

Resonance 181

Chapter 0181: Emerald Arrow of Wood

The tree of resonant power grew on, urged by Li Luo's power. It sprouted jade-green leaves that sparkled with a mystical light. Water resonant power trickled down the length of its trunk, absorbed into the tree.

Wood resonance and water resonance came together, xylem and bark.

The tree of resonant power's leaves wilted as quickly as they had grown. Soon, only the heart of the tree was left, sparkling with crystal sap within.

Within was a tremendous, condensed power.

Dual resonances!

One that was even more stable than the dual resonance slashes that Li Luo had just used.

Li Luo finally opened his eyes slowly, and he gave Wang Hejiu's squad a slow grin. He stretched out his hand, and the core of the tree flew up obediently. Wood shavings peeled away like magic, until a thick, jade-green arrow of wood was left in his hand.

His shortwords bit against each other, forming the silver-blue bow.

Notching the wooden arrow, Li Luo could feel his bow tremble, barely able to harness the power of its load.

"Seems like I need to upgrade the bow too..." Li Luo thought to himself. Regardless, he sighted down on the three stooges, who were looking at him with trepidation.

The winning hand.

"I can't believe we've been pushed this far..." Wang Hejiu said with a suffering expression. This battle had been many times harder than what he had expected. Li Luo should have crumbled before him and Duze Beixuan, but he had not. And now he had even brought out the dual resonances.

He felt like his second place ranking was a little shaky.

"Pull out the trump card. We're not too good at it yet, but we have no choice but to try. I know we were saving it for Qin Zhulu, but if we don't use it now, we might not even get out of this," Wang Hejiu said to his squad.

Both nodded soberly, seeing the truth of his words.

Qi Luozi started it, forest-green resonant power taking shape as vines that formed a stent-like tube with the diameter of a bowl.

It looked like a cannon's bore.

Wang Hejiu placed his hand on it, his poison resonant power flowing in.

Duze Beixuan matched him, his own resonant power mixing within. The cannon glowed, and Qi Luozi strained to contain the power within.

"No... more..." she said through gritted teeth. "Can't... hold... on!"

Wang Hejiu looked faint himself, swaying on the spot. He nodded vaguely to Duze Beixuan, and both slammed their hands onto the cannon.

"Venomous Kun Cannon!"

BOOM!

The cannon roared, spitting green sparks and a giant beam of resonant power. A sickly-green Kun appeared, its skin dripping with acid.

This was a masterpiece of a resonance art combination, its power an awe to behold.

"That's quite something..." Li Luo watched with some apprehension. Finally, he managed to stabilize his bow, and he let fly with his rough wooden arrow.

Weng!

A shrill twang reported off his bowstring as an emerald streak shot out.

The wooden arrow did not fly with any remarkable speed, soaring out at roughly the same speed as the other light arrows he had fired before. Yet behind its ordinary appearance was an overwhelming reservoir of power.

Li Luo's dual resonances!

Shoosh!

It looked like a stone from David's sling, soaring out towards the skull of Goliath—the Venomous Kun Cannon.

There was no colossal or epic reaction. The arrow silently whistled through the Kun, and its toxins dissipated along with the power.

Some light scarring could be seen on the arrow.

Shoosh!

The arrow punched through the Venomous Kun, emerging on the other end with a shaft looking much the worse for wear.

The dismay on the trio's faces was stark. Had their trump card failed to fully block Li Luo's arrow?

Just how perverse was this dual resonance crap?

The arrow could not hold its shape any longer, exploding in a colossal blast of resonant power a few feet away from the three.

They were caught up in the blast and were sent flying into the gorge walls. They all coughed up fresh blood, heavily wounded.

Li Luo shook his head weakly and sank down on a stone himself. He did not even have enough energy to lift a single finger.

The arrow had taken every last bit of energy out of him.

Wang Hejiu, Duzhe Beixuan, and Qiu Luo staggered to their feet with great difficulty, squinting at the unmoving Li Luo, equally spent.

"Let's go... while he's spent. Go!" Wang Hejiu said with great difficulty.

The three of them were in poor condition, not much better off than Li Luo. All thoughts of taking Li Luo's team were put away. Their goal now was just to protect their own points.

Surely Li Luo had no more strength to chase them, right?

Just protect their points. Call this a draw and save some face.

The three helped each other up and turned to leave.

Li Luo tried to laugh, but he only managed a weak splutter, his lips too weak to open properly. He and Xin Fu were out of commission, but surely their group could count to three?

Bai Mengmeng stood in the way of Wang Hejiu's squad, bright, liquid eyes staring at them and dainty rapier in hand.

Wang Hejiu stared at her, a lump in his throat rising until it felt like his Adam's apple was twice its size.

How could he have forgotten? The final member.

Ordinarily, she was not even worthy of their attention, but now the three were barely on their feet. She was invincible before them.

She bit her lip. "Well... hand over your badges, please. My hand normally trembles when I hit people, and I don't really want to risk hitting you in a critical spot."

Their faces soured.

Finally, Wang Hejiu took out their badges, tossing them down before Bai Mengmeng. A third of their points were now forfeit.

Bai Mengmeng put her hands together. "Thanks, thanks," she said fervently.

Her courtesies did nothing to improve their moods. They knew that a storm awaited them on the horizon—the dark wrath of their mentor, Shen Jinxiao. The days ahead were going to be bleak.

Chapter 0182: First Princess' Invitation

Many were watching the conclusion of the Li Luo-Wang Hejiu battle.

Even among the Four Star Hall students there was surprise and respect.

Li Luo's dual resonances were insanely powerful.

This was the power of a Duke? Li Luo had barely scratched the surface of it, and the power was already incredible.

How far would he go when he managed to master it?

Perhaps he would even be equal to a ninth-grade.

Jiang Qing'e watched with a faint smile. As much as she believed in Li Luo, it was always nice to have the result in stone.

She looked back at the First Princess, her red phoenix eyes wide in surprise.

She had gone along with Jiang Qing'e's words, but deep down, she had not truly believed Li Luo could be equal to both Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan.

Dual resonances was a power that even she aspired to obtain.

"Junior Jiang, this is truly a miracle. It's my first time seeing dual resonances used before the Duke Stage."

"Li Luo is of the line of those two House lords. How could the apple fall too far from the tree?" Jiang Qing'e replied.

"Dukes Xuan and Lan were the youngest Dukes in the Xia Kingdom. Indeed, they were extraordinary." The First Princess agreed.

Even Jiang Qing'e had to acknowledge the emotional tact that the First Princess had. No wonder the Four Star Hall students were in love with her.

"I see that Li Luo has both a water resonance and a wood resonance. Is that correct?"

Jiang Qing'e nodded.

"Junior Jiang surely knows, but His Majesty has natural frailties that require long-term medication. For many years, the royal court has sought out powerful healers, but to no avail. Someone said that the weakness can only be treated by powerful water, light, or wood resonances..."

"Li Luo might only be a Resonant Master cultivator, but I wonder, could he try treating His Majesty?" The First Princess bit her lip slightly when she finished.

Jiang Qing'e's eyebrows shot up. "Li Luo? Treat His Majesty?"

"I know it sounds crazy," the First Princess quickly replied. "But I don't want to rule out any possibility. Surely it is worth a try."

Jiang Qing'e hesitated.

The First Princess reached out a hand to clasp hers, her red phoenix eyes beseeching. "Don't worry. Even if it doesn't work out, the royal court will hold no grudge.

"Please. Take it as a desperate sister trying to save her younger brother."

Jiang Qing'e was a little moved, but she had the awareness to know that the First Princess was no innocent little girl either. She ruled the city and the kingdom with clear strategy, and her request for Li Luo to treat the king was definitely no spur-of-the-moment request.

The chances of success seemed slim. It seemed doubtful that Li Luo could pull off anything Duke experts could not.

But there was another layer to this request. A deeper meaning... If Li Luo made the attempt, then House Luolan would be connected to the First Princess, regardless of the outcome. She would be drawn closer in connection.

Sometimes, a small trigger like this was enough to further a relationship.

Which meant that the First Princess was courting her favor.

Jiang Qing'e thought it over. She was not intending to refuse a friendly hand from the First Princess. After all, they were the most powerful faction in the Xia Kingdom besides the Astral Sage College and the Golden Dragon Bank.

Strengthening ties with them was good news for House Luolan.

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "Since Her Highness has asked personally, we will do our best to assist. But I beg you not to get your hopes up. Li Luo's resonances might be aligned, but he is still a mere Resonant Master cultivator."

The First Princess smiled happily.

"My thanks to Junior Jiang and Junior Li Luo."

"Your Highness is too kind."

At this time, Gong Shenjun walked over, with his usual entourage behind him.

"Congratulations, Junior Jiang. Not only did your own ranking battle end early, but Li Luo has overcome a great opponent as well. I think the two of you will be twin champions," he said brightly.

"Senior Gong praises us too highly. An ordinary ranking battle does not count for much."

"Ah, your standards are too high. Maybe you've so many titles that your hands are full, but this is Li Luo's first win. A good start counts for much, you know."

Jiang Qing'e knew his intentions, but there was nothing to fault in his words without seeming cold.

"Then I accept your kind words." Gong Shenjun then turned to the First Princess. "Luanyu, you were smiling really happily a moment ago. Were you speaking to Junior Jiang about something?"

"Oh, nothing much, but I plan to invite Li Luo to try treating His Majesty."

Gong Shenjun's surprise showed. "Oh... that's worth a try."

He was about to dismiss it, but he thought better of it with Jiang Qing'e still present.

He changed the subject. "Junior Jiang, I hear Umbra Cave is opening this year. That's huge. If we get the chance, let's work well together."

Jiang Qing'e nodded.

Gong Shenjun turned and left.

The First Princess watched him go. Gong Shenjun was well-versed in networking as well. His thoughts were often clear enough to those around him, but his conduct left no room for criticism. Perhaps he also understood that he was walking a tightrope towards his goal.

His capacity for concealing things was reminiscent of his father.

"Your Highness, I'll take my leave first. I'll let Li Luo know about His Majesty. If there's no problem, we'll arrange a time."

The result of Li Luo's battle was out, and Jiang Qing'e had no interest in lingering here now. She bade the First Princess farewell, then she leaped off the high wall.

The First Princess watched her go with a faint smile.

Jiang Qing'e had immense potential. If Gong Shenjun managed to win her, it would spell trouble in the future. She didn't want that.

She turned back to survey the screen, Li Luo's results still shining brightly on it. "Protect your fiance well, my boy..."

Chapter 0183: Sunset

Li Luo's battle aside, other battles elsewhere were coming to a close as well.

In the wake of a newly leveled forest stood Yi Lisha's squad and Qin Zhulu's squad.

Hff.

Frosty air blew out gently from the corner of Lu Qing'er's mouth. Her ice silk gloves were off, and the leaves nearby were all coated in a thin layer of ice.

She was barely able to move, her entire body covered in thin chains that glittered with starlight.

The chains were rapidly breaking down under her frigid defenses, growing thinner and thinner.

Finally, they fell off.

Lu Qing'er stood up. Si Qiuying was on the ground before her, icicles pressed up against her vital points. If she made the slightest move, they would take her life.

"My win this time, Qiuying. By a little," Lu Qing'er said weakly.

Si Qiuying ground her teeth in frustration. "I would have had you if it were night!"

Her star resonance waxed with power in the night, when the stars were out. This was not a favorable time for her.

Lu Qing'er did not reply to the meaningless excuse. Yes, and her powers would be much stronger in an arctic environment as well.

She lifted her eyes to the forest ahead.

Where Qin Zhulu had been fighting.

"Violet Vibrance squads are all something else," Lu Qing'er thought to herself. Completely unintimidated by Qin Zhulu's reputation, the One Autumn Leaf Squad had used Si Qiuying's starlight resonant power to obscure their light column and then circled them for an ambush. In one decisive move, they had immediately taken out Yin Yue.

However, Qin Zhulu's reputation was no sham. He still took them on, one against two, going up against Yi Lisha and Qian Ye.

She was left to face Si Qiuying, and had secured a narrow victory.

"I wonder how Qin Zhulu is doing..." Lu Qing'er fretted. Her battle with Si Qiuying had worn her out completely, and she was in no condition to lend Qin Zhulu any strength.

"He's strong, but Yi Lisha and Qian Ye together might be able to take him!" Si Qiuying declared.

She might have lost by a little here, but it did not change the overall picture—Lu Qing'er was more or less out of commission.

As long as Yi Lisha and Qian Ye could fight Qin Zhulu to a standstill, then there was nothing to lose from a draw.

Both Lu Qing'er and Si Qiuying could only wait quietly.

They did not have to wait long. Heavy footsteps soon came, and both girls looked up with eyes wide.

The one that stomped out came with a fearsome aura that quietened the birds perched in the trees.

Qin Zhulu.

He was covered in bloody wounds, but his face was lit up with a rare grin of delight.

"WHOOOO!" Qin Zhulu howled. He tossed a bag towards Lu Qing'er with a flourish. It clinked merrily with Yi Lisha's badges.

Lu Qing'er caught the bag with relief.

Si Qiuying paled. "IMPOSSIBLE!" she burst out. "How could Leader and Qian Ye together have lost?! What kind of monster is he?!"

...

In another place, the battle was still raging on. Bai Doudou, Yu Lang, and Qiu Luo were zipping through the forest at full throttle.

All three were looking rather worried because a full complement of more than 10 Gold Gleam squads were madly chasing after them.

They were forced into running in haphazard zigzags to avoid the squads.

It was like a pack of hounds chasing down a lone wolf.

"Damn, these guys are too much. That's too many people, the cowards!"

Yu Lang was pale with fright. He could distinctly hear the chants from behind. "Beat Yu Lang to death! Beat Yu Lang to death!"

"Come on, guys, I'm just a tool here. Don't direct your anger only at me!"

"Dead end ahead." Bai Doudou said tersely.

Yu Lang and Qiu Luo looked ahead to see a cliff. The floating clouds indicated that it was not at all a shallow cliff.

The Gold Gleam squads closed in from behind.

Qiu Luo swallowed nervously. "How about we, er, hand him over?"

Yu Lang stared at Qiu Luo, aghast. "Damn, are you even human? I've done so much for the team, and you're so eager to hand me over?"

"They can't kill you, they can only beat you up. At least we can keep our points," Qiu Luo argued.

Yu Lang shook his head vehemently. "My pride can't take it. How could I ever face them again?"

"Face? Pride? Since when did you care about those things?" Qiu Luo snorted.

Bai Doudou silenced them. "Enough. We are not handing over our squad mate. Full speed ahead and break through!"

She brandished her spear with a gleam of focused excitement.

The other two resignedly took up their positions, with no choice but to follow suit. Their wind resonant power blooming forth, all three shot forth in a knights' charge.

Ahead of them, the dozen Gold Gleam squads were yelling as they formed a defensive line to counter the charge.

But right before they connected, the last sliver of sunlight dimmed on the horizon. The sun had fully set now.

Dusk.

All of the students suddenly relaxed.

The first ranking battle was over.

Yu Lang and Qiu Luo both sighed with great relief, although Bai Doudou looked a little wistful.

Yu Lang coughed and swaggered right up to the Gold Gleam squads, walking among them without a care in the world.

"Well, that was a good exchange, boys. Let's grab a drink together when we can. You guys are quite something, to make a Violet Vibrance squad flee like mad."

Two of the leaders puffed their chests out proudly. "Violet Vibrance squads are weak against numbers... But that Yu Lang guy in your squad is too cheeky."

"Oh, what's your name again?"

Yu Lang blinked and smiled grandly.

"Qiu Luo. My name is Qiu Luo."

Chapter 0184: The Most School Points

Silence fell on the Violet Vibrance mentors' platform along with the sun.

They had each witnessed the same thrilling battles all across the field.

But their reactions were all very different.

Shen Jinxiao looked like he had just been force fed poison. His squad had lost, and to Li Luo's squad no less...

Chi Chan was not about to pass up the opportunity to rub salt in. She sipped from her cup, and the water tasted like sweet, sweet victory. "My thanks to Mentor Shen Jinxiao for your investment."

Shen Jinxiao's own wine was tasteless in his mouth, but he downed it regardless. "It is no shame to lose to the power of dual resonances."

He showed no outward anger. Duke experts all had experienced their fair share of wins and losses. Plus, it's not like there was anything he could do now. Run in and clobber Li Luo over the head and take back the 12 Step Weave? He could, if he wanted to utterly destroy his own reputation.

"Li Luo is a real gem. His dual resonances are not stable enough to beat Wang Hejiu's squad, but that Warrior Cultivar... truly inspired," Cao Sheng praised.

Mi Er nodded in agreement. "Water along with wood resonant power, to encourage its growth. Warrior Cultivar is not the most offensive move in the book, but a stable one for sure. He combined his powers in the heart of the tree and stabilized his dual resonances... impressive."

"But this technique requires someone with wood and water resonances. Without the nourishing flow of water resonant power, the wood would take too long to grow."

"And then to shape the wood into an arrow and fire it out with resonant power... All of these steps combined were what allowed Li Luo to overcome Wang Hejiu's squad."

"It was a close one, but to have come this far was no easy task at all."

The other Violet Vibrance mentors were all in agreement. Li Luo's dual resonance attacks might be chicken feet to them, but he was a mere Resonant Master... "I think Li Luo might be in second place now when it comes to individual rankings. I wonder if he could take on Qin Zhulu? That boy took on Yi Lisha and Qian Ye at once. He's a freaking tiger in battle," Chu Zi said.

"Li Luo's wooden arrow might be powerful, but it might not be deadly enough against Qin Zhulu. If that arrow were stopped, Li Luo would have nothing left in the bag. His arsenal is still quite limited," Chi Chan said.

These were no humble words, but mere facts. Li Luo's arrow was perfectly suited to the attack against Wang Hejiu's squad. But against Qin Zhulu, he might well tank the attack once, and then Li Luo would be left defenseless.

After all, Qin Zhulu's Second Pattern strength and upper eighth-grade resonance made for a strong combination.

While the mentors were speaking, the exit to the arena had opened, and the students were filtering out.

Some teams were all smiles, others looking regretful or bitter. On the whole, the mood was still good. This had been the first experience of squad battles for many, and the novelty of it was exciting.

Several minutes later, basically all the squads were out.

They now looked at the high platform, where the final results and rankings would be announced.

Mentor Chi Chan stood up, her black veil landing an extra air of mystery.

"The newcomers' first ranking battles are officially over." She raised a hand, and a light screen appeared accordingly. The hundreds of teams were all displayed.

A loud muttering broke out as everyone searched for their squad names.

Li Luo, Bai Mengmeng, and Xin Fu stood together, looking. They realized that the rankings started from sixth place, with the top five still hidden.

Not a single Violet Vibrance squad was on the list, which meant that they had swept the top five slots.

"It's amazing that Wang Hejiu's squad still stayed in the top five. They must be really good..." Li Luo remarked.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng stared at him. No shit...

"You think we can get first place?" Li Luo asked them.

They might have beaten Wang Hejiu's squad, but he had heard that Qin Zhulu had beaten Yi Lisha's squad as well. They might well be their greatest competition.

In truth, Li Luo was already satisfied with the points they had. He wasn't that interested in first place... Although the additional reward of the 12 Step Weave would be pretty sweet!

It would be important for his subsequent cultivation.

After all, the weight of his five-year lifespan still hung heavily over his head. He had to carefully set out goals and make good use of the time he had. No boost could be overlooked.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng looked at each other doubtfully. Every single person among the newcomers feared Qin Zhulu.

Luckily, Li Luo had been on fire, and they had defeated Wang Hejiu's squad. Otherwise, Qin Zhulu would definitely be in first place.

Chi Chan began to announce the top five.

One Autumn Leaf Squad, 2,200 points, ranked fifth.

Golden Gate Squad, 2,300 points, ranked fourth.

Wind Rider Squad, 3,900 points, ranked third.

The crowd chattered excitedly. It had been a close fight, although the One Autumn Leaf Squad and the Golden Gate Squad had clearly lost.

Which meant that the Fairness & Justice Squad and the Clear Moon Squad had both beaten one Violet Vibrance squad each.

No one was surprised by the Clear Moon Squad's result, thanks to Qin Zhulu's presence. But Li Luo's squad beating a Violet Vibrance squad was something fresh indeed.

Ability-wise, Li Luo's squad appeared to be one of the weaker ones. If he hadn't beaten Duze Beixuan before, many would even consider them weaker than some Gold Gleam squads.

They looked at Chi Chan with eyes filled with expectation for the most important results.

A glimmer of a smile clearly showed under her veil. "Second place, Clear Moon Squad, 5,200 points."

"First place, Fairness & Justice Squad, 5,300 points."

Wow!

The crowd let out a roar of excitement in response, and all heads turned towards Li Luo's direction. Fairness & Justice, eclipsing the Clear Moon...

It was a mere 100 points that separated first from second place.

Bai Mengmeng stood rooted in shock, and even Xin Fu smiled happily from under his hood.

An unexpected result.

Li Luo was stunned for a few moments, then he recovered.

Well, it was close, but they had won...

Qin Zhulu was staring at Li Luo too, his gaze fiery. "This Li Luo... makes my mouth water."

Lu Qing'er and Yin Yue's jaws hit the ground at almost the same time.

Lu Qing'er stared at him with an unfriendly expression.

"I meant that his dual resonances are very special. I want to fight him," Qin Zhulu hurriedly explained, seeing their looks.

Lu Qing'er breathed a sigh of relief to herself, then she resumed ignoring him.

"I'm already tired from fighting the swan. Now you come out of left field?"

"The huge swan might be too powerful to tackle head on, but clobbering a deer like you? There are too many ways! For example, I could just find pictures with hundreds of women and scatter them all around the Astral Sage College..."

Chapter 0185: Jinxiao Scheme

Boom!

As the rankings were announced, a bunch of fireworks exploded overhead, and four words appeared above the students.

Fairness & Justice Squad.

"Wow, it's beautiful! Yay leader, the whole school knows about Fairness & Justice squad now!" Bai Mengmeng clapped her hands happily, the pyrotechnics above mirrored in her lucid eyes wide with happiness.

Li Luo stared glumly up at it. "That ain't much use."

It was merely there to tickle the pride of the students. No real use. Zero stars!

Xin Fu nodded approvingly. He didn't like ostentation, and was just about to voice his rare support for their leader.

"The fireworks are too small. If they have one over the whole Xia City, that would be a lot more sincere." Li Luo said.

Xin Fu swallowed his words back down and stared at Li Luo with a disgusted look of betrayal. I overestimated you, leader. You're shallow as ever.

Boom!

Another shower of fireworks, and another squad name was shown.

Fire Fairy Squad.

It came from where the Two Star Hall students were competing.

Li Luo recalled Ye Qiuding, who he had met with Jiang Qing'e previously. He wondered if that guy was from Fire Fairy squad.

He had also heard that the Three Star Hall battles had ended early, taken by a team called Black Swan squad. Of course it had to be Jiang Qing'e's team.

As for the Four Star Hall students, they no longer participated in ranking battles. After all, those with decent talent were already at the Earth Fiend General stage, while the best among them were reaching the Heavenly Dipper stage. This was a standard not to be disrespected even throughout Xia Kingdom.

Battles without the threat of real blood and fire had already lost its meaning for these students.

While the new students were distracted by the fireworks, mentor Chi Chan walked up, a purple scroll in hand. Li Luo's heart leaped.

Li Luo sensed that she was smiling behind the veil. "The first place squad wins an additional Duke-level energy cultivation art, the 12 Step Weave. It is worth 3000 school points."

"However, there is only one energy cultivation art, so one of your squad must be chosen to receive it. The other two will win an additional 3000 school points."

They were the center of envy. The 12 Step Weave was a rather special Duke level cultivation art that allowed those with a 6th-grade resonance to use it. That was very tempting for many 6th-grade resonance users, although of course the price of 3000 school points was just as much of a barrier. By the time they had accumulated that much, most would be Two Star Hall students already.

Not every team was a Violet Vibrance squad like Li Luo's, bagging thousands of points each time.

For the others without the 12 Step Weave, the additional 3000 points was an incredible bounty indeed.

Leader Li Luo stepped forward as representative. He took the 12 Step Weave solemnly from Chi Chan's hands, and then turned to the crowd. "It is a great honor to win this prize today," he said gravely. "The one I'd like to thank most is mentor..."

He suddenly felt a curious pressure swamp him, and his breathing became labored.

It continued for a few moments, until Chi Chan realized what was happening. She stepped forward to break the hold on Li Luo.

"Mentor Shen Jinxiao," she said mildly. "I believe you don't have the right to stop students from making their prize speeches?"

Shen Jinxiao answered with a sneer, and shot a warning look at Li Luo.

Warning him to quit while he was ahead, and not push it.

Li Luo naturally received the message. Loud and clear. He smiled back. Threatening him? A Duke expert who could only glare at him? Shen Jinxiao's hands were tied.

The status of Violet Vibrance mentor created many excuses for Shen Jinxiao to target Li Luo. But at the same time, his position within Astral Sage College limited what he could do as well.

His Duke powers were well able to squash Li Luo like a bug.

Yet now he could only glare warnings. Sticks and stones, Shen...

Li Luo coughed. "Well, actually it's nothing much."

The Violet Vibrance mentors looked a little disappointed. They had been on the verge of pulling out the popcorn.

Li Luo opened his mouth suddenly. "I firstly want to thank mentor Shen Jinxiao for the generous sponsorship for us new students. So I want to say something to mentor Shen Jinxiao..."

"Keep it up! Don't stop!"

The students cheered and clapped loudly. They took up the chant. "Don't stop! Don't stop!" None of them knew the hidden meaning in Li Luo's words, or the reason why Shen Jinxiao had offered the 12 Step Weave. All they knew was that this mentor had paid out of his own pocket for the welfare of the new students. Although they had not gotten any share of the reward this time, it gave them a good impression. Mentor Shen Jinxiao was a swell guy!

Of course it was best if such welfare didn't stop!

Eager glances were all turned Shen Jinxiao's way.

Li Luo smiled warmly. "Mentor Shen Jinxiao is the soul of generosity. I represent all of us and make this plea: we hope that mentor Shen Jinxiao can continue the extra incentives. It's not about how much it is, but the gesture alone will touch us."

"I've even thought of a great name for this. The Jinxiao Scheme!"

Many students nodded approvingly, and the anticipation was stoked to a new high.

"I wonder if mentor Shen Jinxiao will agree to this childish request of us students?" Li Luo said plaintively.

Shen Jinxiao looked like he was having a stroke, facial spasms barely suppressed.

Li Luo the bastard, he really could kill without knives.

He? Support an additional prize for the ranking battles? Perhaps once or twice would be negligible, but over a year or two it was a gigantic sum.

More importantly, the students might be oblivious to the meaning behind Jinxiao Scheme, but his colleagues would be sure to laugh their asses off.

He looked over at Chi Chan, Cao Sheng, and the others, who had taken a sudden interest in observing the floor and the sky. They seemed to have not heard what Li Luo had just said, but he could sense the barely suppressed amusement leaking out of them.

Shen Jinxiao had tried to trip Li Luo up, but now the tripwire seemed to be wound around his own neck.

Shen Jinxiao spoke up with a neutral voice. "It's a good suggestion, but this is no small matter, if it is continued in the long term. It needs the vice principal's approval."

"Let me speak to vice principal Su Xin and get back to you."

He turned and stalked off.

Li Luo grinned and waved him off. "Excellent. Capital. Safe journey, mentor Shen Jinxiao. I will ask you regularly about Jinxiao Scheme!"

Shen Jinxiao had a dark aura that seemed to absorb the pale moonlight shining down on him.

The other mentors were snickering quietly among themselves. They looked at Li Luo but said nothing, turning away.

"Li Luo, you won first place, and today's the Ghost Festival. How about a celebration?" Lu Qing'er's sweet voice came from nearby. Her beautiful figure was even more breathtaking under the gentle moonlight, and her legs were getting even more attention than the lunar rock of the same pale color.

She drew many stares as she passed.

Li Luo looked up at the bright moon in the sky with some wistfulness. Another year, another Ghost Festival. It was a day for family, and he missed his parents.

He wondered how they were doing on the Nobles' Battlefield...

He swept the thoughts to the back of his mind. There was nothing that could be changed about that. The only thing he could do now was focus on getting stronger. Reach the Duke stage, and then he could go after them.

He smiled back at Lu Qing'er.

"Great windfall today. Call Yu Lang, Zhao Kuo, and the others... I'll treat them to a champion leader's dinner. Tell them not to miss it."

Chapter 0186: The Black-Robed Duke

The bright moon hung high in the night sky like a jewel on blue velvet.

Xia City basked in its silver glow, its own night lamps and houses casting an orange radiance in response.

House Luolan's headquarters contributed to some of that radiance, its defenses tight as bodyguards patrolled the perimeter.

Yet at present, a black shadow passed the defenses stealthily, entering the property. He was clothed in black from head to toe, a suspicious character by all accounts. Yet the guards of House Luolan moved past him without batting an eyelid, or even taking the slightest notice.

They had not all gone blind. Rather, this enigmatic intruder possessed powerful arts to cloak his presence from all outsiders.

It was a mark of his incredible skill.

"Is House Luolan completely useless after losing Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan?" he mumbled to himself, shaking his head as he made his way deeper in.

...

House Luolan headquarters, back kitchen.

Having just finished preparations for dinner, Ox Biaobiao strolled out of the kitchen, his bald head gleaming with a miniature reflection of the moon.

He looked up at the real deal and sighed.

"Li Taixuan, Tan Tailan, you two bastards... Saddling me with the kids? What am I? Your nursemaid?"

"I was damned unlucky to meet you two."

He rubbed his head ruefully and turned to regard House Luolan. "Watch the kids, watch the house... I'm not a watchdog, damn it."

Ox Biaobiao's hands slid down to the shining cleavers at his sides, walking out past the kitchen and into the shadows.

A corridor in House Luolan.

The enigmatic black shadow walked on without a care in the world. Abruptly, he stopped, staring intently into the darkness ahead. "So there is one hidden in House Luolan..."

"I say, little tramp, I see your ilk skulking around year after year on the night of the Ghost Festival. Finally felt bold enough to come in, eh?" Ox Biaobiao emerged from the gloom with a grim smile.

"A powerful Duke expert, whiling away years as a chef at House Luolan. Should I praise Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan for their persuasion, or decry your willingness to slave?" The shadowy figure spoke with measured pace, his voice coming from all directions.

"Little tramp, all you do is skulk around, too afraid to show yourself. You remind me of the rats feeding off swill in the kitchen," Ox Biaobiao said.

"All these years spent languishing at House Luolan's headquarters, not setting foot outside even once. House Luolan is in shambles, and yet you have not lifted a finger. I am curious. Why?"

Ox Biaobiao laughed. "House Luolan was always for the two kids to try their hand out. Who cares if it succeeds or fails?"

"I'm curious too. You and the others who have been watching House Luolan. Why? Who are the powers behind you? You've been watching House Luolan for a long time now," Ox Biaobiao said, his eyes turning cold as well.

The black-robed intruder smiled thinly. "Why bluff? Of course everyone wishes to know the secrets that Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan left behind. I appeal to you: leave behind the ruined House Luolan and your guard. Whatever promise you have to Li Taixuan and the others, your years of service must have repaid them all. If you join us, your future will be brighter than it is here."

"Join you?" Ox Biaobiao echoed. "Sure. And do tell, what is your faction's position in the Xia Kingdom?"

The intruder shook his head with a wry smile. "Tell me the secret that Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan left behind, then I will initiate you."

Ox Biaobiao sighed. "Well then... up yours, and your mother."

The intruder said no more, wordlessly gathering energy.

With a sudden wrench, he bent the energy to his will, summoning a carpet of black fire that covered the sky.

One palm stretching out of a black sleeve, he flicked a finger upwards, and the black flames obediently moved to the tip.

This was just a small flame, but no one would doubt its deadliness.

"Let me see just how strong the watchdog Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan left behind is," he said with a cold smile, flicking the black flame out at Ox Biaobiao.

Ox Biaobiao watched the flame fly forward at a controlled pace. It seemed impossible to avoid, but he did not look worried at all. He rubbed his bald head with some consternation.

"Since when...

"...did a fourth-rate Duke get to look down on me?"

Clang!

A cold flash of light, and a clear, metallic timbre rang out. It seemed like a demigod had climbed out of hell itself, such was the savagery of the move.

Ox Biaobiao appeared behind the black-robed intruder. He did not seem to have moved an inch; even his cleavers were still resting on his belt.

An after-image of Ox Biaobiao remained at his original position for a moment longer before it faded with the night wind.

The black flame had frozen in mid-air, then it fell apart, sliced cleanly into two. It then dissipated.

A thin line of light was visible in the middle of the black-robed figure. He had also been split clean in two.

"What fierce knife skills..."

The black-robed man said, now much more serious than before. "Fascinating. A chef who never sees blood, and yet is able to cultivate knife skills not seen in the Xia Kingdom in centuries... Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan are really something else, to get someone like you on their side.

"But it only makes us even more curious about their secret. Ox Biaobiao, you will not be able to hold on to it.

"I can feel that the wards they left are fading with the years. And as for you, perhaps it is not that you will not leave House Luolan's headquarters, but that you cannot..."

"You're just a dog, chained here by them."

His body caught fire and burned away into nothingness.

The worldly natural energies returned to their normal equilibrium, and the sounds of the night returned.

Ox Biaobiao looked morosely at the spot where the intruder had been standing. He had made a run for it. Moreover, he had not sent his real body, only an energy clone.

Still, only a Duke should have been strong enough to penetrate the wards that Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had set around House Luolan. The fact that the black-robed Duke could send an energy clone inside was a clear indication that the wards were indeed waning.

"What a pickle..."

Ox Biaobiao shook his head and looked up at the moon again.

"Looks like I'll have to talk to the kids."

Chapter 0187: Redeeming Royal Sap

The next day, Li Luo was whistling happily as he skipped down the stairs.

When he reached the first floor, he was surprised to see many familiar faces gathered.

On the left, Jiang Qing'e, hair elegantly tied up. She was glowing like a jewel in the morning sun, a living, breathing fantasy.

Beside her, Yan Lingqing, elbows against the table and hands propping up her face, on which there was a look of mischief.

Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing were sitting opposite Lu Qing'er, who was graceful as a willow leaf, skin as fair and lustrous as the morning dew on it.

Yan Lingqing's amusement was clearly directed at Lu Qing'er. They had met along the way, and Lu Qing'er had boldly greeted them again instead of running away after her last defeat.

Jiang Qing'e showed no signs of attacking this time, instead speaking calmly as though nothing had happened before. Eventually, they arrived at Li Luo's place together.

Both girls looked rather calm, although there was an intangible tension flowing.

...Interesting.

In the middle of the three girls, Bai Mengmeng stood innocently, a fresh, white lotus flower blooming by herself.

As the host, she was dutifully pouring tea for the three girls.

Jiang Qing'e, Yan Lingqing, and Lu Qing'er spoke occasionally, although even Bai Mengmeng could tell that there was an air of coolness.

The descended Li Luo was immediately the focus of attention.

"Er, why are you all gathered?" Li Luo asked with uncertainty.

He also spotted Xin Fu at the foot of the stairs, who was concentrating hard on his easel, as though trying to capture this scene.

"Leader," he said hurriedly upon seeing Li Luo, "would you like to appreciate my latest masterpiece?"

Li Luo laughed carelessly. "No need, I already deeply understand your artistic ability."

Xin Fu glared at him with growing resentment.

Li Luo ignored him, walking over to the table. "Well, my three lovely, radiant suns, you set our humble abode alight."

Jiang Qing'e gave him a small smile. "Congratulations, first place."

"It wasn't all me, Mengmeng did a lot as well," Li Luo said modestly.

Behind him, Xin Fu looked up. "What the hell?!"

"Keep it up. When you defeat Qin Zhulu, you'll be first among the new students," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo shrank a little inside. It had taken everything he had to beat Wang Hejiu's squad, even pulling out a clutch dual resonance attack just to secure his Pyrrhic victory. Against Qin Zhulu? The odds were maybe 30-70.

Him 30, Qin Zhulu 70.

After all, while his dual resonances might be roughly equal to an upper eighth-grade resonance, Qin Zhulu had a Second Pattern on top of that...

Plus, Qin Zhulu was an absolute monster in battle. Li Luo highly doubted he would be able to stop his attacks.

"Go for it, Li Luo," Yan Lingqing sang playfully, looking over at Lu Qing'er. "Remember, Qing'e said she would reward you if you were first."

A slight disturbance crept up on Lu Qing'er's face, like the first crack of ice over a frozen lake.

Jiang Qing'e carelessly swept up a banana on the table and stuffed it in Yan Lingqing's pouty mouth. "Eat your bananas."

Yan Lingqing protested furiously by taking a savage bite out of it.

"I, ah, I'll do my best."

Lu Qing'er joined the conversation now. "Since we get some time off after the ranking battles, I came to find you so we can go back to Xia City together."

Li Luo nodded and smiled. "Great. But before that, there's something I have to do. Wait for me, Qing'er."

"What is it?"

Li Luo grinned.

"I just earned myself a hard-won 5,000 points, didn't I? Time to go get what I need the most."

...

Bank of Points.

Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and Yan Lingqing.

"Wonderful morning! One serving of Royal Sap, please!" Li Luo said breezily, handing over his badges to the mentor with a grand flourish.

Many students were looking over curiously. Royal Sap was one of the most prized resources, and not many students could redeem it.

Especially One Star Hall students.

"That's the guy that got first place in the ranking battles, Li Luo. No wonder he has so many points," they whispered.

"Wow, just a month into school, and already 5,000 points..." Another sighed.

"Is that Jiang Qing'e with him? I heard they're engaged. That's one lucky dog." The general sentiment was that ten Li Luos were still not equal to one Jiang Qing'e, his win notwithstanding.

After all, she had so many wins, she had to be tired of them by now.

Li Luo ignored the comments he had heard too many times before. He was fully focused on the mentor before him.

After ascertaining the amount, he took out a dark-green box. The life force inside it was tremendous.

He opened the box and carefully retrieved a bamboo container roughly the size of a palm. It was thin enough that a viscous liquid could be seen sloshing within.

The paste-like substance seemed to be the embodiment of life itself. It morphed and shifted between light and liquid with a life of its own.

Runic patterns were carved all over the bamboo container, containing the energy within.

It was impressive. Very impressive.

"That's Royal Sap?" Li Luo marveled, his anticipation building.

The mentor placed the green box in front of Li Luo.

"That's a lot... seems plenty for my use?" Li Luo stretched out a hand.

The mentor blocked his hand. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Isn't it mine?" Li Luo asked, perplexed.

"All yours?!" the mentor almost screamed. "You couldn't afford this box of Royal Sap even if you sold off the entirety of House Luolan!"

Li Luo stared at him.

The mentor was not jesting. He took out a specialized syringe made of bark and extracted one drop, which he transferred to a green vial the size of a thumbnail.

"There you go." He placed it in front of Li Luo.

Li Luo stared at the mini green bottle with immense disappointment.

He had no idea how much Royal Sap Ox Biaobiao would need to make him the miracle paste, but there was no chance this measly drop was going to cut it!

I saved up 5,000 points for this?! You're ripping me off!!

He stared angrily at the box of Royal Sap.

The mentor noticed.

"Student Li Luo," he warned him with a drawl. "Control yourself. Since the day the Astral Sage College was built, not a single person has successfully stolen anything from this place."

Chapter 0188: Birthday

Li Luo managed to control himself.

After unceremoniously stuffing the little bottle into his pocket, he heard Jiang Qing'e pulling out her own badges.

"I'll have one too," she said.

The mentor repeated the extraction process, handing her another drop of Royal Sap.

Jiang Qing'e took it and casually passed it to Li Luo.

"That's all I can get with the points I just earned. Don't worry, we'll get more eventually. You still have time," she said.

Li Luo stared at it and shook his head quickly. "I can't. It must be very useful to you too."

Royal Sap couldn't even be bought outside, even if one had the cash to splurge. Since Jiang Qing'e was on the verge of reaching the Heavenly Dipper General Stage, she definitely needed Royal Sap desperately.

"I can earn points much faster. Besides, I hear the Umbra Cave is opening this year. That's the real source of points. Don't worry about me." She dismissed it.

"Alright, enough nattering, let's go." She shooed them away.

Yan Lingqing gave him a sickly sweet smile. "Are you overcome with gratitude?"

Li Luo sighed. "I would dedicate my body to her if only I were given a chance."

Yan Lingqing rolled her eyes. "In your dreams."

"Now let's go. The others look ready to swallow you whole, Royal Sap included," she pointed out.

Li Luo noticed that many students were cracking their knuckles ominously in his direction and eyeing his Royal Sap. They had never imagined that something so precious could just be given as a gift.

Li Luo's life was surely too sweet.

And it was a gift from Jiang Qing'e, no less!

The engagement was enough to stoke their jealousy to the maximum, but after witnessing her hand him the Royal Sap that had been bought with her hard-earned points...

They were surely going to go crazy.

Not just the students, but the mentor as well. He was a man too, and he was once an Astral Sage College student as well, so he understood what incredible fortune it was to have the favor of such a girl.

This Li Luo... had he saved the world or something in his past life?

Feeling the heated glares, Li Luo decided to bail with Yan Lingqing before their emotions got the better of them.

Out of the Bank of Points, Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and Yan Lingqing left the Astral Sage College, moving towards the vehicle prepared by House Luolan.

House Luolan's finest bodyguards flanked it.

Once out of the Astral Sage College, all safety measures were up to the individual. And it was always better to err on the side of caution.

In front of the House Luolan carriage was a busty figure in a skin-tight qipao. She was looking sexy enough to warrant the security detail even without Li Luo around.

Who else was it but Cai Wei?

She smiled when she saw the three, waving her fan at them.

They waved back.

Cai Wei first greeted Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing, then turned to Li Luo with an impish smile. "Well, young lord, how is school treating you?"

"I just wanted to cultivate in peace," Li Luo said blandly. "But things happened and I ended up first place in the monthly battles."

"Wow! Congratulations."

"But also, can you also settle up the shortage of secret water source? Sun Creek Villa, both Tianshu and headquarters, have been chasing me daily." She said sweetly but firmly.

Li Luo shuddered. Damn, holidays had just started, and already she was planning to squeeze him dry?

"Sister Cai Wei, do not worry. I'll get it done." He replied.

"Young lord," she said coyly from behind her fan. "A young man like yourself should be firm and vigorous. You wouldn't be going limp on me, would you?"

"I'm not limp at all!" Li Luo said outraged.

Jiang Qing'e felt the conversation was derailing quickly, and intervened. "Enough teasing, Cai Wei."

"Aww, Qing'e's so caring." Cai Wei tittered.

Li Luo rolled his eyes. He looked around but Lu Qing'er was nowhere to be seen. Strange... didn't they agree to head off together?

"Looking for Lu Qing'er? She was waiting here for you, but the Golden Dragon Bank people came, and she had to leave first." Cai Wei said.

Li Luo nodded. "Well, let's be off too then."

They departed.

Far behind, there was a luxurious carriage with golden dragons painted on it. A beautiful matron in red was eyeing the young girl by her side.

"Qing'er, you wouldn't have fallen for that Li Luo, would you?" She asked.

Lu Qing'er carefully masked the jolt in her heart. "Mother, what are you on about? Li Luo and I are just friends. He helped me a lot back in Southwind Academy."

Yu Hongxi narrowed her eyes. "That kid attracts beauties like a harem. He's definitely a playboy. Stay away from him."

Lu Qing'er wasn't too happy about that. Wasn't she one of the girls around Li Luo as well?

"That's nothing to do with Li Luo. Cai Wei and Yan Lingqing are both Jiang Qing'e's friends, and they also work at House Luolan. It's normal, isn't it." She replied.

"Well, who knows."

"Li Taixuan was no good, and his son's definitely no good as well." Yu Hongxi said primly.

Lu Qing'er looked at her, astonished. "Mother... you liked Li Taixuan?" "And so what? Li Taixuan might be a rotten character, but he's very skilled. Back then there were many high-born girls chasing him."

Lu Qing'er pondered this. "And they all lost to Tan Tailan? Even a great beauty like you?" Yu Hongxi reached out an ungracious hand to pinch Lu Qing'er's cheek. "Making fun of your mother?"

Lu Qing'er laughed and hugged her. "I just find it unbelievable. You're beautiful and extremely capable. Xia Kingdom's Golden Dragon Bank is run so properly. The accounts are flawless."

Yu Hongxi was mollified. "Well, I just had a soft spot for Li Taixuan back in the day, that is all. There's nothing much to regret there. Besides, Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan came to Xia Kingdom together. If I had gotten to Li Taixuan earlier, she wouldn't have stood a chance."

"And what about mentor Cao Sheng from Astral Sage College?" Lu Qing'er suddenly asked. "Mother, you know that he took me as his student right?"

"An admirer who failed to woo me. He only reached a Duke because of my help as well. He tried to court me after that, but I rejected him. He was heartbroken and went to Astral Sage College to be a mentor. I've not met him for many years."

"He looks like a slovenly and coarse character, but is sensitive to even the slightest setback. Like a child."

Suddenly her mentor's reputation seemed to darken a little.

"But he's not a bad person, and I guess he has a good eye, since he took you in as a student. Otherwise I wouldn't even bother with him again." Yu Hongxi continued.

"If not for mentor Cao Sheng, a 7th-grade like me probably wouldn't have a Violet Vibrance mentor." Lu Qing'er said dully.

Yu Hongxi patted her head. "7th-grade? Your birthday's in a few days time. Mother here hasn't been stinting on the spirit liquids and purifying lights. By my calculations, your ice resonance should be close to the 8th-grade now."

Lu Qing'er perked up, pleased. "Really??"

Back in Tianshu, her 7th-grade resonance had been exceptional, but now at Astral Sage College, she was again a small fish in a big pond. It was hard to do anything amazing with it.

Lu Qing'er didn't mind too much, except that Li Luo was shooting far ahead now, and she didn't want to fall too far behind.

Besides, Jiang Qing'e was a 9th-grade!

"I've been giving you plenty of quality spirit liquids and purifying lights ever since your resonant palace was opened. It's no surprise that you're reaching the 8th-grade," Yu Hongxi said with a satisfied tone. "Also, it will be your birthday present."

Yu Hongxi was the anchor of Xia Kingdom's Golden Dragon Bank. The resources at her disposal eclipsed House Luolan's by far. And for her precious daughter, there was no expense too great.

"Thanks, mum!"

Lu Qing'er hugged her fiercely. Still, there was one last shred of hollowness in her eyes. What she really wanted to talk to her mother about was her father.

She only had vague impressions of him from when she was a child. Her father had left, and then there had been no more news. However, the proud Yu Hongxi had treated him as dead, and ignored him thereafter.

All these years, Lu Qing'er had never dared to press the issue. When she did, her mother would fly into a temper, and so finally she had buried the issue deep within her heart.

"Mother, can I invite friends for my birthday?" Lu Qing'er whispered into her ear.

"I bet it's Li Luo."

"He helped me a lot before! You can't be biased against him just because of what happened in your generation."

Yu Hongxi shook her head, bothered. She was tempted to refuse, but it was Lu Qing'er's birthday.

"As you wish."

She saw Lu Qing'er's face brighten, and her own mood darkened in response.

This was an ill wind that could not be encouraged.

Li Taixuan had broken her heart, and so be it. Was her daughter to suffer the same fate at his son's hands?

Chapter 0189: Unrelaxing Holiday

Li Luo's carriage trundled peacefully down the long, dusty road back to Xia City.

Inside the carriage, spring reigned in the form of feminine voices twittering and three fresh, flowery beauties.

Among the girls, it was Cai Wei who did most of the talking, reporting on the happenings of House Luolan in the last month.

Most of the house's matters had fallen on her shoulders, with Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo both at school. Li Luo knew that without her, Jiang Qing'e would be even more heavily burdened.

Cai Wei's management skills were peerless, and the tangled mess of everyday affairs at House Luolan had been sifted through her orderly hand.

"There have been no major changes with House Luolan's enterprises, except for the Suncreek Villa. Thanks to the Young Lord's secret watersource, this month's revenue reached 300,000 skygold."

Jiang Qing'e stared at Li Luo, golden eyes bulging.

The Suncreek Villa's headquarters had only managed to pull in about a million skygold a year previously, averaging about 100,000 a month. Li Luo's secret watersource had tripled it?

In a year, the Suncreek Villa would earn three million? That was half of House Luolan's total revenue the previous year!

Li Luo felt a little tingle of happiness. The big swan had always been too excellent, and nothing that Li Luo did could surprise her, until now.

He carefully masked his smugness, smiling modestly. "Well, it's all as planned," he said casually, examining his fingernails. "The Tianshu's Suncreek Villa enjoyed the same bounty."

"But this month alone, we have bought seven sixth-grade and over twenty fifth-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights because of the Young Lord's wanton overconsumption," Cai Wei continued with impeccably heartless timing. "Which puts our expenses at 320,000 skygold, so we're 20,000 skygold in the red."

Li Luo's fingers curled fearfully into his palm. Sister Cai Wei! Why the backstab?!

"Well, well, Young Lord. Looks like you've dug a deep ditch for yourself," Yan Lingqing said, enjoying his dismay.

"Money is meant to be spent," Jiang Qing'e said kindly. "And it's not gone to waste. The spirit liquids and purifying lights are invested in Li Luo. Once he masters his dual resonances, House Luolan will have a new Duke, and all of it will pay off."

Li Luo was moved. Big swan, you're the best.

But still, he felt like he had to make amends for the loss. "Cai Wei, is there still room for improvement in the headquarters' revenue?"

If he could raise Tianshu's revenue that much, then headquarters should be able to increase by far more, given the larger scale of production here.

"Theoretically, yes... But don't forget that the Suncreek Villa headquarters isn't exactly doing all that well right now."

With a sinking jolt, Li Luo recalled that House Duze had dealt him a sneaky hand by poaching the last president, Hanzhi, along with nearly half his resonance artificers.

For a villa, resonance artificers were the engines of production. No matter how much secret watsource or materials you had, it meant nothing without resonance artificers to convert them.

"That dog..."

Li Luo cursed. Hanzhi could fuck right off, but the resonance artificers... that hurt.

"How's the recruiting been?" Jiang Qing'e asked.

Cai Wei dipped her chin. "I've been recruiting, raising the pay, and also using the Young Lord's secret watsource as a selling point... but results haven't been as good as expected."

Li Luo frowned. An upper seventh-grade secret watsource was pretty good. It should have been a great attraction for many resonance artificers. Why was it not working?

"Who's poaching them again?" Jiang Qing'e asked.

"Who else? Of course it's House Duze's Bigswamp Villa. They've spent a fortune stealing Hanzhi and our artificers. How could they just sit back and let us recover?"

"For the last month, they've been watching the Suncreek Villa closely. I'm sure they're equally shocked at how well it's been doing. They've steeled their resolve and doubled down to steal even more resonance artificers and limit our recovery."

"House Duze again..." Li Luo brooded. In school, the House Duze siblings were causing him no end of trouble, and outside, in Xia City, they were undermining House Luolan at every turn.

At least the battles inside the school went by the book. Outside... houses fought without mercy or rules. Violence and power reigned supreme.

House Duze's goal was to strike House Luolan's name off from the Five Great Houses and pick their bones clean.

A thought occurred to Li Luo that if he and Jiang Qing'e were not in the Astral Sage College right now, and under its protection, House Duze would probably already have used some underhanded means to wipe the two of them out. House Luolan would fail by itself without anyone at the wheel.

"The free agent resonance artificers in Xia City have more or less been wooed over by the Bigswamp Villa, at more favorable conditions than we have given. They're using their wealth advantage to choke us out."

It was simple yet effective. If not for Li Luo's secret watsource, the Bigswamp Villa's tactics would probably have wiped them out already.

Even so, the Suncreek Villa was not in a good enough position to attract good resonance artificers.

And without more resonance artificers, they couldn't expand. Which meant no growth for House Luolan.

"Let's take that slowly. As long as the Suncreek Villa holds firm, we will eventually grow," Jiang Qing'e said reassuringly.

Li Luo and Cai Wei nodded. House Duze might be flexing on them, but they couldn't lose their cool.

"Oh, there is another, more urgent matter," Cai Wei said.

"According to my information, many resonance artificers from the Xiling Province's Suncreek Villa are making their way to Xia City. Pang Qianchi corresponded with them before. I sense... trouble."

Li Luo was surprised. "The Xiling Province's Suncreek Villa branch?"

Besides headquarters, the Suncreek Villa had two other branches. One was at the Tianshu Province's City of Southwind, the other was at the Xiling Province.

However, the Xiling Province was Pei Hao's territory, and the Suncreek Villa branch there had mutinied against the headquarters long ago.

A wave of resonance artificers known to associate with Pang Qianchi, all migrating to Xia City. For what?

"Pei Hao must be behind this," Jiang Qing'e said.

Whether the Xiling Province resonance artificers or Pang Qianchi, they were all Pei Hao's allies. It was unthinkable that they would move without the mastermind's direction.

"Pei Hao..."

Li Luo's eyes turned cold at the name. He was the main troublemaker that was tripping House Luolan up both inside and outside.

"Inform Pavilion Master Lei Zhang to keep an eye on Pang Qianchi... More importantly, we need to find Pei Hao if we can. My gut is telling me that he might be in Xia City," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo frowned. "Pei Hao's here?"

In their last encounter with Pei Hao, he had split up House Luolan's Council of Nine. If he was in Xia City, it was definitely not to see the sights.

She nodded. "That's my feeling."

"If he's in Xia City..." Li Luo said with a murderous glint. "Can we find an opportunity to wipe him out?"

Killing Pei Hao would not undo the mess that he had created for House Luolan, but it would stop the problem from getting worse. They could stabilize and recover much more quickly.

"Actually, Pei Hao's not the one I'm most afraid of... I'm more afraid that there's a greater power supporting him," Jiang Qing'e said in a low voice.

Li Luo concurred soberly. There had to be some elite power supporting Pei Hao. Otherwise, he would not have been bold enough to rebel immediately after his parents' disappearance.

But who could it be?

House Duze? Or House Jiyan? They were the two strongest powers positioned against House Luolan, and they had reasonable motive to do so. Or was it someone else?

Li Luo kneaded his brow. It seemed like his vacation was not going to be a relaxing one.

Chapter 0190: 100,000 Points

Li Luo and the others had barely set foot in House Luolan before Ox Biaobiao greeted them with a hearty soup and a big smile.

"Young Lord, you're looking a little healthier after a month, but the nourishing soups cannot be missed. Drink it all, quickly!" Ox Biaobiao urged him.

Li Luo smiled back at him and took the soup. "It's been a whole month, Uncle Biao, and the first thing you can think of is soup!"

He gulped it down. "Uncle Biao, about that miracle paste... How much Royal Sap is needed?"

Ox Biaobiao looked at him with surprise. "Young Lord, you've come into some?"

As one of the most precious resources at the Astral Sage College, a mere month was shockingly quick.

Li Luo waved it off modestly, then produced the two thumbnail-sized bottles.

Ox Biaobiao examined them. "Indeed, Royal Sap. Superb job, Young Lord.

"At this quantity, another 20 bottles should be enough to refine the miracle paste."

Ack.

Li Luo's mouthful of soup sprayed out. He stared at Ox Biaobiao. 20 bottles?

Beside him, Jiang Qing'e sighed. She was prepared to learn that this bit of Royal Sap was not enough, but this was a little drastic.

20 bottles of Royal Sap was 100,000 points!

A herculean task, even for her.

"Uncle Biao, you're killing me here."

"Young Lord, I'm completely serious. The substance and potential you have lost would kill the development of anyone else. It's almost impossible to find anyone who can heal that sort of foundational gap throughout the Xia Kingdom. You're lucky that this old ox here knows about it."

Li Luo nodded glumly. His second resonance had brought him great power and even allowed him to taste the dual resonances of a Duke. But the price was heavy indeed.

Everyone was dazzled by their power, but they didn't know that under his shiny reputation hid a yawning hole.

His battered foundations would hold him back from the General Stage. If word of it got out, he would again be the target of disdain, just like when he was a blank palace cultivator.

"Uncle Biao, don't worry. The price of Royal Sap might be high, but we have some time. Li Luo's still far from the General Stage. I think we'll make it if we work hard," Jiang Qing'e said soothingly.

Li Luo looked at her, conflicted. Clearly, she intended to help him work towards the 100,000 points needed... But Royal Sap was incredibly important for her as well, especially if she was going to challenge the Seven Astral Pillars. If all her points went to him, her own cultivation would be impeded.

Li Luo opened his mouth, but she shook her head at him.

He swallowed his words back down.

The only thing left for him was to earn as many points as he could, to ease the burden on her.

Ox Biaobiao looked at them with rare sternness. "I know that Royal Sap is difficult to get, but you're not children anymore. How will you grow without stress?"

Both stiffened up at this uncommon reproach, but they nodded. After all, neither had ever treated him as a subordinate.

"Besides, do you think this is all the pressure you'll have to face?" They looked at each other.

"Uncle Biao," Jiang Qing'e said softly. "What do you mean?"

He rubbed his bald head and blew out a breath. "Well, I'd planned to keep it until you were at least Heavenly Dipper Generals, but the situation is worse than I expected. I have to let you know."

Both children sobered up immediately. They had long suspected that the mysterious Ox Biaobiao had been left at House Luolan for good reason.

However, they had trusted his discretion and not pressed for an answer.

He sat down heavily. "Last night, an unknown Duke expert trespassed at House Luolan."

Shock.

Duke expert?! Trespassing at House Luolan headquarters?

Who? Why? Was he trying to kill them?

"A Duke expert entering House Luolan headquarters?" Jiang Qing'e asked urgently. "How could it not trigger anything? I wasn't notified of any alarm."

"It was just a Duke too afraid to show himself. Besides, his real body didn't come, just an energy clone. I got rid of it."

They fell silent again.

Who actually was Ox Biaobiao? He knew too much, even the arcane ways of healing Li Luo's foundation. There was no way he was just a simple chef.

And now he had finished off a Duke's energy clone. Not just Li Luo, even the usually composed Jiang Qing'e was reeling from this information.

"Uncle Biao..."

"I always knew you were the legendary hidden hero," Li Luo said sincerely. "Whether or not you are interested in my knees, I would like to fall upon them for you."

Jiang Qing'e knew that he was trying to hide his shock with a glib facade.

"Legendary hidden hero my foot," Ox Biaobiao laughed. "I'm just a good-for-nothing who can't leave House Luolan."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were alarmed.

But he did not elaborate on that. "In recent years, a dark power has been investigating House Luolan's headquarters, although you two might not have been aware.

"They have been content to just watch up till now, but last night they finally entered headquarters."

Ox Biaobiao looked at them.

"Do you know... what they're looking for at House Luolan?"