

Resonance 451

Chapter 0451: Pre-Departure

When he was back in the privacy of his room again, Li Luo immediately pulled out the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel. He had not dared to examine it too closely in front of Mentor Chi Chan and Yu Hongxi, even though he trusted them to a certain extent. The secret of his third acquired resonance was too big to entrust to outsiders.

This Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel was less of a wheel than the others, since it had three pointy bits that made it triangular. Like before, it was covered in scrawls of runes and patterns.

However, while the previous one had been full of holes for hundreds of ingredients, this one only had two simple, hexagonal indents.

They were probably to hold just one primary and one secondary ingredient.

Which meant that these things were going to be far rarer and more expensive than previously.

If the last acquired resonance had been built off quantity, this one was going to be chasing ultimate quality.

Li Luo guessed that he was going to have to find Duke-level ingredients.

"But where..." he groaned. He didn't even know if the Golden Dragon Bank's headquarters would have such rare objects. Plus, their price would be astronomical.

The good news was that he only needed two. If he needed a hundred like before, he'd probably have to sell House Luolan.

Still, even securing two wasn't going to be easy.

In any case, it wasn't that urgent of a matter for now. He would have to reach the General Stage to get his third resonance. Although he was already at the final tier of the Resonant Master Stage, he was a long way away from the next stage. [1]

Rubbing his hands idly over it, he weighed it for a moment more, then placed it back in his pocket sphere. He needed to think carefully about the elemental composition as well.

He took out a piece of paper and drew three circles on it. In the first, he wrote "waterlight", and in the second he wrote "woodearth."

These were his existing dual resonances.

Both of them leaned towards the support and control types. Although he had managed to utilize the primary-secondary interactions to augment his resonance arts significantly, there were times when Li Luo felt painfully aware of the lack of raw firepower in his arsenal.

Of course, they made up for the lack in a multitude of other ways.

If he had been given a free choice, he probably would not have gone with these resonances. But both water and wood were for the sake of his body—to reduce the negative effects of obtaining an acquired resonance.

It was his only choice to try and survive because his foundation was too weak. But by the time he chose his third resonant palace, he would be a General. That was quite a solid and respectable level.

Finally, some autonomy in his choice.

Li Luo tapped the table thoughtfully. For now, he would not need to consider the support-type resonances.

He wrote one word in his third circle.

"Offense."

Fire, metal, lightning, or even a beast resonance were all acceptable options for him.

But the final choice would probably be based on what sort of materials he could get his hands on.

Perhaps there would be goodies to be won at the Holy Grail Meet.

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The next day, Jiang Qing'e came knocking on his door.

"How did the refining go?"

The two were on their usual stroll around the lake, Jiang Qing'e's long, shapely legs keeping up easily with Li Luo. He told her all about the invitation to Yu Hongxi and Chi Chan.

They sat near the lake at one of their favorite spots, and Li Luo told her about what had transpired during the actual refining. Jiang Qing'e was silent for quite a while, processing the information quietly. Li Luo looked at her pale reflection in the water, then back to her lovely legs in the flesh. Idly, he wondered which was fairer.

He even told her about Mentor Chi Chan's Ichthyic curse. Although it was not public information, Li Luo trusted Jiang Qing'e to let the information go no further.

"I think Shen Jinxiao did something, although I have no proof." Li Luo shrugged.

"It's indeed fishy that he would be there." Jiang Qing'e agreed, very willing to give Shen Jinxiao zero benefit of the doubt.

"So there was a huge battle at the Umbra Cave back in the day, and Master and Mistress had participated as well..."

Her thoughts soon turned to a different topic. "It's a good thing for us that Mentor Chi Chan hates Shen Jinxiao so deeply. Another helper for us to send him along the dark path."

Li Luo chuckled. Luckily, there was no one around to overhear their conversation, or they would have turned pale to hear two students casually discussing how to kill a Violet Vibrance mentor...

Jiang Qing'e pulled out a case from her pocket sphere and handed it over to him. "A batch of spirit liquids and purifying lights from Sister Cai Wei, ranging from fifth to seventh-grade."

Li Luo eagerly took it. Just in time. His waterlight resonance had not been growing much recently, and was still stuck as a lower seventh-grade. On the other hand, his fifth-grade woodearth resonance was making good progress. He could probably reach sixth-grade by the Holy Grail Meet, and the boost in strength would be very much welcome.

"The school will probably be mustering the competitors tomorrow. I hear we'll be transported from the Tree of Resonant Power. We'll be away from the Xia Kingdom for a while. I've already made the arrangements over at House Luolan, and with Cai Wei there, things shouldn't be too bad. And with Ancestor Yuan Qing back, Pei Hao will probably behave himself for a while," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo nodded. Jiang Qing'e was always a competent force by his side.

"Li Luo..."

He turned around to see her pensively looking into the lake.

"When the Holy Grail Meet ends, you'll have been at the Astral Sage College for a year..."

"Mm," he nodded.

"It's almost time," she said, inclining her head at him with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Are you ready?"

Li Luo understood what she was referring to. At the start of the new year... Housemeet.

At that time, all of the landmines, comets, and bombs would be exploding from above, below, and around.

House Luolan would be thrown into a fateful crisis, he had no doubt.

He met her gaze with a confident smile.

"No matter who comes for House Luolan..."

"I'll end them."

1. TN: It is very urgent for the readers because we all wanna know the 3rd resonance... 📄

Chapter 0452: A Weighty Send-Off

The atmosphere at the Astral Sage College had an unusual gravity to it the next day.

Students had gathered under the branches of the Tree of Resonant Power, noisy as a concert crowd.

All of them were watching the smaller group in front, a group that was fully kitted out and armed.

The group that would represent the Astral Sage College at the Holy Grail Meet.

At every level, it was an overwhelming majority of Violet Vibrance students.

Li Luo was standing with his One Star Hall peers, looking out at the sea of black-haired heads and feeling a bit like a king.

"I feel like my life's really taken off now." He heard someone sigh happily from beside him.

Li Luo looked over to see Yu Lang red in the face and looking blissful.

"How much did you drink?" Li Luo snorted.

"Li Luo," Yu Lang said loftily, "you best not get cocky. I think that I might well become the most brilliant student in the One Star Hall before the Holy Grail Meet ends. Not just the girls in our year, but all the older sisters in senior years will be throwing themselves at me.

"I will walk back into the Astral Sage College, arms wide open," Yu Lang said beatifically. "They chant my name. 'Yu Lang! Yu Lang!' They rush me. 'My herooooo~.

"I will open my mouth to thank them for the welcome, but they will seal it with a kiss. I will try to raise my hand to acknowledge their welcome, but they will press it to their brea-

"Heroes," Li Luo interrupted, "invite enemies like flies to rotten meat. You think you can handle the assassination attempts, saboteurs, and plotting?"

Yu Lang puffed out his chest. "I can handle anything. I am fearless. That's what it means to be a hero! Ah, Li Luo, you don't know what sort of iron I've built into myself after a year of training. I can weather any storm!"

Li Luo gave him a big thumbs up. "You've truly matured. I believe you'll do great things at the Holy Grail Meet!"

Yu Lang's eyes narrowed. "Sounds like you're trying to trap me," he accused Li Luo rudely. "Somehow, that's discouraging."

"Li Luo you black-hearted scorpion, I wouldn't trust you any further than I could throw you."

While the two continued their strangely-paced conversation, the students around them were getting livelier. Soon, it was buzzing with so much excitement that even Li Luo and Yu Lang looked up, sensing that the top brass had come. True enough, Vice Principal Su Xin was seen in front of the crowd, the others in tow.

With the whole of the school management present, there was no doubt as to how important the Holy Grail Meet was to the Astral Sage College.

On the elevated platform, Vice Principal Su Xin took a step forward, and the crowd fell silent.

"Beloved students," she said in a warm voice that rang clearly out to the edges of the crowd. "Today, our delegation leaves for the Holy Grail Meet. This is the highest interschool competition in all of the East Divine Continent. I think everyone here understands how important it is... but there is one person best suited to impress that importance upon all of you."

The students began to whisper confusedly. Who else could there be but Vice Principal Su Xin?

Vice Principal Su Xin lifted a crystal ball in her hands, and it floated into the air, flattening out like a mirror of water. The sparkling surface dimmed until there was nothing but blackness reflected on its oval surface.

Li Luo felt a chill run down his spine. Black was black, and yet that particular shade of black seemed ominously familiar to him.

From the blackness, a person emerged in the lotus position, and soon he was clear enough for all the students to see properly.

A fresh-faced middle-aged man clad in green.

He was sitting alone in the absolute darkness like a bodhisattva, ready to piece the world back together with patience even if it fell apart.

The man Li Luo had seen in the Umbra Cave—Principal Pang Qianyuan!

"Who else..." he thought dryly to himself. There was no one else who Vice Principal Su Xin would accord that much respect to.

But because he had not been seen in school for many years, many students did not react to the appearance of their principal. However, even through the mirror they could sense his aura, so they knew that he was someone strong.

Vice Principal Su Xin spoke again. "Dear students, I think I had best introduce him... this is the Astral Sage College's principal, Principal Pang Qianyuan."

Now the surprise and amazement started to come.

"Wow!"

The crowd exploded with excitement.

They were hopping up and down now, pointing and gesturing excitedly. Their principal was a legend, and now he was right before their eyes. Those who had just entered the Astral Sage College had never even seen him before.

He had become a mythical figure, only spoken of but never actually heard or seen. And now this god had come to speak to them!

It was said that this man was the only King Stage expert in the Xia Kingdom!

King Stage... an unattainably far goal for many students. He alone was a big part of the reason why the Astral Sage College was so highly respected in the Xia Kingdom!

Even through the mirror, this was the honest-to-goodness principal!

"Principal!"

"Principal!"

They took up an enthusiastic cheer. (-Overlaid)

It was not just the students who were over-excited—even the Silver Spark and Gold Gleam mentors were overwhelmed by his appearance.

This man was faith itself in the halls of the Astral Sage College.

The man's weathered face creased into a graceful smile. He lifted his arms and patted the air gently with his palms once.

Instant silence.

Everyone stared at him eagerly.

"I apologize that this is the only way I can meet everyone. I confess that I'm not a very responsible principal. I hope you can forgive me," he laughed.

Even his laugh had a warm, sonorous ring to it that put them all at ease.

"Before I knew it, four years had passed, and it's time for the Holy Grail Meet again.

"Ordinarily, I would not appear, because I have to be cautious of my surroundings at all times. But for the Holy Grail Meet, and the Holy Grail Meet alone... that is the day that I have been waiting for for all these years.

"Do you want to know why?" he asked seriously.

"Because I need the Dragon Bone Holy Grail. The Astral Sage College needs the Dragon Bone Holy Grail.

"Of course, it's not just us. Every single school in the East Divine Continent is thinking the same way...

"But that's not our concern. All I know is that many brilliant, young students like yourselves die in the Umbra Cave each year. Bright futures, innocent lives, snuffed out in the darkness of the Umbra Cave. Their bodies are forever buried there.

"Do you know how many we have lost over all these years?"

Pang Qianyuan closed his eyes in pain.

In the still silence, a gentle breeze rustled through the Tree of Resonant Power, and many students lifted their heads to look at the whispering leaves. Every leaf in the southwest portion of the tree's canopy was marked with a face and a name.

The students who had passed in the Umbra Cave.

The leaves increased in number each year.

The silence took on a melancholy pall.

Up till now, they had been obsessed with glory, but Pang Qianyuan had laid out the bloody reality before them. The glory and riches were merely a prize the school had set, blood gold that they priced accordingly.

Each time the Umbra Cave opened, some of them would not come back alive.

The Holy Grail Meet's winner could take the Dragon Bone Holy Grail, which meant it determined their fate.

They looked upon their representatives in a new light now.

Li Luo could feel it, all the hopes and gratitude radiating their way.

Even Yu Lang's usual, cheeky grin faded away now.

"Can we win the Dragon Bone Holy Grail?" he whispered to Li Luo.

"Who knows?" Li Luo shrugged.

Yu Lang screwed up his lip.

"Li Luo."

"Hmm?"

"If I can be of help to you in the Holy Grail Meet, in any way, no matter the outcome—even if you use me as bait, I'll do it!"

Li Luo blinked, a little embarrassed by Yu Lang's outburst.

And then he clapped him on the back and laughed heartily.

"What are you saying, Yu Lang? Would I treat a brother like that?!"

Chapter 0453: Departure

Li Luo thought that Principal Pang was being a real wet blanket on their cheerful, little departure.

Still, he knew that the principal had not exaggerated. He had simply laid out the facts, facts that perhaps most of the students vaguely knew but would choose to ignore. Ugly, horrifying facts were seldom pursued voluntarily.

The tension hung heavy like a watery mist in the air, yet it was unaffected by the gentle breeze.

Within the mirror, Pang Qianyuan looked slowly around the crowd. "I did not wish to speak of these things at first. I know it will only increase the pressure on the competing students. But I had to say it, to ask you to fight with the future of the Astral Sage College on your shoulders.

"Do not think of it as a competition. Think of it as a cruel war."

Li Luo could smell urgency in the principal's message. Why? Had things in the Umbra Cave taken a turn for the worse? If they could not bring back the Dragon Bone Holy Grail, what would happen to the Astral Sage College in the future?

He sighed. None of this was in his control. All he could do was fight as hard as he could so that that question would not have to be answered. "I'll not drag this out any longer. I just have one last thing to ask—to beg of you..."

He lifted his eyes to the platform where Li Luo and the others stood.

His expression solemn, he bowed before them at the waist, head lowered.

"Please do your best to bring the Dragon Bone Holy Grail back. You will be the heroes of the school!

"Your names will be carved onto the plaques of the schools, remembered forever.

"Most importantly... I will thank you on behalf of all the student lives that you would have saved from a dark fate."

With that chilling yet exciting parting shot, his image faded away from the surface.

The courtyard was silent.

Everyone was absorbed in their thoughts.

Vice Principal Su Xin lifted her hand, and the mirror formed back into a crystal sphere that returned to her hand. She resigned herself to the fact that the principal was not one for lifting spirits.

He had always worked in a straightforward and dry manner. Stress he felt, and stress he would express, letting it ripple through the Astral Sage College student body.

Still, the student representatives were the cream of the crop. A little pressure should be bearable for them.

"I have just one last thing to say," Su Xin said.

She looked directly at Li Luo at the others.

"Chosen ones, triumph!"

She said it like a command and a plea, packed with enough emotion to bring tears to the eyes of the students.

"Triumph!"

"Triumph!"

The tip of her finger glowed, and the Tree of Resonant Power responded accordingly. A branch bent down and began to elongate, a snaking root that ran across the floor before arching back up again on itself.

In a short time, a door of wood was formed.

With a gentle creak, it swung open, light pouring out from within.

"You can enter the Holy Grail Meet grounds by going through here. Of course, I will be with you throughout." Vice Principal Su Xin gestured at the door with a smile. An entire frame of leaves spread out like a shimmering hedge around the door, each one the size of a large plate.

"Don't be afraid that your heroic actions will not be seen. These leaves will relay the action at the meet. Do your best, and know that the whole school is cheering you on from behind."

The thought gave the student representatives heart, and they smiled.

"If we're ready, let's go," she said simply, then she led the way through first. The light swallowed her up.

Next were the Four Star Hall students, led by Gong Shenjun and the First Princess.

The Three Star Hall students, led by Jiang Qing'e and Duze Honglian.

The Two Star Hall students, led by Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding.

Finally, the One Star Hall students, led by Li Luo and Qin Zhulu.

Right before he stepped through, Li Luo took one last look back, and the raw emotion he felt from the watching students blasted him like a heat wave. Their cheers rang loud in his ears.

"Principal, you're really one to lay on the pressure," he mumbled to himself as he stepped through.

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While the representatives were departing. *Ve/LB*. In

In the deepest depths of the Umbra Cave.

The elements ran riot here, raw energy morphing freely between whatever forms were decreed to them in the lawless space. Fire raged against wind, forming a tornado of fire that melted into water, then rose again as a mountain of stone. Amidst the madness sat Pang Qianyuan, surrounded by an invisible barrier and untouched by all of it.

The space was further tainted with corruptive energy and maddening howls that wormed their way into one's brain. Not even a Duke could last long here.

Pang Qianyuan sat there as calmly as a hunter listening to the wolf pack's howls.

He cast his gaze deep into the void, where a crescent gash marked the liminal space between two worlds.

A vast river of darkness was in the gap, filled with unspeakable vileness, evil, and every sort of negativity that existed in the world.

It roiled and rolled, and then a shadow emerged from its depths.

An enormous, black fish, its every scale reflecting a tortured human face. Its flat, fishy eyes were the pale-white color of bleached bone, and they were fast on Pang Qianyuan.

"Pang Qianyuan, are those tiny beings your best shot at this?" it mocked him.

He looked at it expressionlessly, choosing not to engage. He knew that the Others picked away at the darkness in one's heart. After their long years of struggle, he already knew what a wily foe it was.

"The black river widens," it hissed at him. "You cannot stop it. When it brims over and out of the Umbra Cave, your school will fall. All that land will be food for us."

With a slap from its colossal tail, it raised a dark wave of water that crashed down emphatically.

It snickered softly, then sank back into the black river.

Pang Qianyuan watched it go, then sighed softly to himself.

In his mind was a single face, the youthful one of Li Luo.

The Astral Sage College's representatives were strong, stars of their respective generation that eclipsed many of those that had come before them. There was even Jiang Qing'e, the monster that was all but guaranteed the title of strongest Three Star Hall student. Yet the one he favored was Li Luo.

If his plan paid off, this would be the most brilliant chess move he had ever played.

His piece was no simple pawn, but the son of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan.

Of the bloodline of Heavenly King Li.

"Don't let me down now."

Chapter 0454: A Small Space

This time around, the teleportation took even longer than Li Luo had expected. The beryl-green energy stream carried him onwards like a leaf on a river.

The howling energy all around them was overwhelming, and soon their senses began to shut down, putting them into a sort of pseudo-coma. Only Vice Principal Su Xin was completely unaffected, while Gong Shenjun, the First Princess, Jiang Qing'e, and a few other powerful students could battle it with a bit of success.

But all journeys eventually came to an end.

When Vice Principal Su Xin saw a white light ahead in the distance, she knew that they had arrived.

She used a finger's worth of energy to prod at the dozing students.

It helped them gradually recover from their sleep, and by the time they were conscious again, they had already exited the warp tunnel.

The first thing that Li Luo saw when he opened his eyes was a green tower made of wood that had the gnarled surface of an ancient tree.

There was no sun or moon in this place, but the lack of natural light was substituted by ethereal lights that hung in mid-air, interspersed with wisps of cloud that dressed the air in white cotton. It looked like some sort of paradise.

As his eyes adjusted, he realized that the green tower was but one of many that rose up in the distance.

And far away, he could hear the sounds of a crowd.

Vice Principal Su Xin led them all to the nearest green tower in front. As they approached, they saw a moat around the tower, only it was filled not with water but with worldly natural energy, moving in its natural, vortex-swirl flow.

"This energy vortex is where you will compete.

"When the Holy Grail Meet starts for real, you will all jump down and reach your respective proving grounds," Su Xin explained.

They looked down curiously at the energy vortex in the water.

"Do you know... where we are?" Su Xin suddenly asked them.

They looked around at each other, puzzled. How would they know?

Jiang Qing'e hesitated and then spoke up. "A small, isolated space... we are in some sort of rare treasured artifact with an inner space, so could it be the Dragon Bone Holy Grail itself?" The others gasped. They were inside the Dragon Bone Holy Grail itself?

Su Xin's surprise was plain to read on her face. "Qing'e, sharp as always. I'm surprised you managed to guess this one."

"It had to be something that we are already familiar with, and also very special, since you went out of your way to ask us. Only the Dragon Bone Holy Grail comes to mind," Jiang Qing'e explained.

"Indeed." Su Xin nodded. "We are within the Dragon Bone Holy Grail itself. See those spires? Each of them is a base camp for one school. The one we are at is the tower designated for the Astral Sage College." They were suitably amazed. If it was capable of creating such a wondrous space, it was believable that it could have the power to suppress the Umbra Cave itself.

They soon noticed a signboard attached to a pole in front of the tower that had "Astral Sage College" written on it.

Vice Principal Su Xin pushed open the doors. "I give you all 10 minutes to choose your rooms. Then meet me in the main hall on the first floor. I need to explain the rules of the Holy Grail Meet to you."

They left in a mad rush, shouting and bustling around the tower. Yet 10 minutes later, they were all gathered obediently in the main hall.

Vice Principal Su Xin sat cross-legged on a futon and told them all to take up seats on futons that faced her. "Dear students, there are about 12 hours left before the Holy Grail Meet starts in earnest. Time is of the essence, so we will divide up the work. Each hall should select one student to go scout for information. Since all the student representatives from the various schools are gathered in one place, it is the best time for intelligence-gathering."

The four halls converged among themselves, then each selected a representative.

For the One Star Hall, Yu Lang was chosen.

He was the ideal choice in two ways. Firstly, he was the weakest among the Violet Vibrance students, and hence the most expendable. Secondly, he was precisely the sort of sneaky sneak that was suited to the sneaking nature of the job that intelligence-gathering required.

Yu Lang stepped out reluctantly. "Hmm, maybe Mengmeng should come along?"

Bai Doudou snorted. "Not a chance, boy. Off with you."

Her tone promised a swift kick to his bottom, and so he cringed and stepped out obediently.

"And now, let's get down to business," Su Xin said seriously. "The Holy Grail Meet is divided into two parts. The first is a hall-wide battle. The four halls will compete to decide the four strongest students.

"When the battles start, you will each be transported to your own areas. There, you will need to use the anima gourds given to you to collect anima dew. Anima dew is a special substance filled with an energy unique to the Dragon Bone Holy Grail. It can protect you from the Dragon's Belly that you must pass through."

With a gesture, Su Xin summoned an image of a sea of flames before them.

"The Dragon's Belly is special because no one below the Duke Stage can last more than 10 seconds inside. That is why you need sufficient anima dew. They say that 99 drops will get a person through safely.

"Once you pass through, you will have reached the core area: Dragonbone Island. There, the final fight will commence, and whoever manages to sit on the Dragonbone Throne in the end will be crowned the final winner and strongest student.

"That is the Hall fight.

"It is always a group effort. All of you need to work together, and no one has ever succeeded alone before. Your goal is the same—to form a supply chain that collects anima dew and feeds it forward to the strongest students. Only then can we send the greatest number of strong students to Dragonbone Island and hold an advantage in the showdown.

"Which means," she said severely, "it is time to put aside all of your past quarrels. For now, at least, you are all in this together. Everyone must treat everyone else as a true companion, if you wish to make it to the end."

There was silence while they took in her words.

Chapter 0455: The Strictest of Warnings

The hall-wide format for the first half had come as a surprise for Li Luo.

All his plans had revolved around squad-work, but now he realized that he had set his planning horizons a little too near.

Still, this made sense. Ultimately, the Academic Federation fostered white-hot competition among the schools so that the students would grow stronger. Unity among the students was also important, sometimes even more so than individual strength.

There were some in this world who had the strength to rival an army... but these students were laughably far from that level.

Working with the other Violet Vibrance squads wasn't going to be a problem... except for Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan. Those two were turds the length of a baseball bat.

Li Luo glanced over at them. Both were frowning heavily at the moment. Sensing Li Luo's eyes on them, they looked up uneasily.

At school, they had their fair share of conflicts, and their relationship had been strained and sour at best. *Ve/LB*. In

Not sabotaging each other might be as good as you could have hoped for when you put them in the same competitive environment. Working together? The notion was hilarious.

"Students, let me say this again." Vice Principal Su Xin was speaking in the sharpest tone they had ever heard from her. "The Holy Grail Meet is of paramount importance to the Astral Sage College. I need each of you to act on behalf of the greater strategy. Put aside your petty and selfish interests. Any malicious deeds will be answered with the harshest of punishments, handed out by myself personally. And the school will never again take another student associated with you or yours."

That was a threat severe enough to make the students pale. The anger of a gentle woman was feared even by the wisest of them.

The threat of cutting all ties.

Li Luo swallowed nervously. The school was the ultimate training ground of the Xia Kingdom. If they barred a house or any faction from cultivating there, it would be a devastating blow indeed.

Even Wang Hejiu's expression turned circumspect immediately. The Wang family's dynasty ran far and deep, and they sent many disciples to the Astral Sage College each year. If he killed off that channel for the house, his father would probably strangle him to death with his own hands.

Wang Hejiu sensed Vice Principal Su Xin's cool look directed at him, and he shuddered. It seemed like the kind vice principal knew of his enmity with Li Luo all too well.

Message received, loud and clear.

After all, Li Luo was deemed as a competitor for strongest One Star Hall student. If he pulled Li Luo down, the school would not stand for it.

At this point, he was feeling like a cornered rat. He forced a smile. "Don't worry, Vice Principal. Li Luo and I might have fought childishly in the past, but I know this is different. I will definitely do my best to work with his squad."

Duze Beixuan, in the meantime, was getting heat from a different direction.

His sister, Duze Honglian.

The younger Duze sibling quailed before his older sister. He knew her fiery temper, and she would not hesitate to punch his face in even before everyone here. He hastily nodded. "I'll do my best as well."

Duze Honglian nodded and then turned away, satisfied. She was worried that Duze Beixuan was too young and stubborn to lay down his pride. But when Vice Principal Su Xin made such a threat, their only choice was to respect it.

Not even House Duze could survive without the school.

"Seems like our friend Honglian over there knows what's up," Jiang Qing'e's teammate Tian Tian noted.

Duze Honglian set the example herself. "I will do my best for the good of the hall," she said, addressing Jiang Qing'e directly. "Jiang Qing'e, show us how deep your potential runs. Go take that strongest Three Star Hall student title. None of us have seen you at your 100% yet. I hope to see it this time."

Jiang Qing'e nodded back calmly. "I will do my best. With the help of someone as strong as yourself, things should be a lot easier."

Duze Honglian's eyes widened, and she could feel a sudden, hot prickle at the back of her throat. To think the day would come when Jiang Qing'e would acknowledge her. Duze Honglian had seen Jiang Qing'e as a bitter rival from the day the two girls had enrolled, but the gap between them had only grown bigger and bigger. Duze Honglian held on to her anger and pride stubbornly, because if she let them go, all that would be left was despair.

But the reality in battle was clear cut. Duze Honglian had to respect Jiang Qing'e's dominance over her. She herself did not know if she was hanging on so grimly just to earn Jiang Qing'e's respect.

"Damn you, Duze Honglian," she scolded herself inwardly. "How pathetic can you get? Just one kind word and you're an emotional wreck. Shame!"

Compared to the One and Three Star Halls, the Four Star Hall was a lot more peaceful. Their class had divided up into two clear sides over the years—the Gong Shenjun team and the First Princess team. Both had many followers, and both maintained a cordial relationship with each other easily, as politically-seasoned individuals.

They very quickly established their own understanding.

As for the Two Star Hall... Well, they were a little neglected.

Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding could tell that Vice Principal Su Xin had paid them little attention from the start, whether in the form of pointed warning or kind words.

Which made them a little troubled.

It meant that she held zero expectations for the Two Star Hall. Understandable. Compared to the others, this year's Two Star Hall was painfully ordinary. And they had almost cost the school the ticket match as well.

Under such circumstances, who would even hold hopes for the Two Star Hall at the Holy Grail Meet?

In Vice Principal Su Xin's mind, the Two Star Hall was probably just here to make the headcount.

Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding shared miserable looks.

Was this what it felt like to be the middle child?

Damn... the feeling sucked.

Chapter 0456: Golden Resonant Tree Brooch

Now that she had impressed the gravity of the situation on all of them, Vice Principal Su Xin returned to her usual, soft, and kindly manner.

"And there's one more thing to talk about: the format to choose the ultimate winner.

"After the first hall-level battle, there will be four victors—the four strongest students. They will each be awarded a golden resonant tree brooch..." She summoned the image of one to show them a small, gold badge about half the size of her palm. The image of a tree was carved on the flat, shiny gold, its majestic canopy stretching to the ends of the accessory.

"The number of golden resonant tree brooches determines the ultimate winner. And I might be a little arrogant," she said, smiling at Jiang Qing'e, "but I daresay one of those brooches is already in our hands."

No one disagreed. Even the other schools had marked her down as the top contender.

"However, the first hall-level competition only provides some advantages. The decider is the second half, the mixed-level competition.

"In the mixed-level competition, each school forms three-student squads, and all three must be from different Halls. For example, 4-3-2, or 4-3-1."

The students listened intently.

This was very interesting indeed... Li Luo glanced over at Jiang Qing'e, and found her looking back at him. They both smiled briefly.

Alright, locked in. No matter who the third person was, he was tagging along with Jiang Qing'e.

No—Li Luo was no longer the same kid he was back in the Umbra Cave. He was much stronger now, much more useful... Perhaps even more useful than the deadweights in the Two Star Hall.

"The squad that wins the mixed-level competition gets three golden resonant tree brooches, which makes it even more important than the first competition. Usually, no school wins three strongest student titles, which means that whoever wins the mixed-level competition takes the victory and brings home the Dragon Bone Holy Grail."

Li Luo bit his tongue. Three strongest students? That difficulty level was out of this world. Besides, if one school won three strongest students, they could just form the ultimate team with those three students and steamroll the second round anyway.

Probably no school had managed that feat in the history of the East Divine Continent.

They only dared to aim for the Three Star Hall title because they had a ninth-grade light resonance monster that came once in a lifetime. Which school would have three lifetimes-worth of karma aligned at the same time? Not realistic.

"Golden resonant tree brooches are very special treasured artifacts. They are made specially by the Academic Federation. One of their properties is the ability to act as mini trees of resonant power, allowing them to continuously refine your resonance grade. In other words, it's as if you are constantly consuming spirit liquids and purifying lights at every minute. Of course, the effect is not as strong, but it will save you a huge expense in the long term."

You could almost see skygold raining down in every student's imagination. Even the richest of them—Gong Shenjun and the First Princess—were interested. This was some real value indeed.

Of course, the one most moved by this statement by far was Li Luo. His breathing was ragged with excitement. If there was ever a spirit liquid drinking competition, he would make the leaderboard. He would beat all of the other competitors' total volume combined. He was the ultimate spirit liquids and purifying lights black hole that vacuumed up money, along with any happiness and hope in Cai Wei's life. Plus, he had many resonances. That treasured artifact would have an incredible effect on him.

To him, this was even more attractive than a violet-eye treasured artifact.

He licked his lips. Target acquired. Ignore the mixed-level competition for now. One step at a time. He had to win the hall-level competition for sure.

Plus, the mixed-level competition would be messy, as there would be too many variables to plan for properly. Plus, he was only a small mouse among giants there. With Jiang Qing'e and other Four Star Hall students around, it was naive to think that a puny Resonant Master like him would change anything drastically. Which was why if he wanted a golden resonant tree brooch, the hall-level competition was the time and place to get it.

"Oh, and if someone gets two golden resonant tree brooches, they can request for it to be merged into a violet resonant tree brooch. I trust you are all familiar with the difference between gold and violet..."

"Violet resonant tree brooches are much stronger than their golden counterparts, and with it will come unimaginable glory. Few get golden resonant tree brooches, but the number of violet resonant tree brooches is even lower." Su Xin seemed to be directing her words to Jiang Qing'e. As one of the top seeds, she had a shot at one.

It was hard to say for the mixed-level competition, but at least things seemed more or less guaranteed for the hall-level competition.

Jiang Qing'e just nodded neutrally. In truth, a resonance-improving treasured artifact might be useful for others, but she was already a ninth-grade. The limit was there.

On the other side, Li Luo was staring at the sky. He could not afford to let his jaw point downwards, or his saliva would brim over.

He shook his head at the sky.

"Vice Principal Su Xin, you tease. You devil. You... tease.

"You sure know how to turn a decent, little boy bad.

"I'm so bad, and the only cure is a violet resonant tree brooch."

Chapter 0457: Ambitions of an Enlightened Sage

Whilst the students of the Astral Sage College pondered over their strategies for the hall-level competition, the others were not idle. Everyone was hunched over, crafting master plans for the exciting battle ahead.

Meanwhile, in another isolated space a fair distance away stood a tower marked with the signboard of the Enlightened Sage College.

Each college teleported in at a different time due to the varying distances. On the other hand, the Enlightened Sage College, having been the champion of the previous competition, possessed the Dragon Bone Holy Grail and had thus arrived here without much delay.

Five people were sitting at a round table at the top of the tower, watching the zones below.

"We have already crafted a plan for each school. You four are the jewels of the Enlightened Sage College, and your performances will determine if the Dragon Bone Holy Grail can continue to remain with us."

The one who had spoken was a man dressed in grand robes of white that matched his snow-white hair. Despite this, his face was youthful—the glowing skin of a child with dark, bright eyes that shone with intelligence.

He was the leader of the Enlightened Sage College delegation, the vice principal, Guo Jiufeng.

"Jing Taixu, you're definitely one of the most favored contenders in the One Star Hall, but you shouldn't get careless. The other schools haven't been sleeping for the last few years—they must have cultivated their own talents to take the Dragon Bone Holy Grail. Still, a quasi ninth-grade wind resonance like yours is still an enormous advantage. You might end up taking the title."

The handsome youth in green was known as the Spear of Enlightened Sage, and he did not just have the firepower, but also the lanky build to match his name. The corner of his lip twitched up a fraction, more focused on a wisp of green energy that weaved in and out of his fingers playfully.

"Don't worry, Vice Principal. I understand." Jing Taixu nodded. "The Sacred Summit Sage College's Sun Dasheng and the Heavenly Inferno Sage College's Lu Ming will not be easy to deal with. It will take all I have to deal with them. And we don't know if there are any dark horses from other schools either. There's too little information. I'll play this cautiously."

Guo Jiufeng nodded, satisfied. He was quite sanguine about letting Jing Taixu do his thing. The kid had yet to lose since he had entered the school. Other schools might be strong, but Jing Taixu would never take anyone lightly.

"Yuan Banshan, the Two Star Hall needs to be even more careful. Our school was the last champion, and all eyes will be on us as target number one. Break up all ganks early, stay low-profile."

Guo Jiufeng now turned his eyes to a burly youth who was leaning forward on the table. His well-muscled forearms were bulging with veins.

This was Yuan Banshan, the carry of the Two Star Hall class. Although he was not as talented as Jing Taixu, he was still an elite in his year across all schools.

He had an upper eighth-grade alp resonance, a variation of an earth resonance.

"According to our information, Ao Bai from the North Sea Sage College probably leads the pack. He's ahead of you—his fiend palace is probably close to forming. If you meet him, be careful."

Yuan Banshan's eyes widened slightly. He was already at the liminal point between the peak of the Resonant Master Stage and the General Stage. It was where the first Fiend Palace Tier was still forming, and those at his level were known as False Generals.

But according to Guo Jiufeng, Ao Bai was already breaking out of their bottle-neck? Almost a true Earth Fiend?

That was indeed ahead of him.

"I'll be careful," Yuan Banshan rumbled.

Guo Jiufeng nodded. He was a little disappointed with the haul this year in the Two Star Hall. Out of their four halls, this was the weak spot. How far they got was going to be up to luck.

He then turned his attention to the next student. He was a lot more ordinary-looking compared to Jing Taixu in terms of facial features, but he had a head of light-blue hair.

His long hair was neatly braided so it fell behind him, and when he smiled, his eyes narrowed into slits. "Lan Lan, I don't think I need to say too much. Your batch is the one that has been nurtured the longest—you entered school right when we won the Dragon Bone Holy Grail, which means that you've enjoyed our boosted cultivation resources for your full four years. And you deserve every resource we've spent on you. I hope you can take the title in the Four Star Hall and bring us a golden resonant tree brooch." Lan Lan nodded slightly.

"We have prepared for the Holy Grail Meet for many years. As the last champion, we not only got the Dragon Bone Holy Grail, but also other rewards from the Academic Federation. It has strengthened our lineup and foundations greatly. It gives us a significant advantage.

"That is why the school has great hopes for all of you. The One and Four Star Halls are the most likely wins... The Two Star Hall lacks a little firepower, so we hope to make the surprise push in the Three Star Hall." Guo Jiufeng now turned to the last person, a youth clad in grayish silver. This was Lu Jinci, their Three Star Hall representative who was already in the Fiend Finisher Tier.

Lu Jinci shook his head, irritated. "Come on, Vice Principal. You know that the Three Star Hall competition is the most difficult one, right? Jiang Qing'e from the Astral Sage College has a ninth-grade light resonance, for heaven's sake. It'll be like running headfirst into a mountain!"

Guo Jiufeng smiled. "It's exactly because Jiang Qing'e is overwhelmingly strong that there is a chance."

"What do you mean?" Lu Jinci asked, astonished.

Lan Lan's eyelids flickered. "Hmm... get the other students to gank Jiang Qing'e?"

Guo Jiufeng laughed softly. "Indeed. She is so strong that no school alone has an answer to her. Which means that joining forces is the only answer. It will be on everyone's minds. Simple, is it not? All it needs is a little... engineering."

"If we win by joining forces," Lu Jinci said hesitantly, "is that not a little... unfair?"

"It looks like the years of peace have made your brain mush," Guo Jiufeng said harshly. "Have you forgotten that your years of peaceful cultivation were built on the lives of other students? You stand on a mountain of graves, and another mountain will come after it. And you speak of fairness?"

Lu Jinci subsided quickly. "I understand. I will follow the school's instructions in all things."

Guo Jiufeng nodded. "Jiang Qing'e is a real talent not just in the East Divine Continent, but throughout the Academic Federation, I reckon. The Astral Sage College is really lucky to have such a beast. But we also have a plan to take her down..."

Dipping his finger gleefully in a teacup, he wrote two words on the table.

The four students bent over.

"Swan Hunt."

Those two words looked innocuous enough, but somehow sinister.

Chapter 0458: Rumors Have It

Swan Hunt.

It was a comical name, but no one laughed. Especially the one most involved—Lu Jinci. He knew that the innocent-sounding Big White Swan was nothing to fuck with.

He had never fought her before, but a ninth-grade light resonance was enough of a name to have him scared shitless.

"We need to do one thing in this plan."

Guo Jiufeng gently tapped the table. "We need to make the Enlightened Sage College become Jiang Qing'e's number one target. She must want to come hunt Lu Jinci. That will make our plan much easier to execute."

Lu Jinci winced. What had he done to offend the vice principal recently?

"Vice Principal, I haven't offended her at all. Why would she come after me?"

"Well, go offend her, then."

Lu Jinci groaned. "I'm not good at that. Besides, she'll probably ignore me."

Guo Jiufeng smirked. "Well, I expect as much. Which is why I'm leaving this task..." he turned to Jing Taixu. "To you."

Jing Taixu nodded reluctantly. "Well, if the school orders it, I'll give it a try. I guess I do want to size her up as well."

"Do your best," Guo Jiufeng told him. "But it's not a must. It just makes the plan much smoother. If it doesn't work, we'll just have to hustle harder in other ways. And now, time is of the essence, so go quickly." He waved them off.

"Oh, and bring Lu Jinci with you. So they recognize each other."

Jing Taixu and Lu Jinci left the tower.

"Junior Jing, what's the plan?" Lu Jinci asked.

Jing Taixu shrugged. "You follow me to the Astral Sage College's tower, then we go looking for Jiang Qing'e."

"Just like that? Why would she even bother?" Lu Jinci asked.

"Ah, which is why I will start a fire first." Jing Taixu pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket sphere and handed it over to Lu Jinci, whose jaw dropped.

He stared at the words on the paper in disbelief.

"Breaking news!"

"Rumors that the Enlightened Sage College's Jing Taixu has a history with Jiang Qing'e! Their parents have already arranged an engagement!"

"Junior Jing, this doesn't seem very believable," Lu Jinci said doubtfully.

"It's just to draw some attention, stir some interest. Every school has sent scouts out to keep their ears to the ground. All kinds of fake news are flying everywhere. Besides, it isn't all fake. My father did mention before that he knew the Xia Kingdom's Li Taixuan back in the day and offered a marriage arrangement after learning that he had an outstanding female disciple. Still, the offer was completely ignored." Jing Taixu grinned.

"So you plan to spread that rumor?" Lu Jinci asked.

Jing Taixu nodded. "Jiang Qing'e will definitely hear of it. And then I can bring you over to meet her. She'll definitely consent to meet us then, I think. Get her to know about us, and the mission can be considered accomplished."

Lu Jinci stared at him suspiciously. "Somehow I feel like you're the one who wants to meet her."

Jing Taixu flinched, but he recovered quickly with a smile. "Hey, it's only normal to want to see pretty girls, right? Especially strong ones. Nothing unusual there."

"That's not the best way to make a first impression though," Lu Jinci noted.

"Well, can't be helped. It's the school's command... Then again, a rocky start can sometimes be turned for the better. It's more important that she knows me well at first, rather than think well of me. There'll be chances in the future."

"You're truly a veteran in these things, huh," Lu Jinci marveled. "No wonder I hear that you already have a dozen girls on your plate in your first year."

"Thanks, Senior."

Jing Taixu waved over a One Star Hall student and passed the paper to him, then he passed five more golden dragon notes worth 100,000 skygold each. "Here, hide your identity and get some unsavory types to spread these things."

"Lazy moves."

"Just getting the basics covered." Jing Taixu grinned.

The One Star Hall student hurried off.

"Alright, now we wait for the information to reach Jiang Qing'e's ears, then we move."

Lu Jinci nodded doubtfully.

The Enlightened Sage College student returned to his room to put on a hood and mask. Satisfied that he looked dodgy enough, he made straight for where he knew people gathered.

It was a large plaza where many schools had come to look for information.

Of course, true or false, no one could tell.

The Enlightened Sage College student looked around for someone suitable. He didn't want anyone who looked too smart; otherwise, his own identity might be unraveled.

About half an hour later, he finally saw someone suitable.

A young man sitting on a ledge, staring out at the lake with a vacant expression. He didn't look particularly bright, daydreaming in the middle of one of the most important events for all schools. Plain clothes, scraggly, scruffy expression, probably in need of money.

He moved towards the young man with a bright smile. "Brother, want to take a job?"

The tired and hungry Yu Lang looked up at him grumpily, only to see a dodgy-looking person dressed all in black and in a mask. He was just about to brush him off when the guy handed him a piece of paper. It was a golden dragon note for 100,000 skygold.

"Spread some news for me, brother, and this 100,000 skygold bill is yours."

Yu Lang perked up immediately, and the note disappeared into his pocket. "Brother, you have a good eye. You immediately spotted me out of all the people here. You speak my language." He grinned.

The Enlightened Sage College student wasn't interested, and he turned and left.

Yu Lang first stowed the note properly, then glanced at the information.

His eyes widened as he read it again.

"Son of a b*tch, trying to sabotage my brother Luo?!"

He chased after the student in black and caught hold of him.

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

"Brother, can you give me all these kinds of jobs that you have? You're looking for more people, right? But give me all of it, and I promise I'll deliver!" Yu Lang said greedily.

"Heh, you're crazy greedy. Do this one well, and I'll think about it."

Yu Lang groaned. "I know what you're saying," he whispered knowingly. "How about this: I'll give you a 50 percent discount. I'll do all the dirty work for you!"

The student in black was astonished. He was the employer, and he was getting a discount?! What in the world was this business model? What a great lad.

The student in black grinned. Well, Jing Taixu had told him to get the word out, but he hadn't specified how far. And this greedy kid was super eager.

He handed all the slips to Yu Lang to pass out, then he put another golden dragon note on top.

500,000, and he made 300,000. What a great way of doing business.

"Do a good job, man."

He clapped Yu Lang on the shoulder, then walked away whistling.

Yu Lang simpered and bowed until he was out of sight, then he hurriedly found a deserted corner and pulled out a pen. He copied the writing style on the messages exactly, modifying them accordingly.

"Breaking news, part two!

"But the marriage arrangement eventually fell apart when the Jing family revealed that Jing Taixu has had an erection problem since he was young!"

Chapter 0459: Jing Taixu Loses His Cool

Jing Taixu waited at the Enlightened Sage College tower for an hour, then he called Lu Jinci and headed out. Surely the rumor had caught someone's ear by now.

Perhaps already in Jiang Qing'e's own dainty ones.

The two set out for the Astral Sage College's tower. The location had been easy enough to find.

"Senior Lu, do you think the Vice Principal's plan is really going to work?" Jing Taixu asked as they moved through the mass of other students.

Lu Jinci chewed his lip. "I don't know. I've never fought someone with a ninth-grade resonance before, so I can only imagine what it's like. Hey, you have a quasi ninth-grade resonance, don't you? What do you think?"

Jing Taixu grinned. "At the risk of sort of tooting my own horn? I think Senior Lu is in for a whole lot of trouble."

He might have a "quasi," but it was still a ninth-grade.

"A whole lot of trouble. We'll see who can survive till the end," Lu Jinci said grimly. He acknowledged that it wasn't going to be easy. Much depended on how many other elite schools and students he could rally to the cause, but in any case, there was no smooth sailing to be had on the horizon.

"Just my luck," Lu Jinci groaned. "The East Divine Continent's got such a beast in Three Star Hall, and our school still wants to find a breakthrough here?"

Jing Taixu chuckled. He was just about to reply, but he noticed something unusual about the mood. He looked around at the other students and saw that they were looking at him strangely.

He was used to being watched. As the hotshot star of the Enlightened Sage College and even the Holy Sun Dynasty, he had received his fair share of attention.

But...

These people were all looking at him with amused pity!

"Senior Lu, do you feel like... these people are looking at me oddly?"

Lu Jinci started. He took a careful look around. "Yeah, something's happened," he agreed.

Jing Taixu frowned, then he took a few brisk steps forward and caught a female student gently by the arm. "Hello," he said with his best smile. "I was just wondering if there's anything strange about me?"

She looked at his face, then blushed. Again, the same look of pity... and regret?

Jing Taixu was as handsome as they came, but this sort of infirmity... What a shame.

She took out a flier and passed it to him, then left quickly.

Jing Taixu looked down quizzically. It was the news that he had been spreading, so what was the problem...

His eyes landed on the extra line of words at the bottom.

His eyes were as wide as saucers. Even his usually calm personality was rocked.

"I'll be fucked!"

It was a rare outburst from the urbane, young heir to the Jing family of the Holy Sun Dynasty, and an unfortunate one to make in light of the fake news.

A vein pulsed on his temple.

"What's wrong?" Lu Jinci asked, surprised by his vehemence.

Jing Taixu crushed the paper in his fist. He wordlessly handed it over.

Lu Jinci pried it open and read it.

"What the f*ck?!"

"Wasn't this the news you were spreading?"

Jing Taixu took a deep breath. "Indeed. But someone's added an extra line!" he said through gritted teeth.

"Seems like all of them have been altered, judging by the mood. Didn't you send people out in secret? What happened?" Lu Jinci asked.

"That useless dunderhead must have passed all the slips to a single person... who wishes me ill." Jing Taixu was feeling quite upset that his plan was backfiring.

No wonder the girl had looked at him with pity!

"Erm..." Lu Jinci wasn't sure what to say at this point. He pitied Jing Taixu too... for the slander, of course, not the erectile dysfunction. And it wasn't like you could prove the rumors wrong anyway. Take off your pants in public? Absolutely crazy. "This person is a real cunning one," Lu Jinci said with grudging admiration. Their unknown saboteur knew just what would catch public interest. The original news had been sensational enough already, but this guy was a real master of human psychology. It was a masterstroke of an addition that had flipped the tables completely back on them.

Plus, Jing Taixu was a top seed contender for the One Star Hall, so everyone would lap up any news that made him look bad.

"Should we issue a clarification? Something else?" Lu Jinci waved the paper thoughtfully.

"It's no use," Jing Taixu growled. "You think people actually care if I can get it up?"

Lu Jinci was silent. Of course, everyone understood that fake news was abundant in this place—perhaps all information gathered here was basically fake news. But it was entertaining, nonetheless. Hey, listen, the great genius of the Enlightened Sage College, the one who might take the strongest One Star Hall student title—there's one area where he can't go hard in!

A real attention-grabber.

"Motherfucker, whoever did this is a real master." Jing Taixu shook his head. He had really shot himself in the foot.

"It must be the Astral Sage College who did this. I think all the information landed directly in their hands," Lu Jinci suggested.

Jing Taixu scowled. He would really like to find the guy he had paid and drop him on his head a few times. What sort of luck did he have to immediately be connected with an Astral Sage College guy? Or was he just stupid? "Forget it, let it go." He sighed. "If this was really done by the Astral Sage College, then Jiang Qing'e will know about it. I guess the mission was accomplished, in a way."

"Let's continue on to the Astral Sage College. In any case, we should still meet Jiang Qing'e."

Lu Jinci nodded, and the pair continued on their uncomfortable way.

Chapter 0460: Burning Bridges

While Jing Taixu was being taken for a ride by the Astral Sage College's One Star Hall wind resonance user, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were enjoying some private time together, leaning on the balcony and looking out at the streets.

And then Li Luo noticed a familiar head in the crowd.

Yu Lang.

Seeing him with Jiang Qing'e, the green-haired trickster waved urgently but discreetly to him.

Li Luo was a little hesitant, but he went over anyway. "Weren't you asked to go out and get information? Why have you snuck back?"

"Oh, I got some eye-popping, jaw-dropping information, alright." Yu Lang hesitated. "But for you, it might be a bit teeth-grinding and knuckle-clenching too."

He handed the unedited version to Li Luo.

Li Luo looked at it, and his expression turned dead-serious. He had always been good at holding his composure, but there was clear anger in his eyes now.

Rumors and fake news were to be expected, but Jiang Qing'e was a line that should not be crossed with him, especially when it involved their engagement.

"Do we show it to Senior Jiang?" Yu Lang asked.

"Nothing much to hide," Li Luo said, handing it over to Jiang Qing'e.

Her golden eyes skimmed the paper. She took the news calmly enough, although her eyes lingered on it strangely.

"Fake news is abound in this time and place. No need to care too much," Li Luo said.

"This... is not completely fake news," Jiang Qing'e said. "The Holy Sun Dynasty's Jing family. They indeed came to us with a marriage proposal before, but Master ignored them completely. The proposal might have a shred of truth in it, but the malice in this is definitely real."

"Wait- a real proposal?! Why didn't I know about it?" Li Luo exclaimed.

"Well, it wasn't much. It was many years ago, and it was dismissed quickly. I doubt anyone remembers it at all. In fact," Jiang Qing'e said thoughtfully, flicking the paper with one finger. "Perhaps the only person who remembers it is the proposer himself."

"Jing Taixu," Li Luo confirmed.

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "Even I took a while to recall it. It has to be him."

"What's his goal here? Offending us out of nowhere?" This was basically a declaration of war, and they couldn't see the reason.

Was Jing Taixu mad?

Or was he just insanely strong as a quasi ninth-grade?

"Maybe an idiot?" Jiang Qing'e offered casually.

"Senior Jiang, don't be angry! I've already punished that lout for you!" Yu Lang cackled like a madman.

"Oh?"

Yu Lang fished out his modified copy. "I managed to snag every last piece of this, and now the Yu Lang version is being circulated instead."

Jiang Qing'e stared at it, and her eyes widened. She fought a smile.

Li Luo peered over her shoulder, and his own eyes widened as well.

"Yu Lang, you're a genius. I've truly underestimated you in the past," Li Luo said admiringly.

Yu Lang's addition had leached the sting out of the first piece of news. It was no longer the main dish, but merely an appetizer to provide context to his addition. Jing Taixu was getting a taste of the medicine that he had been so eager to dish out.

Li Luo patted Yu Lang on the back. "Thanks, man."

The original rumor would have made Li Luo a very angry man. He was protective of Jiang Qing'e's reputation.

But Yu Lang's twist had completely derailed the slander, and turned it back on the instigator.

He was grateful to have such a friend around him.

Yu Lang grinned. "Senior Jiang is our ace. How could I let them turn the Astral Sage College's Ace of Hearts into the Ace of Spades?"

"Protecting the school's reputation is the duty of all good students," he said piously.

Jiang Qing'e smiled warmly at him. "Thank you."

Yu Lang felt a little bashful to be thanked by her. Although she was not the cold and aloof kind, her talent put her in a different league, and it was still difficult to feel friendly with her.

Such raw sincerity out of her was a rare sight, and it would unarm even a practiced rogue like Yu Lang.

A student rushed up to them. "Senior Jiang, there's someone at the tower asking to meet you. He says he's Jing Taixu from the Enlightened Sage College."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e shared hostile looks.

Jing Taixu had come in person?

"Should we see them?" Li Luo asked Jiang Qing'e.

He wanted to see what this guy was made of.

Jiang Qing'e nodded silently, but there was a subtle tension in her features that expressed her hostility.

They went to the entrance and stepped out to see two people standing by a tree nearby.

Jing Taixu and Lu Jinci.

They walked over to Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e.

Jing Taixu's eyes were locked on Jiang Qing'e. He had thought he was ready, but her beauty and presence were still overwhelming.

There were many playboys in this world, but Jing Taixu was a practiced master... a playman. And even he had never seen a woman of this caliber before.

No wonder his old man had swallowed his pride and sent out a marriage arrangement. He had thought that his father was weak back then, but now he understood.

Li Luo's eyes were locked on Jing Taixu.

He immediately disliked him.

"Jing... Squi-shy?" he said with a smile.[1]

Jing Taixu stiffened. "It's Jing Taixu. So it was you guys who modified the information."

Li Luo nodded. "Well-written, wasn't it?"

"You might not want to hear it, but it's the truth. Such a thing indeed happened before," Jing Taixu said.

"Of course it's happened before. House Luolan has had crates upon crates of such proposals over the years. Don't worry too much about it, sir." Li Luo laughed lightly.

Jing Taixu looked at this youth, who might even be more handsome than he was. He frowned. "And you are...?"

"Li Luo of the Astral Sage College. Son of Li Taixuan... Oh, and Jiang Qing'e's fiancé." He reached out and took Jiang Qing'e's hand in his.

"Which is why your rumors made me very angry, my Enlightened Sage College friend."

Jiang Qing'e smiled widely and interlocked her fingers with Li Luo's tightly.

"Fiancé?" Jing Taixu was blown away by this development. Jiang Qing'e looked happy as well.

"Young Lord Li Luo, you are a lucky man. A childhood sweetheart? Blessed indeed." Jing Taixu sighed.

"Senior Jiang, I did not know of this. No wonder what I did was received extremely poorly. I merely wanted to meet you once, after hearing Father speak glowing praise of you in the past. If I have besmirched your reputation in any way, I sincerely apologize."

Jiang Qing'e looked at him coolly. "When you hear the buzzing of a housefly in your ear, you don't lean in to interpret apologies in its resonance.

"You smash it to pulp instead."

Jing Taixu shrank back a little. He sensed killing intent in Jiang Qing'e's voice.

Lu Jinci took a half-step forward, his own eyes tight on Jiang Qing'e.

Although they were banned from fighting, Jiang Qing'e's anger was apparent. They didn't know what she was capable of.

"Jing Squishy, ah, I mean, Jing Taixu," Li Luo interjected. "I'll see you in the hall-level competition."

Jing Taixu smiled at Li Luo. How could he not understand the challenge that Li Luo was issuing?

"Friend Li Luo, I'm looking forward to it."

Jing Taixu and Lu Jinci walked away.

"Well, looks like we accomplished what we came for," Lu Jinci said softly once they were a safe distance away.

He could feel that they had riled Jiang Qing'e up.

Jing Taixu nodded.

"I felt like I just poked a tigress in the face," Lu Jinci said with a shudder.

Jing Taixu did not respond.

"Hey, what're you thinking about?" Lu Jinci asked.

"I think I fancy her," Jing Taixu said with a sigh.

Lu Jinci rolled his eyes. "You've fancied like a dozen people already in your first year."

"This one's different," Jing Taixu said defensively.

"Hey, she's already engaged. You've also made an enemy out of Li Luo, you know." Jing Taixu just smiled.

"I envy Li Luo's luck, but I don't fear his strength. It's not his fault, it's just that there's no one in all of the East Divine Continent's One Star Hall that I fear." He smiled widely.

Lu Jinci had no objection. A boast was not a boast if one had the ability to back up the words.

Over on the other side, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e watched the pair leave.

"Li Luo," Jiang Qing'e suddenly said.

"Hmm?"

"A task for you. Eliminate him in the One Star Hall competition."

"Oh? Any rewards?" Li Luo asked eagerly.

She smiled and lifted up their interlocked hands and gave it a playful shake.

"Sorry, you've already redeemed it beforehand."