swallowing and absorbing all of the worldly natural energy, gaining the strength to constantly tear the void apart.

In a blink, it tunneled through the void to arrive straight at Lan Lan.

With great speed and momentum, it collided right into him.

Under the anxious gazes of all, everyone was on the edges of their seats.

Boom!

Right at the moment of collision, millions of green sword lights swept outwards with cataclysmic force, eviscerating everything and anything, gouging out deep furrows in the ground near the point of impact. The space where Lan Lan was standing looked to be even more devastated, almost fragmenting under the pressure of its own existence.

Sword light blanketed half the sky in a momentary flash of grandeur.

First Princess continued to stare at the shattered area of space but 10 breaths later, her expression wryly changed.

As the space gradually repaired and restored itself, where Lan Lan used to stand had appeared a mysterious power that gradually radiated outwards. This strange force seemed to possess immeasurable might and was as vast as the abyss! Where it passed through, sword light would be swallowed and dissipate without a trace.

Just as quickly as it came, the green sword lotus disintegrated into thin air. Meanwhile, Lan Lan was currently floating in midair, the giant avatar behind him already completely materialized.

Incomparable, incomprehensible power radiated from it.

Even the curious gazes from within the mountain forest all contained glints of fear.

This was Lan Lan's Enlightened Sage Scripture finally demonstrating its capabilities.

"Senior Gong, Lan Lan has brought out his trump card. If we don't help out now, the First Princess will undoubtedly be eliminated!" Duze Honglian's expression turned anxious as she blurted out her thoughts.

Gong Shenjun calmly watched the scene before him. "As I said before, The moment I act, the situation will become incredibly difficult. Instead, we should hope that Junior Jiang is able to quickly capture Lu Jinci and turn the tables."

With that, Duze Honglian immediately turned to look towards Jiang Qing'e, one of many watching the other critical battle unfolding.

Bang!

Lu Jinci had been struck by another blast of light resonant energy, being knocked flying and crashing into a boulder.

However, he completely disregarded his injuries, quickly summoning more resonant power and escaping as though his life truly depended upon it.

Right after he moved, a pillar of light crashed down upon where he was just standing, piercing deeply into the ground.

His eyes furrowed at the sight of that attack. That was the light resonant energy's Demonbane Nails, something he had managed to amply experience during the hall-level competition. The moment he was afflicted by it, his resonant power would inevitably be sealed.

If this were to happen, the result would be plain for all to see. Defeat.

"Senior Lan, please act quicker! I can't hold on any longer!" Lu Jinci screamed in fear with cold sweat beading down his back.

Hearing his cries of help, Lan Lan could feel the urgency of the situation, and his expression turned grim. Staring right at the First Princess, he spoke bluntly. "Since you're unwilling to back off, then I'll take you down myself!"

He quickly formed a series of hand seals, and the giant avatar behind him started to move.

Absolute crushing pressure descended from the skies, blanketing the First Princess in its full fury.

Her expression ashen, even she could feel a hint of fear surfacing from deep within. However, this did not mean that she would give up. She steeled her resolve, tightly grasping the green jade scepter, pushing her resonant power to its extremes.

Seven heavenly pearls took form behind her, and resplendent brilliance spilled out from them.

This was the last stand.~~nor~~**VE-L**/In

The First Princess might be of the fairer sex, but her determination and bravery far surpassed that of any of the guys around her.

Lan Lan took a deep breath but remained unflustered. The massive avatar began to act, and the worldly natural energy around it was frantically incited, creating waves of power in its vicinity.

Alas, just as he was about to execute the three kowtows, a certain voice piped up, ruining the suspense.

"Senior Lan, why don't you stop there? Look who I have!" The interruption was unexpected, and Lan Lan was taken aback. Turning to face the source of the distraction, his pupils shrank at the sight of what greeted him. [1]

Atop a pile of rubble stood a triumphant Li Luo, his hand grasping the Onyx-Elephant Blade with its blade pointing directly at the chest of a kneeling Jing Taixu. There was also a spiritual mirror looming above them. Lan Lan seemed a little lost in thought at that moment.

"Jing Taixu lost?"

"How... Why...? What happened and how did Jing Taixu lose so quickly?"

How was this possible? Li Luo may have taken the victory in the hall-level competition, but it was a hardfought, pyrrhic victory. On the other hand, he currently seemed to be radiating with energy, as though he had barely even warmed up!

"How did he win?"

Lan Lan glanced at Jing Taixu, whose expression was pale and seemingly in a trance.

Some surprised shouts could also be heard coming from within the forest.

This was completely outside of everyone's expectations.

Everyone had expected their battle to be drawn out and bitter. Thus, no one had bothered to watch them, considering the fact that speed was the key. In fact, the focus was on Lan Lan and the First Princess.

Yet even before Jiang Qing'e was able to corner Lu Jinci, Li Luo had already concluded the battle.

This was also before Lan Lan could utilize his final move, forcing things into an impasse.

Even Duze Honglian was taken by surprise at this scene. Most people couldn't even believe their eyes.

"How did Li Luo beat him so quickly?" Zhu Xuan asked.

Duze Honglian could only heave a sigh. Although she did not understand how this was achieved, Li Luo had truly captured Jing Taixu as a hostage the quickest. If Lan Lan were to continue with his actions, he would have to bear the consequences.

Even the valiant and heroic Gong Shenjun was astonished. Paying greater attention to Li Luo, he finally let out a smile.

"Our dear Junior Li Luo is truly a man of miracles."