

Resonance 441

Chapter 0441: Cruel Cauldron Conditioning

The arboreal sprawl cloaked the rocky mountains in a coat of severe green, relenting only to allow dappled sunlight to filter downwards, and the ferocious roar of spirit beasts ringing out upwards.

This was the mountain behind the Astral Sage College, the Gukun mountain range.

Sweat was pouring down Li Luo's face, stinging his eyes. His hand was practically a wiper on maximum speed, but the rain of saltwater seemed endless. He was using his resonant power in every way he could think of to increase his speed, and yet Chi Chan easily maintained her distance a few dozen meters ahead of him. He could not close the distance.

The Gukun mountain range had become particularly lively recently. As the Holy Grail Meet neared, all of the Violet Vibrance squads were hunkering down with their mentors here, killing spirit beasts and training themselves.

Li Luo saw Chi Chan halt in front of him, and he gratefully scurried back up to her, wheezing heavily.

He followed her gaze to see two people fighting a bunch of spirit beasts nearby. They moved well together, taking turns to attack and support each other. The spirit beasts fell with brisk efficiency.

Li Luo immediately recognized their familiar movements—Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng.

This patch of forest had been marked out by Chi Chan for their training use, which meant that all the spirit beasts in this area were swarming them.

It was brutally effective.

Even from a distance, Li Luo could feel that both their auras had been hardened significantly, and their resonant powers were much stronger than before.

Everyone was racing against time to improve themselves.

"Am I to train here too?" Li Luo asked his mentor.

"This is not the sort of training you need. For you, the most important thing is to improve the level of your dual resonances," she replied. Li Luo followed her gaze... further. The only other thing of note was a volcano's mouth, with an ashy-white plume of smoke rising slowly from it. The heat was distorting the air.

With barely a thought, Chi Chan had moved herself over to the mouth of the volcano, and Li Luo again chased her accordingly.

Looking down, he could see magma bubbling merrily below him, gurgling like a baby. A very hot, red, wet baby.

He swallowed nervously. "Er, Mentor, you're not asking me to hop down and cultivate, are you? I'll be in hot soup, both literally and figuratively. My body can't handle this sort of heat."

"I wouldn't ask you to," she chuckled.

Li Luo was very relieved to hear that.

He was relieved too, but too soon. She reached out a slim hand and clenched it above the magma.

Li Luo saw it start to rise, the neon red magma cooling into an ashy-gray as it solidified in the air.

Soon enough, it formed a large, black cauldron.

Although the redness was all gone, the cauldron continued to steam and hiss with heat, and Li Luo could still feel it from a few meters away.

"Get in. You're going to cultivate inside," she said, jabbing a finger at the cauldron.

Li Luo turned an unhealthy shade of green. The damn thing was literally made of magma, and it was an enclosed space. He was definitely going to get cooked in that thing.

"Given your current resonant power, you should be able to last about 10 minutes in there. After that, you'll be completely drained and no longer able to protect your physical body. You'll be burned to a crisp," she told him as casually as if she was explaining how to bake bread.

"If you want to avoid that, you're going to have to break the cauldron within 10 minutes. However, I've put a sliver of my dual resonant power into it as reinforcement. It's not very strong, but enough to stop you from smashing it with brute force. Your only hope is to use the true power of dual resonances to nullify mine...

"If you can get your dual resonances to the Becoming One Stage, you'll be able to do it."

Li Luo winced. He had tried his best to reach the Becoming One Stage ever since the ticket match, but he had yet to replicate his success. It had been a pure fluke.

Still, he did not object to the cruel training that his mentor had set up for him. He knew that cultivating at the brink of life and death was the best sort of motivation and inspiration for a breakthrough.

"Li Luo, the cultivation of dual resonances is indeed very difficult. Because strictly speaking, it's not something that a Resonant Master is prepared for. It's the rightful domain of Dukes, and to dare to trespass on nature's boundaries is a rare but difficult chance to grasp.

"And yet if you can, you will have power in your hands that can far exceed your cultivation level.

"When you reach the Duke Stage, you will naturally grasp dual resonances, and it will even be at the sentience stage, something that you can only dream of right now. But you are not a Duke. You cannot move the resonant power within your body with that level of will.

"There is no way to brute force this—you have to let nature take its course. The power within you is like a very special plant. Pulling on it isn't going to make it taller in any healthy way. You'll have to grow it, nurture it.

"Quieten your heart and feel the pulse, the logic, the system of the two resonances. Understand their nature and then become them."

The two avoided Chi Chan's eye, scooting off to their training.

Suddenly, the training that they thought difficult looked like a walk in the park compared to their leader's. Their mentor was taking good care of them.

Good luck, Leader. Hope you survive. Li Luo was again gently lifted out of the cauldron in a bubble of water, which set him down against the slope of the volcano.

His skin was red as a cooked lobster, but this was skin, not shiny carapace. It was peeling badly at places, and blackened at others. However, the water bubble around him was pumping him full of healing energy that patched him back up.

Water resonant power from Mentor Chi Chan.

A Duke's water resonant power had healing powers far beyond Li Luo's own waterlight resonance.

In a few minutes, he was as good as new again.

He continued to lie on the ground and pant, staring blankly at the sky. He had made some good progress during his training, but his dual resonances had not managed to reach the Becoming One Stage yet.

He did not know why, but they were always just a little short.

"Mentor, what's going on?" His head creaked sideways to look at her. She inhaled deeply, taking in the fragrance of the tea, then he looked up at the mountain scenery.

"Come here," she said, setting down her teacup.

Li Luo creaked over, joints protesting.

"Put on your shirt," she said impatiently.

His shirt had been burned clean away. He had prepared some thermal-resistant pants, but his mentor was not interested in his topless form, even though he had some good definition on his muscles.

Li Luo pulled out another shirt from his pocket sphere with a shy chuckle.

"Give me your hand."

Li Luo reached out obediently, putting his overheated hand in her cooler one.

"Use your resonant power."

Li Luo sent out his water resonance, then his wood resonance.

She gave him a half-smile. "Still trying to hide it?"

Li Luo started, then laughed weakly. "Hehe, Mentor, you found out?"

"I always suspected. Your resonance arts were always stronger than they should have been, and a little different. And I confirmed it by putting you in the cauldron for the last few days."

Li Luo shrugged sheepishly. Now he showed his other two clearly—light resonance and earth resonance.

"You're really obsessed with hiding things, aren't you? Not just dual resonances, but with two more secondary resonances," she said with some surprise. "Well, it's not a miracle—some people naturally develop these. You don't need to think of yourself as a freak."

"Hehe, I don't really think that way," Li Luo said. "I only hid it out of habit. Always be unpredictable, right?"

She shook her head. "Wily as they come."

Still, she knew about House Luolan's circumstances as well. He was in more danger than other students. When one's life was on the line, anything you could do, you did.

She did not pay too much attention to that. "The dual secondary resonances must have given you much range and agility in your fighting up until now, but it's also brought some troubles."

"When what you needed most was raw power, it was a plus. But the crux of the transition to the Becoming One Stage is different. It marks a switch to fine control. At this time, the extra colors within you are muddying the direction."

"Do you mean that I can't reach the Becoming One Stage because of the dual secondary resonances' interference?" Li Luo asked, dismayed.

She nodded.

"But I always sift the light and earth out of my resonant powers when I combine them," Li Luo said.

"Maybe you try to, but it's not thorough. The two elements are too deeply entwined. How could a mere Resonant Master like yourself separate them cleanly?"

"Well then, what now?" he asked, crestfallen.

"It's not a difficult problem. You just need to reach the General Stage. Then this will not be a problem," she laughed.

"You can't do it right now, of course. So the other way is to borrow some external power."

"What external power?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Flowing Shear. You learned that resonance art, right?"

"The Flowing Shear resonance art?" Li Luo blinked, then nodded. He had indeed trained it before. He had used it against the human skin and fleshy Other back in the Umbra Cave to cut them apart from each other.

"Why not try using some Flowing Shear within your body? Borrow its power to make the cut, and maybe you'll be able to reach Becoming One a lot easier," she suggested.

Li Luo's eyes lit up at the idea.

"I can do that?"

"But you need to be careful," she cautioned him. "Don't go turning your organs into minced meat. Not even my water resonant power can save you from an internal grinder."

"Why must my secondary resonances be liabilities?! Why can't they be enablers instead, to improve my dual resonances?!" Li Luo grumbled, surly at having his expectations dashed.

"What are we learning now?" Chi Chan asked him acidly.

"Er, dual resonances, of course."

"And what does DUAL resonance mean?"

"Well, it means combining two resonances."

"And," she said testily, "if you want to add a third resonance into the mix, would it still be called dual resonances? I'm sorry to say that it would be called triple resonances instead. Even I haven't mastered that yet. What are you griping about?! What gun are you trying to jump?" she cried, waving her hands about agitatedly. "Besides, your secondary resonances are much, much weaker compared to your primary resonances. The melding would be too unbalanced to create triple resonances.

"Dual resonance melding is about deep control. Deep control. Deep control!! You are mixing two highly unstable, volatile elements together. Throwing a third resonance into the mix would be chaos."

Li Luo's eyes lit up with a wicked light. "Ah, so even if it fails, I could make a huge-ass explosion? An energy bomb?"

There was a dangerous look in Chi Chan's eye now. "Is that what I'm trying to teach you? If you really want to die, you might as well jump into the volcano now."

Li Luo knew when to surrender. "Well, I feel a strong surge of enthusiasm to try the Flowing Shear technique, Mentor! I'm going to do very well and work towards the Becoming One Stage, Mentor!"

He immediately sat down to cultivate, recovering his resonant power.

She sighed tiredly, shaking her head.

Li Luo was a sharp one, but sharp things were often dangerous. He liked playing with fire too much.

Chapter 0443: Loser

Chi Chan's advice was extremely on-point. After calibrating his Flowing Shear resonant art, he managed to separate the resonant power within him much more cleanly, and he felt like he was making good progress again.

He only spent a day experimenting with the Flowing Shear, and now he was already capable of using it at will within himself without injury.

And on the ninth day of cultivation in the volcano, he finally managed to reach the Becoming One Stage.

BOOM!

There was a deafening bang from the volcano, and then the cauldron gave way, shattering into pieces.

They fell into the magma below with a noisy splash.

Li Luo landed lightly on the mouth of the volcano, his face flushed with heat and excitement. He had finally managed it. Around his wrists, bracelets of shining blue and green power circled.

This was the sign of the Becoming One Stage!

After all that hardship, he had finally succeeded.

Clenching his fists, he could feel the energy swirling within him. Although he was still the same First Changing cultivator, his power was on a completely different level now.

He could definitely beat Lu Cāng much more easily, he believed. Clap, clap, clap.

Li Luo turned around to the source of the steady applause.

It was Bai Mengmeng, in awe. Beside her was Xin Fu.

Li Luo grinned at them. "Mentor, I've done it!" he declared proudly.

"Well, you're not completely helpless, I guess. If this didn't work, I was just about to call off the cooking," she said.

"Leader, your screaming has become good entertainment in these parts. A lot of people drop by every day to marvel at your volume," Xin Fu said with a smirk. Li Luo stared at him.

"Don't listen to him, Leader. Everyone admires your tenacity. Not everyone can tough through that sort of training," Bai Mengmeng hurriedly assured him.

Li Luo nodded glumly. If he had known, he would have held his screaming a little bit more, and gone back as a tight-lipped grim hero. But now...

"Mentor, it's quite an effective training method. It helps build resilience. You shouldn't show favoritism—Xin Fu has great potential as well. I strongly recommend him for a course."

Xin Fu blanched. This counterattack had come really swiftly. His leader was really petty.

"Er, no need. I'm not aiming to be the strongest One Star Hall student in all of the East Divine Continent or anything," Xin Fu hurriedly reassured her.

She ignored their banter. "We'll call a wrap to all of your training. Go back to school and rest."

She whirled back towards the school, and her squad followed her like little chicks behind the mother hen.

Back at school, Chi Chan indicated that Li Luo should stay a while more. Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng headed for the tower eagerly for some well-deserved rest.

"Rest well tonight. Tomorrow, I'll begin your refining. I've already secured a location for you, a cultivation hall that only Violet Vibrance mentors can borrow. I don't know what you want to refine, but there are security wards that will provide privacy," she said.

"Mentor thinks of everything." Li Luo grinned, pleased with her foresight.

He needed the power of two Dukes for the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel, and he knew it wasn't going to be easy. Although the school was quite safe, privacy wouldn't hurt.

"The pay is very good. Of course I will give you proportional effort," she said with a half-smile.

"Go and rest, then. Oh and..."

"Congratulations. You've become one of the top four competitors among the One Star Hall students. I look forward to your performance at the Holy Grail Meet."

...

The next day, Li Luo was finishing his preparations in his room when he heard a knock on his door.

When the door opened, two beautiful ladies awaited him. On his left was Lu Qing'er, in the Astral Sage College uniform, plus her signature, white-lace socks. Her face was glowing with youthful energy.

On the right was Yu Hongxi, in her usual red. Standing beside Lu Qing'er, one might even think they were sisters rather than mother and daughter.

Lu Qing'er beamed at him brightly, hanging off her mother's arm.

"President Yu, you are very punctual."

Li Luo hid his surprise that Lu Qing'er was here as well. However, he soon realized that her daughter was the best possible cover for a trip to the Astral Sage College.

Yu Hongxi took out a pocket sphere, pulling out a silver box from within. "These are the ingredients you needed," she said, handing it over to Li Luo. "They're all prepared perfectly."

Li Luo gave her a big thumbs up. "President Yu, you're the best!" he said excitedly.

He had been quite worried about these materials. After all, if he had managed to get two Dukes and not brought the right materials, that would've been a huge embarrassment. But clearly Yu Hongxi was highly capable.

"A mere transaction," she said with an easy smile.

Lu Qing'er frowned at her mother's words, pinching her elbow.

"Are you going to make us wait at the door all day?" Yu Hongxi asked impatiently.

Li Luo hastily stepped aside to let them in.

To his surprise, he saw yet another person behind them.

A familiar one... Mentor Cao Sheng?

Today, he was not as slovenly looking as he usually was. He was hunched over, his stature stiff with nervousness. He was rubbing his hands nervously, but together with his hunched back, it only made him look like a suspicious character.

"Mentor Cao Sheng...?" Li Luo asked.

"Oh, keke, I was here to speak to Mentor Chi Chan about something, and I ran into Qing'er and President Yu along the way. What a coincidence, eh?"

His eyes were following Yu Hongxi into the room.

Li Luo understood immediately, although he wasn't very sure what he had understood. So Mentor Cao Sheng had a soft spot for Yu Hongxi... was there history between them? Didn't Yu Hongxi like his dad? Which meant his old man had been Mentor Cao Sheng's love rival?

No, Mentor Cao Sheng probably did not qualify as a love rival. After all, his father had only treated Yu Hongxi as a friend.

Of course, from Yu Hongxi's attitude and the fact that she had gotten married and had a daughter in the flesh with them today, it meant that Cao Sheng's feelings were unreciprocated.

Ah... one-sided love.

So sweet, yet so bitter.

Li Luo looked at Mentor Cao Sheng with some sympathy in his eyes.

In the complicated love struggle of the previous generation, this poor man had emerged the ultimate loser.

Chapter 0444: Buy Two Get One Free

Li Luo was still looking at Cao Sheng with pity, while the latter boldly followed them into the house like a lost puppy. Li Luo's heart went out to him. Love made fools of us all.

Luckily, I'm awesome, so I won't know what it's like to be rejected.

Bai Mengmeng came hurrying over to serve tea to Yu Hongxi and Lu Qing'er with an adorable smile.

Yu Hongxi nodded in appreciation. "This Li Luo," she said mischievously to her daughter, "spends all his days in the same house as such a cute girl."

She knew that her daughter liked Li Luo. She might acknowledge his abilities, but he was an engaged man. Whether the engagement was real or just a formality, she was still reluctant for him to be too close to Lu Qing'er.

But young girls had a mind of their own. Yu Hongxi knew that forbidding anything would only be counterproductive.

That was why she preferred to drop subtle reminders for her daughter instead.

The apple did not fall far from the tree. Lu Qing'er was equally sharp, and quickly picked up on what her mother was trying to do. "You're overthinking it, Mom. Squadmates are not chosen by ourselves."

"Bai Mengmeng looks like she thinks well of Li Luo," Yu Hongxi said mildly.

"Mom, there are many girls in school who think well of Li Luo."

"Sounds like playboy potential to me."

"Only because your mind is dirty, Mom."

Yu Hongxi coughed irritably.

Li Luo showed Mentor Cao Sheng in and seated him opposite Yu Hongxi.

"Mentor." Lu Qing'er greeted him with a smile.

Cao Sheng nodded and gave her a hasty smile back.

Yu Hongxi looked at him as well. Cao Sheng was sitting as straight as could be, and sneaking surreptitious looks Yu Hongxi's way.

"Mentor Cao Sheng, thank you for taking care of Qing'er all this time. I've wanted to pay you a visit for a while now, but could never make the time," Yu Hongxi said.

"Oh, no trouble at all, no trouble... Qing'er is very talented! Just-just like yourself," Cao Sheng added awkwardly.

Li Luo and Lu Qing'er looked at each other. It was their first time seeing Mentor Cao Sheng this flustered.

"Mentor Cao Sheng, some wine?" Li Luo tried to ease the mood.

"Oh! Er... Li Luo! Well!" Cao Sheng stammered. "Don't you know that I don't like wine much? A cup of hot tea will do."

Dafuq?

Li Luo's jaw almost fell through the floor. Mentor Cao Sheng, how can you lie like this and not have your tongue turn black? He is the biggest drunkard in the school. And now he is posing as a teetotaler? You've got to be kidding me.

Of course, he couldn't afford to expose Mentor Cao Sheng on the spot and embarrass him, so he gestured for Bai Mengmeng to set another cup of hot leaf liquid in front of Cao Sheng.

Lu Qing'er was feeling a little embarrassed herself. Mentor Cao Sheng's temperament and favorite drink were all well-known to her. But what could she say at this point? It would be too cruel to expose him.

Mentor Cao Sheng had a soft spot for her mother. He'd probably been on high alert from the moment that Yu Hongxi set foot in school, and set up his "coincidental" meeting.

A coincidence so forced that Lu Qing'er cringed.

Yu Hongxi ate financial politics and maneuvering for breakfast. This sort of childish wooing was blatant as could be to her.

Still, she was polite enough to entertain him with a few exchanges. They chatted pleasantly enough, but the mood was so cool that Lu Qing'er had no doubts about her mother's complete lack of romantic interest in him.

Regardless, Mentor Cao Sheng was lapping it up blissfully.

Lu Qing'er wanted to tell him that no love ever came from a forced relationship. If he hung himself by the neck on the tree, her mother would still not take a second look. "When do you start?" Yu Hongxi asked Li Luo. As Lu Qing'er had predicted, Yu Hongxi had zero interest in Cao Sheng's beverage preferences.

"Er..." He looked uncertainly at Mentor Cao Sheng, not sure if he should discuss this in front of him.

"I've already told Mentor Cao Sheng about your refining. Because both myself and Mentor Chi Chan will be helping you, we will be defenseless. Although the school is quite a safe place, it's always better to be cautious. We should ensure we are undisturbed, and Mentor Cao Sheng has graciously volunteered to defend us," Yu Hongxi said.

Li Luo was amazed. Were the bodyguarding services of a Duke expert so easily gotten for free?

For the first two Dukes' help, he had paid out two King Quintessences. And now Cao Sheng was doing this for free?!

He was a little giddy with happiness. Like a free pizza that had fallen from the sky. Duke level crust, Duke toppings.

Li Luo looked at him with a complex expression. "Mentor Cao Sheng, you are a great man."

Cao Sheng waved it away happily. "Oh, it's nothing at all, Li Luo. Just tell me about such things earlier! Of course I would have helped you."

Li Luo gave him a grateful smile, but he was screaming inwardly. Mentor Cao Sheng, you crazy bastard. Do you think I don't know what you're usually like? Back when Shen Jinxiao was hammering me into the ground, I didn't see you lift a finger, unless it was to lift your wine cup.

It wasn't that he didn't want to cultivate good relationships with the Violet Vibrance mentors either, but no such opportunity had ever presented itself.

Li Luo did not mind—he did not expect these elites of the Xia Kingdom to give him the time of day as the young lord of House Luolan. Besides, there was nothing to tie them together.

Mentor Cao Sheng deciding to become a kind father was all thanks to the halo of romance that Yu Hongxi had brought.

In any case, a Duke's protection would definitely allow today's refining to go more smoothly than ever.

He chatted with Yu Hongxi for a while more, then Mentor Chi Chan arrived when the light outside just started to dim a little.

Chi Chan showed no surprise at all to see Cao Sheng there. In fact, she almost seemed to have been expecting it. Not one given to gossiping, she greeted both of them simply.

"Well, we're all here. Let's get to it, then."

Li Luo rose accordingly.

Time to forge the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel.

Chapter 0445: Her Heart

In the southwest corner of the Astral Sage College.

A red-brick spiral building stood out from among the lush, green grass. It was an unfamiliar place for most students, as only Violet Vibrance mentors with resources to spare could rent the place.

Mentor Chi Chan brought Li Luo and the others to one of the cultivation chambers.

Pushing open the heavy, stone doors, a glittering arena of white crystal greeted their eyes. The cool room sparkled with golden glamor, and a spacious, stone platform in the middle of the room basked in their reflective spotlight.

A wave of worldly natural energy blasted them full on from the moment the doors opened.

For Dukes like Chi Chan and Yu Hongxi, it was like a cool and refreshing breeze playing across their faces. For Li Luo, it was closer to a tornado. He felt like he had been dunked into one of those earthenware wine jars the size of a bathtub, and he had drunk every last drop. He could barely stand straight.

Mentor Chi Chan had expected as much, so she reached out to steady him.

She also sent a jolt of resonant power to fortify him, shaking him out of his drowsy state.

"Wow, this is intense," Li Luo muttered to himself. This was even stronger than what he had experienced from the Tree of Resonant Power.

"Is this dragon's blood amber crystal?" Yu Hongxi asked appreciatively as she stepped into the glittering room. "The Astral Sage College is truly something else. This crystal is very expensive. This entire room was built out of it, and it harnesses the harmonies of dragon's blood in an inspirational design. Even Dukes would gain greatly from cultivating here."

Chi Chan smiled. "Very modest, President Yu... As if the Astral Sage College could ever hope to compare to the Golden Dragon Bank's wealth."

"Wealth built through a lifetime of scrimping and saving," Yu Hongxi replied. "No boldness in luxury like the Astral Sage College."

"If President Yu finds this too ostentatious, I would be delighted to show you to House Luolan's wagon parking yard," Li Luo said.

"Oh, no thank you." Yu Hongxi smirked. "You don't have enough space to park all the wagons I have."

Li Luo scowled. Damn, she is ruthless! Get off your high and very expensive horse! You think money alone can make you happy?

Li Luo sighed. Actually, money would make him very happy. If he had enough money, his waterlight resonance would already be an eighth-grade... And maybe he would have a seventh-grade woodearth resonance to go alongside it. Money could make him very happy indeed.

Money he did not have.

While Li Luo was brooding about his financial concerns, Yu Hongxi turned to Cao Sheng, who was standing at the door. "Mentor Cao Sheng, our safety is in your hands."

Mentor Cao Sheng waved eagerly at her. "Don't worry, President Yu. I will not let anyone cause trouble to you. Anyway, the school is quite a safe place. I doubt anything would happen."

"It's always good to be safe. If there's nothing else," she said, turning to Li Luo, "let's begin."

Her natural business efficiency had reasserted itself.

Li Luo was only too happy to oblige.

With a gentle flick from Chi Chan's wrist, the heavy, stone doors swung shut with a rumble.

Cao Sheng stared at the closed door, then planted his own butt outside it. He rubbed his grizzled cheek and grinned like a young boy. He had not spoken so intimately with Yu Hongxi in many years now. Then again, he knew that it was not her fault—he was the one who had not dared to speak to her.

In this regard, he was truly a coward.

Back in the day, he had not even been able to muster up the courage to confess. He knew that the reply would be a clear refusal—she had told him that she liked Li Taixuan.

Afterwards, he left the Golden Dragon Bank and entered the Astral Sage College. Although they still worked near Xia City, he had never gone to find her. She was a proud woman and would probably not tolerate his attention. He had all but cut contact with her.

Cao Sheng knew that he was a coward.

In his heart, Yu Hongxi was perfect, and he dared not even have the slightest untoward thought about her.

But tragically, one's feelings could not be controlled. He could not help but like her—an understandable reaction for any hot-blooded man towards a wonderful woman like Yu Hongxi. Cao Sheng sighed deeply. He closed his eyes and let the memories fill his mind's eye.

He had been a young boy, escaping to Xia City after his family had fallen into ruin. He had nothing more than the threadbare shirt on his back and a growling stomach.

He had collapsed by the city wall, resigned to death by starvation when someone threw a hot, fresh bun at his face. The yeasty fragrance had awoken his soul, and he had scarfed it down, sinking his teeth into the plump and piping-hot snack. The bun pressed against his tongue, burning it, and somehow he had enjoyed the feeling.

When he had licked the last crumb clean, he finally looked up at his savior.

A young girl dressed in red, she was as beautiful as she was proud, staring down haughtily at him.

"You big lout, come do hard labor for me if you want to eat." She turned away without waiting for his reply.

He stood rooted on the spot for a few seconds, then crawled hastily after her.

Later on, he had demonstrated his talent and carved his own reputation in the Xia Kingdom as one of the top elites. But all of that was thanks to Yu Hongxi.

He laid back and smiled at his memories.

In all these years, he had not dared to appear before her, afraid that he would be a bother. But his life had been hers, bought for the price of a steaming bun all those years ago. She had never asked him for anything since then, as though she had forgotten that she had a Duke's life at her beck and call if she so wished.

Finally, now she had asked him for something.

Although it was just door guarding, he felt that he had to do his best.

Slapping his knee, he looked up at the night sky, then turned his head to the right. "I say, Old Jin, how about giving tonight a rest, eh? For me?"

A figure shifted in the darkness, then the veil of black parted to reveal a person.

Stepping out into the moonlight was none other than Shen Jinxiao.

"I had not expected the wildest of my colleagues, MMentor Cao Sheng himself, to be on bodyguard duty," Shen Jinxiao said with a slanted smile.

"Bodyguarding is an honor," Cao Sheng replied. "If she asked me to go do hard labor, I'd still do it gladly."

"A moving, yet pitiful story." Shen Jinxiao sneered. "And so strange. You are a Violet Vibrance mentor in the Astral Sage College, one of the few elite Dukes in the Xia Kingdom. You're of comparable status to President Yu, and you are fully deserving to chase her. There's no need to sit here steeping in imagination."

"Steeping is all the heat I can handle in the power of her beauty," Cao Sheng replied.

"Your obsession," Shen Jinxiao noted.

Cao Sheng nodded. "And your obsession? Li Luo? Or is it Jiang Qing'e?" Shen Jinxiao smiled wordlessly.

"Mentor Shen Jinxiao, I do not want to fight you. Do not make trouble here tonight. I could ignore your tussle with Li Luo and Chi Chan, but tonight, you are up against me. I will not show courtesy," Cao Sheng said with a quiet promise. Under his scraggly hair, his eyes were clear and filled with power.

Free of his sappy thoughts of Yu Hongxi, Mentor Cao Sheng flexed the full power that he had earned as a Duke over the years.

Shen Jinxiao waved lazily.

"I'm not here to fight you."

"Eh? Then you're just here to watch me guard the door?" Cao Sheng frowned.

Shen Jinxiao laughed, then he sat on the stone steps beside Cao Sheng.

Cao Sheng frowned, but there was no good reason to shoo Shen Jinxiao away, even though he was a little too close for comfort. "Mentor Shen Jinxiao, I've always felt that your anger against Li Luo was unwarranted.

"What is it that you are trying to accomplish?"

Shen Jinxiao remained silent, looking up at the bright moon.

In it, he could almost see the silhouette of Jiang Qing'e.

But his eyes were not on her imaginary face. He looked at her organs inside her, and he licked his lips. I want her heart.

Chapter 0446: Yu Hongxi's Resonance

In the closed chamber.

Li Luo was sitting in the middle on the cultivation platform, while Chi Chan and Yu Hongxi were on two futons by his sides.

"Mentor Chi Chan, President Yu, I'm beginning," he said formally to them.

They both nodded, a little curious about what Li Luo hoped to achieve by gathering such power in one place.

Li Luo ignored their unspoken questions. He reached into his pocket sphere and took out the golden scroll.

It immediately filled the air with a magical humming.

Li Luo hesitated for only a moment, then he bit down hard on his finger and allowed fresh blood to land on the scroll.

This was made by Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan, so his blood essence was a simple activation key that would prevent the scroll from being stolen.

The blood was absorbed into the scroll and then blazed with light that flooded the chamber. They criss-crossed until a hexagonal ward floated in the air above them.

Golden runes swam in and out of the hexagonal plane like sprites.

Li Luo whistled. Damn, his parents built some beautiful things.

In the meantime, Yu Hongxi and Chi Chan were impressed at a deeper level. A mere Resonant Master like Li Luo might only marvel at the beauty, but Dukes like themselves were blown away by the complexity and intricacy of the formation.

The hexagonal miracle before them was one of the most sophisticated constructions that either had ever seen.

"This was left behind by Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan? The fact that they fashioned a ward of this level speaks of superb mastery and expertise..." Chi Chan said in awe.

Yu Hongxi was even more surprised. Working at the Golden Dragon Bank meant that she had seen a great variety of strange and expensive things—perhaps even more so than Chi Chan, who lived at the school. And with her worldly experience, she knew that this ward was one that most Dukes would struggle to make.

If Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had made it themselves, then the two were even more powerful and talented than she could have imagined.

Li Luo was right in the core of the ward. Golden light swirled around him and coalesced as a brazier, then it continued circling him. At that moment, he felt like he could control the entire ward with this beam of gold.

At the same time, the swirl of golden light flooded his mind with information on operating the ward.

He took it all in for a moment, and he felt more and more relieved as he processed the information. He had been afraid that he would not have enough power to harness these two Dukes' powers to build the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel. After all, he had barely managed to walk into the cultivation chamber in the first place. He felt like a little fish trying to redirect two rivers.

But the information from the ward put him at ease.

He realized that this marvel his parents had built could practically run itself. All he needed to do was use the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Art, and the ward would guide him to harness Yu Hongxi and Mentor Chi Chan's power to fuel the Acquired Resonance Flame and complete the forging.

In other words, his role was merely that of a vessel.

His parents must have factored in his strength during their calibrations.

"Sometimes, they seem almost reliable," he thought to himself.

"President Yu, Mentor Chi Chan, you only need to continuously charge the ward with your energy," he told them.

Both of them nodded, then they began to summon their respective powers, tremendous enough to warp the air around them.

Chi Chan's power came in the form of a sea of water behind her, crashing forth with the roar of the waves and a tiger.

Her first resonance was a water resonance, and her second was a jade tiger resonance.

Yu Hongxi shot her own resonant power forth, and Li Luo could not resist staring. It was a sea of flowers, brilliant red. In their midst was a gigantic flower that bloomed widely. On its sturdy petals ran lines of royal purple in the pattern of a phoenix's wings.

"Phoenix's Blood Rose..."

Li Luo immediately recognized the curious flower. It was a flower resonance, one said to be capable of surviving by devouring spirit beasts whole once it gained sentience.

He had not expected this to be Yu Hongxi's first resonance.

Within the sea of flowers, a steaming power rose, flaring up the flowers until they were an even more brilliant red. Clearly, her second resonance was some sort of fire resonance.

BOOM!

While Li Luo was gawking at their resonances, both had already sent a tremendous stream of power flooding into the hexagonal ward.

Boom! Rumble!

Two vortexes of energy opened up in the ward, absorbing all of the energy that they were funneling into it.

Their energy's presence alone was enough to distort the air. Pushing it into the ward was creating a gigantic force, but Li Luo was completely unaffected, cocooned by its magical properties.

He took out the material box that Yu Hongxi had provided him, pulled out the ingredients, and placed them in the brazier at the core of the ward.

As the two Dukes continued to pour their power into the ward, the points of light on it gradually began to light up.

Li Luo calmly began to use the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Art.

A small spark danced on his fingertip, then it leaped off.

Li Luo was a little embarrassed by this tiny, little bit of Acquired Resonance Flame, though it was the most he could produce. If he had to forge the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel with that tiny spark, he'd take a lifetime to even boil down the ingredients.

Fortunately, he had great powers at his disposal. His own personal, extremely expensive gas burners.

A golden halo settled down over Li Luo, acting as a focal point to draw the energy towards him. It then redirected the energy through him and onto the spark.

FWOOM!

In a few short moments, the tiny spark grew into a roaring flame dozens of meters tall. His finger was like a freaking dragon now, and Li Luo thrust it into the golden brazier.

A gigantic fire roared to life, and the refining began.

Chapter 0447: Sudden Situation

The refining process was going as smoothly as Li Luo could have hoped for.

It was so easy that he even felt comfortable enough to nod off.

The ward all but ran itself on autopilot. His only job was to use the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Art to create a puny Acquired Resonance Flame.

The ward would then turn Yu Hongxi and Chi Chan's enormous amounts of power into a special fuel that would boost his Acquired Resonance Flame to the point that it was suitable to refine the ingredients inside the brazier.

The herbs and ores continued to bubble and fuse within.

This was no ordinary fusion. The ward was expertly designed to fuse all the ingredients in the proper steps and amounts, with not a single mistake. Li Luo didn't have to do anything.

This was easier than a walk in the park. This was like riding a carriage through the park.

Seeing how relaxed Li Luo was surprised Yu Hongxi. Her eyes widened as she realized how automated the ward was.

"This ward... is sentient?"

Li Luo had no idea what she was talking about, but Yu Hongxi was a Duke, so she clearly understood the ward's intricacies a little better than he did.

She was highly impressed.

Those two had really never stopped moving forward, even after they had left the rest of the generation behind.

Back when they were at the Xia Kingdom, their talent had eclipsed every other expert in their generation. No one else had dared to claim talent of any sort, not when they grew up in the chilly discouragement of those two's shadows.

Now that they had been gone for many years, the memory of their brilliance had slowly faded away from Yu Hongxi's mind. But this ward had brought it all blazing back—those years of domination by the two.

Yu Hongxi controlled her feelings, focusing on pushing more resonant power into the ward.

Over at the other side of the chamber, Chi Chan was feeling the same.

"Seems like there'll be no problems with refining whatever this is," she thought to herself. She let some of the tension ease from her shoulders.

Although House Luolan had many enemies, none should be able to infiltrate the Astral Sage College's grounds. The only pesky one here was Shen Jinxiao, but he would scarcely barge in to cause trouble.

Thinking thus, she was happy to push more of her resonant power into the ward.

Suddenly, her body lurched. There was a disturbance in the flow of Chi Chan's resonant power.

She seized up.

She fell to the floor, her hand clutching at her veil. Under it, her eyes were filled with horror and pain.

"No! It can't be!" she said hoarsely.

"After so many years, why has it been triggered now?"

Chi Chan screeched in agony.

From beneath her veil, black marks started to surface, becoming a line of small, black fishes. They burrowed into her eye, turning her right eye completely black.

A sinister aura filled the air.

Her left eye was normal, but it was struggling frantically.

Her resonant power was flying out of control, smashing and ricocheting off the space.

"Li-Li Luo, watch out!" she shouted with her last breath.

BOOM!

She completely lost control, her resonant power gushing out of her from unexpected parts of her body in a bizarre variety of strengths. It would blast out of her chest at one moment, then ooze from her back in the next. Her entire body was at its mercy, contorted this way and that like a limp ragdoll in the resonant power's fury.

Li Luo could not deal with the attacks coming his way.

He stood no chance against the wrath of a Duke; he could not even avoid it.

The torrent of resonant power was stopped midair by a wave of red resonant power that shimmered together as a wall of petals. It not only stopped the attack, but absorbed some of the power.

"Mentor Chi Chan?!" Yu Hongxi was on her feet, looking over gravely. She had saved Li Luo.

"President Yu! What's happened to Mentor Chi Chan?" Li Luo gasped.

"She's lost control, it seems."

Yu Hongxi was watching Chi Chan's crazed eyes carefully. "That twitch. That aura. It's the corruption of Others. Has she succumbed before?"

Li Luo looked at his mentor in disbelief.

"Mentor Chi Chan? Corrupted by Others?! What Other could corrupt even a Duke?"

"Actually, Mentor Chi Chan always wears a veil. Is she hiding something beneath it?"

BOOM!

While they spoke, Chi Chan moved again. Her jet-black eyes were locked onto Yu Hongxi, slim hands punching out with ferocious power that sharply contrasted against her diminutive frame. A blue tiger leaped forth.

The black stripes on its back pulsed with power that made Li Luo go cold with fear.

Roar!

The tiger snarled as it rent the air with its sharp claws.

Yu Hongxi's fingers moved in a blur as she lifted her chin defiantly. Completing a series of hand motions, she pushed out with her palm.

"Crimson Flower Palm!" Crimson power burst out of her open hand in a circle of petals. The heart of the flower glowed with a dark flame.

Ping!

The tiger leaped into the petals in a clash of fire and water. Vaporization sent boiling steam out in a vicious spray, but the walls of the cultivation chamber absorbed it all.

The tiger retreated, growling and pacing.

Yu Hongxi frowned. Chi Chan was in a strange state, but she was not about to kill a teacher. She could only defend, and also defend Li Luo, the puny Resonant Master caught between two Dukes. He would be wiped out like an ant otherwise.

Besides, their goal today had been to help Li Luo with his refining. If they ended up fighting all their strength away, they would have none left to help Li Luo. Today would be wasted.

Li Luo could not possibly keep the ward running forever. As the core energy within faded, the ward would fade as well. He could not replicate it again.

This was a real dilemma.

Yu Hongxi's mind raced. One more option was Cao Sheng, who was just outside. But the more eyes on the situation, the more muddled the picture.

While she was puzzling this out, Li Luo received some information from the ward itself. Clearly, the fighting had triggered some defenses from the ward.

Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had truly prepared for every single possible outcome.

Li Luo was moved by his parents' foresight and meticulous crafting. It might have just saved him right now.

"President Yu," Li Luo shouted to her, "transfer your resonant power to me. I'll subdue Mentor Chi Chan!"

Yu Hongxi was taken aback. "This youngster..."

Still, she moved decisively to push more of her power into the ward.

"Alright, kid, let's see what you can do."

Chapter 0448: Black Fish

As Yu Hongxi continued to force a steady flow of energy into the ward, it began to keen shrilly.

A golden ring flowed into existence in front of Li Luo, then it bulged forward and took the form of a cannon pointed straight at Chi Chan.

Her eyes were still crazed, but some basal instinct had warned her of the new danger. She turned to Li Luo, the jeweled, blue tiger already loping across the field towards him.

"Watch out!" Yu Hongxi shouted. A Duke had the power to level mountains, and Li Luo was not a mountain. He might soon be a grave mound though, if Chi Chan's tiger had its way with him.

Li Luo watched the tiger bounding across the field towards him with studied disinterest. Curiously, he did not feel any danger—it had to be because of the ward. Otherwise a Resonant Master like himself would have already been paralyzed by the raging power of a Duke.

Heart as calm as a still lake, he followed the nudgings of the ward.

Wub, wub!

The power that Yu Hongxi was feeding into his Acquired Resonance Flame was burned up all at once, and it passed through the golden ring that was the cannon's mouth.

The golden ring had a strange effect on the energy. As the raging flames passed through it, they shrank until they were about the size of a fist.

In exchange, the ruby-red flames now had a trail of glittering, gold sparks. They snaked out like a fiery dragon.

Pssh!

The thin, golden fire dragon smashed into the tiger, vaporizing it instantly and traveling onwards to Chi Chan.

Chi Chan moved swiftly, gathering her robust power on a fingertip, creating a single, concentrated water droplet.

It flew out like a sparkling sapphire, sucking in more worldly natural energy like a black hole as it flew out.

Swoosh!

Sapphire against ruby, they collided like bullets.

Pssh!

But again, Chi Chan's power was lacking. The water droplet fizzled away, and the golden fire dragon blazed on.

It landed on Chi Chan's face, burning away the veil instantly.

Behind it was a lovely face. Perhaps because she was a water resonance user, her skin glowed beautifully. Everything about her was overflowing with life and vitality, and compelling beauty exuded out of her dainty nose and cherry-red lips, tightly pursed.

The only mar to her beauty was a black-fish tattoo on the right side of her face.

The little fish seemed alive, wriggling enthusiastically across its facial canvas. On its pure-black body was a single eye that was pure white. It had an almost cartoon-y appearance that was somehow chilling to behold.

As the fish swam, it left a trail of black water in its wake. It plunged and leaped out of Chi Chan's right eye repeatedly, as if it were a deeper pool of water.

This fish had to be the reason she had gone mad.

"What deep corruption!" Yu Hongxi exclaimed. Even she could sense it... how strong the Other must have been to leave something of this caliber!

"Could it have been an Other King?! Chi Chan has met an Other King?!"

As the golden fire dragon smashed into her face, it wrapped itself around the black fish in a tight coil and squeezed.

A faint, gold halo formed around the black fish, sealing it and shrinking it.

Chi Chan's face gradually calmed back down, and a few moments later, both of her eyes were clear again.

As she fell to her knees, Chi Chan lifted her hand to touch her face tentatively.

Yu Hongxi rushed over to her. "Mentor Chi Chan, are you alright?"

She had not let her resonant power fade away completely yet, keeping her guarded stance.

Chi Chan smiled and shook her head weakly. "Li Luo," she called out, "I'm sorry for ruining your plan."

"No worries, Mentor," Li Luo quickly assured her. "You only ran into problems because you were helping me."

She was quiet for a moment as she took out a new piece of veil. "Your attack seems to have sealed it away for the moment. It is quite a unique seal. I think it might be able to keep it under wraps for quite some time.

"Shall we... continue?" she asked.

Yu Hongxi looked at Li Luo. Clearly, Chi Chan was not too willing to explain the black fish on her face, and Yu Hongxi was tactful enough not to push her.

Any safety issues had definitely been disclosed to the upper management in the school. Although such corruption was insidious, a Duke like Chi Chan would be able to suppress it under normal conditions.

"Well... if you are feeling okay, Mentor, then let's continue."

Yu Hongxi wordlessly took up her position again.

Chi Chan's eyes were drooping slightly. She seemed almost deflated after the incident, but for the sake of Li Luo's refining, she roused herself and again started to funnel resonant power into the ward.

After that slight hiccup, the refining continued again.

The refining process proceeded smoothly and easily once again, like before. The boredom was very much welcome after the excitement they had just experienced. Li Luo resumed his role as a prop and vessel, allowing the ward to run the show.

He had no complaints. It was a form of doting by his parents, and he wasn't about to spurn their coddling.

When the first rays of morning light broke through the clouds, so too did the refining come to an end.

The magnificent ward started to fade away, as did the golden brazier before Li Luo. From within, a golden nimbus of light landed gently before him.

It was a triangular object covered with intricate marks that compelled one's gaze.

Li Luo paid zero attention to the mystical object, stuffing it unceremoniously into his pocket sphere. He stood up and stretched lazily.

He looked calm as could be, but inside, he was hopping up and down.

His Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel was complete. He was one large step closer to his third resonance.

Chapter 0449: Ichthyic Curse

The cultivation chamber doors swung open.

Li Luo, Yu Hongxi, and Chi Chan walked out to see Cao Sheng and Shen Jinxiao by the door.

Cao Sheng sprang to his feet with a smile for Yu Hongxi. "Cultivation over? I trust all went well?" Even as he spoke, he could sense that something was off. Chi Chan was staring daggers at Shen Jinxiao, who was behind him.

"Shen Jinxiao! It must have been you!" Chi Chan's water resonant power roared to life as she stepped forward. Wrapping him in a violent swirl of water, it formed a cocoon around him.

The water spun faster and faster as the cocoon contracted.

Crushing the space within.

Shen Jinxiao calmly raised his own crimson resonant power, dissipating her power easily enough. It steamed off harmlessly. A dark-red figure had appeared behind him.

The figure had four limbs and a demonic aura to it.

Li Luo was shocked. This was his first time seeing Shen Jinxiao reveal his resonance... he was an Ifrit resonance user?

This was a fire resonance mutation, and a rather rare one. But compared to the table variety, this one was much more aggressive.

The fire demon behind him flexed strongly, smashing through the water cocoon thoroughly. With a quick leap, Shen Jinxiao retreated a dozen paces away.

"Mentor Chi Chan, are you attacking me? Tut tut, breaking school rules now, are we?"

She stared at him, choking up with anger.

Cao Sheng was taken aback by the sudden burst of violence as well. "Mentor Chi Chan, is something wrong?"

"Mentor Chi Chan ran into complications during the refining just now," Yu Hongxi said. "It seems like she suspects Mentor Shen Jinxiao of having a hand in it."

Cao Sheng's eyes widened. "Is it... the Ichthyic curse?"

Yu Hongxi's eyes flashed with understanding for a moment. Was that the black fish on Mentor Chi Chan's face? It seemed like this was no secret among the Violet Vibrance mentors.

However, Cao Sheng did not explain further. Yu Hongxi was still considered an outsider, and these were not his secrets to reveal.

Neither did Yu Hongxi press, understanding her position.

Chi Chan continued to seethe, her anger refusing to subside away. Her fists glowed with watery power as she prepared to attack again.

This time, an even stronger force descended, pushing her until she hunched over. A person floated down from above.

"Mentor Chi Chan, what has happened?"

Vice Principal Su Xin. She was looking serious. She had hurried over after sensing resonant power disturbances of great magnitude within school grounds.

Cao Sheng quickly explained the situation to her.

"The Ichthyic curse was triggered?" Su Xin strode quickly over to Chi Chan's side, forcefully tilting her chin up and ripping away the veil.

"Hmm?"

She immediately saw the golden ring around the fish's tail.

"It was sealed away? And what a strange seal. Is this some secret art from the Golden Dragon Bank?" she asked, startled.

In the past, she had been the one to seal away the Ichthyic curse whenever it was triggered. This seal was even stronger than any that she had created in the past.

Yu Hongxi was about to speak when she heard a pleading cough from Li Luo.

"Oh, just a sealing scroll treasure I brought along from the Golden Dragon Bank just in case. I had to use it since the situation was urgent."

"We are in your debt, President Yu," Su Xin said gratefully.

Yu Hongxi waved it away with a smile.

After carefully putting the veil back in place, Chi Chan said in a cold voice, "I suspect Shen Jinxiao did something to trigger it. I want him investigated!"

Shen Jinxiao smiled. "Ah, but I have been by Mentor Cao Sheng's side for the whole night. I don't think anyone would think me capable of pulling off such a fine trick right under his nose."

Cao Sheng hesitated. "Indeed, I was on my guard the whole night. He did not do anything suspicious," he confirmed.

"Mentor Chi Chan. I know you have resented and mistrusted me for many years, but what happened back then was a mistake. I've apologized to you so many times. You have never accepted though..."

Shen Jinxiao paused.

"But you should not forget who was the one who laid the Ichthyic curse on you in the first place. Please don't slander me. I cannot bear such a heavy crime that is not mine."

Chi Chan's fists were clenched so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

"I wonder," Li Luo suddenly said. "Why were you suddenly here, Mentor Shen Jinxiao? And for the whole night? Things were going fine, and then suddenly they weren't when you appeared. Doesn't it seem reasonable for some suspicion to be cast upon you?"

"Indeed, I came to see what you were up to," Shen Jinxiao admitted freely. "What would a mere Resonant Master cultivator be doing with two Duke experts? I confess that I suspected you of being up to no good, and so I came to protect the school's interests."

"Or perhaps you would like to clear your name before the vice principal? Tell us what you were refining. Or what use it has."

Li Luo smiled and shook his head. "It's confidential."

"Then how can we be sure that it's not whatever you were refining that caused Mentor Chi Chan to lose control?" Shen Jinxiao said sadly. "Perhaps you're the one looking for the scapegoat here."

"Shen Jinxiao, shut up right now," Chi Chan snarled.

He smirked, then he turned and left. "Mentor Cao Sheng, please escort President Yu accordingly," Vice Principal Su Xin said.

He nodded quickly.

Yu Hongxi nodded with a courteous smile. These were school affairs. It was not appropriate for a Golden Dragon Bank outsider like herself to be involved. She took a quick glance at Li Luo and then left.

Cao Sheng eagerly followed behind her like a puppy, delighted and yet almost afraid to get too close.

As they left, Su Xin took Chi Chan by the hand and briefly conferred with her privately before she left. She only looked at Li Luo long enough to acknowledge his presence, but did not probe as to what he was doing with two Dukes.

Only Chi Chan and Li Luo were left now.

"Mentor, I'm so sorry for causing you trouble," he said sincerely.

He was not sure why she had lost control, but if he had not sought out her help, things would probably not have turned out this way.

"It had nothing to do with you," she assured him, then she turned and walked slowly along the stone path.

Li Luo hesitated, then followed her cautiously.

In the misty dawn, they walked silently for a while.

"Li Luo, do you know how I got corrupted by an Other?"

Chapter 450: Ichythian King

Li Luo was, of course, itching with curiosity. He really wanted to know how Mentor Chi Chan had gotten corrupted. He immediately gave her his full attention.

"You should know that there is a terrifying Other King in the depths of the Umbra Cave that the Astral Sage College guards. Principal Pang has not emerged for many years because of that thing.

"We named it Ichythian King." A shadow fell over her face as she spoke the name.

"Ichythian King?"

An Other King... a King-level Other... If that thing popped out into their world, it could level the whole Xia Kingdom in a moment. Years of prosperity, thousands of lives, all wiped out in a moment.

"Back in the day, the Ichythian King plotted to break out of the Umbra Cave and roam the Xia Kingdom. Of course, the school would not allow that to happen. There was an epic battle.

"The battle went back and forth. Finally, to break the stalemate, the school organized a huge ambush.

"It was not just comprised of Violet Vibrance mentors, but also other Dukes from the Xia Kingdom. Among them were your father and mother," she added.

Li Luo inhaled sharply at the mention of his parents. They were everywhere, had been everywhere.

"But that ambush ended in failure, and afterwards, the school decreed that no more external experts would be invited to the Umbra Cave unless there was no other choice," she said slowly.

"Why is that?" Li Luo was puzzled. The Astral Sage College was rich enough. Many hands would make light work, right?

"Because when dealing with the Others, numbers are not always an advantage. It might even lead to disaster," she explained patiently.

"Part of the Others' deadliness is their ability to play on human emotions, especially Other Kings... their corruption is terrible to behold. And for experts, they have traveled further along the path to power, and experienced much darkness in their lives. These people are susceptible to the manipulations of Other Kings.

“That is why the school instead sends young students. Your purer hearts and minds are a precious asset in this struggle.

“In that ambush, the corrupted experts ended up becoming our biggest issue.

“The Ichythian King almost broke out of the Umbra Cave back then, but it was eventually beaten back by Principal Pang. Of course, your parents were a huge help as well. They are indeed very strong—even Principal Pang himself acknowledges it.”

Li Luo’s heart skipped a beat. To think that the very ground he walked was steeped in such rich history, and that it would be unraveled to him at such an unexpected time. And now he knew why the school would risk student lives rather than hire experts.

It was a result of their past failures.

“As for the Ichthyic curse on my face, that was left by the Other King as well.”

She sighed deeply. “When the Ichythian King was cornered by Principal Pang and your parents, it split itself into nine aspects and fled. I was paired with Shen Jinxiao to chase one of the aspects. The two of us activated a seal resonance art to capture it.

“But perhaps because the other aspects had all been captured and eliminated, this aspect became the real thing.

“Of course, the Ichythian King was badly injured at that time. Even though the real one appeared before us, we were able to hold it for quite some time with the seal. We would have bought enough time for Principal Pang and the others to reach us.

“But Shen Jinxiao was afraid. He fled, leaving me to face the Ichythian King alone... Of course, I could not. If not for Principal Pang’s arrival in the nick of time, I would’ve died in the Umbra Cave.

“Even so, I was left scarred by the Ichthyic curse. This is its signature move, and it is capable of corrupting even Dukes. If not for Principal Pang helping me seal the curse, I would have succumbed.

“From then on, I wore a veil to keep others from seeing the Ichthyic curse.”

Her voice was calm and quiet, but Li Luo could imagine the storm of emotions that she had to be feeling. The fear. The anger and frustration after being corrupted. The despair.

“Shen Jinxiao is a cowardly, castrated dog!” he swore. So that was the cause of the enmity between Mentor Chi Chan and Shen Jinxiao. No wonder she hated him with a passion. She had been left hanging by him all those years ago.

If not for the school rules, she would probably have challenged him to a fight to the death already.

“Afterwards, he defended himself by saying that he had sent a signal to retreat, but I was the one who insisted on staying. That was why we had not been able to unite against the enemy.”

“Son of a bitch!” Li Luo was very worked up now. At first, he had been fully prepared to fake an appropriate level of sympathy, no matter her answer, but Shen Jinxiao was really dogshit through and through. He had backstabbed Mentor Chi Chan, then gaslit her about it.

“The school should banish that failure of a human being,” he grumbled.

Chi Chan smiled thinly. “It’s a wasted cause. After all, only the two of us were there. Not even the school can do anything about a he-said-she-said. At the end of it, Shen Jinxiao was merely chastised.”

“That’s too damn easy on him! Principal Pang must be blind!”

She shook her head. “The school has its own interests and priorities. But so do I. When the right moment comes, I will deal with him. I just hope the school does not intervene.”

Li Luo was silent for a moment. “Mentor, if the opportunity comes, call me along. After hearing your story, I hate Shen Jinxiao even more! I didn’t even think it was possible to detest him more than I already did!”

“What’s your story with him?” she asked, slightly interested.

Li Luo shook his head in a bothered manner. “The main problem,” he burst out, “is that now my mentor’s beautiful face has to be hidden behind a veil all day. Does he know how much eye candy he’s cost me?!”

“Li Luo, how are you bold enough to dare to tease your mentor?” she said in a dangerous tone.

Li Luo clutched his heart. “True words, spoken sincerely, Mentor. It’s such a shame for someone as beautiful as you.”

She could not help but laugh at his antics, knowing that he was trying to cheer her up.

“Alright, enough,” she said, tousling his hair fondly.

“If you really want to help me, bring back the strongest One Star Hall student title at the Holy Grail Meet. Better results reflect well on me, and I’ll have more leverage over the school to use on Shen Jinxiao. Can you do that?”

She looked into Li Luo’s earnest eyes, and he nodded with a smile.

“Of course. But I hope you can promise me one thing as well.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Let me be the one to stick the last knife in him.”