

Resonance 521

Chapter 0521: A Fragrant Reward

Pitter patter.

Li Luo was sitting in his room, eyes on his books and mind somewhere else. The sound of the shower in the next room was very distracting.

Jiang Qing'e was showering right there!

Of course they had bathed together when they were young. But that was when they were children, and from the age that they began to realize the differences between men and women, the common bathing had stopped. But now Jiang Qing'e was taking a shower in his room, and it was enough to set his heart racing again.

"What is she playing at?"

"What a tease."

Li Luo sulked and tried to remain calm.

The sound of water in the bathroom continued for half an hour before stopping.

Then the door of the bathroom gently opened.

Li Luo decided to sneak a glance upwards, but his eyes never returned from their journey.

Jiang Qing'e's long hair was down, still damp. She was in a loose-fitting set of white pajamas, which Li Luo recognized as his own, which he had left in the bathroom.

Even with the difference in size, Jiang Qing'e's shapely body filled out the pajamas appealingly in all the right places.

And because the pajamas were long enough, they stopped perfectly at the mid-thigh area, revealing her lovely legs that made the room seem somehow brighter.

Gulp.

Li Luo felt a catch in his throat. Jiang Qing'e was often clad properly in battle clothing, matched with her cool attitude that left a sense of distance with others. But now she looked completely vulnerable.

The gap in her look gave a strong appeal in a completely different way.

Li Luo was busy looking, and Jiang Qing'e acted as if nothing was wrong. Instead, she walked over to the table and poured herself a cup of hot water, taking two big gulps.

"Your pajamas are quite comfortable. They're clean, right?"

Li Luo rubbed his nose. Nope, no nose bleed. "If you like it, I'll give them to you," he said casually.

"Word in school is that Young Lord Li Luo is a real playboy. Are these your moves?"

"Who's been slandering me like that?!" Li Luo demanded, outraged.

Jiang Qing'e laughed.

Li Luo found himself getting lost in her beauty again. Dark lashes framing golden eyes; smooth, fair skin you just wanted to kiss; a feminine fragrance wafting out of her body heated by the shower...

Li Luo coughed to shake himself out of it. "So, Qing'e, what is it you're planning to do tonight?"

She tilted her head at him, golden eyes watching him. "Li Luo, you did very well at the hall-level competition today," she said with a smile.

Li Luo hastily waved it away. "It was okay, nothing compared to you, Qing'e... Although I am indeed the strongest One Star Hall in East Divine Continent now." He grinned, lowkey happy to show off.

Jiang Qing'e did not burst his bubble. She continued to look at him with a soft expression. "In one year, you broke out of your blank palace state, made it into the Astral Sage College, and became the foremost student in your hall. Today you defeated rivals that started way ahead of you in all ways, and now you are the strongest. Li Luo, you've improved so much this year that even I'm surprised.

"I'm very happy today," she said softly.

She knew that his efforts were also motivated by his desire to help her with the burdens of protecting House Luolan.

And he had indeed accomplished it.

She had always been angered by those comments deriding Li Luo as useless. Her heart had gone out to him.

It had nothing to do with romantic love, but rather a deep bond between them.

Although Jiang Qing'e had been very worried about him in the two years where he had blank palaces, she had purposely reduced contact with him. It was not because she had been unwilling to be associated with him. Rather, she was afraid that her own outstanding performance would cause him unnecessary pressure.

In the years that Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had not been around, she had to take care of both the house and the young lord.

Now that Li Luo was growing into his own strength, she felt like she could finally put down a heavy burden.

Li Luo heard the kindness in her voice, and he felt a wave of warmth rush through him. He smiled at the beautiful view in front of him. "And so this is a reward for me?"

"You could call it that," she said with a bit of a smile.

Li Luo took a deep breath, then let it out again. "I'd call it torture, Qing'e."

She rounded the table to stand beside Li Luo and then propped herself against it, her legs beside his face.

Li Luo suddenly felt like breathing was a difficult task, more difficult than beating Jing Taixu.

Watching Li Luo squirm uncomfortably, Jiang Qing'e smiled down at him. "So let me ask you—still thinking of annulling the engagement?"

Li Luo kept his face carefully blank. "And if I am? And if I am not?" Jiang Qing'e folded her arms. "If you choose not to, perhaps our relationship will be better, and there will be more rewards in the future."

Li Luo swallowed hard. "That's unfair," he protested. "We're supposed to have a fair fight, not use these honey trap tactics. I know! You're afraid!"

Her eyebrows went up. "Afraid of what, pray tell?"

"I'm getting more and more awesome by the day. At this rate, I'm going to be able to annul the engagement soon, so you're trying to interfere with me," Li Luo accused her.

Jiang Qing'e rolled her eyes at him but gave up on the teasing. She looked out of the window at the night sky instead. "Li Luo, when the Holy Grail Meet is over, you'll have been at the Astral Sage College for about a year." She sighed.

House Luolan's Housemeet was almost upon them.

All the plotting and intrigue planned by their enemies would culminate then.

If they could not survive that storm, House Luolan would founder in a sea of betrayal.

And his and Jiang Qing'e's lives might well be at risk.

It was a sobering thought. Even though Li Luo's growth had been explosive in the last year, it was still far from enough to affect the outcome of the Housemeet. That was why he wanted to win the Holy Grail Meet and then bring the power of the three-tailed heavenly wolf that Principal Pang would grant him.

"House Luolan is the lifework of the Master and Mistress. No matter what others think of it, I will not permit it to be shut down. Even if it costs me my life," Jiang Qing'e said with quiet determination.

"Qing'e, we still have to win the Holy Grail Meet first," Li Luo said firmly.

It seemed like they were going to have to avoid the unknown factor of Gong Shenjun for now.

Although they still did not know why he did not want to win, this win was too important to him to risk it.

"Understood," Jiang Qing'e said.

She stretched up lazily to her full height, until even the loose pajamas showed a generous band of midriff that had Li Luo's eyes popping. "Your room's ventilation is better than mine. I'll sleep here tonight."

She walked off towards Li Luo's bedroom.

"What about me?" he asked hurriedly.

She did not even look back, casually flipping the door closed behind her.

"Take advantage of the night to do some quiet cultivation in the study? Prepare for the upcoming battle?" Her amused voice came through the door a bit muffled.

Li Luo was devastated.

Jiang Qing'e leaned with her back against the door and smiled to herself. Surely after she had pulled Li Luo away, Lu Qing'er's eyes would be glued to Li Luo's door. She wasn't intending to leave so soon.

Lu Qing'er had been making progress with Li Luo lately, so Jiang Qing'e felt the need to reestablish some dominance.

Chapter 0522: Feeling the First Princess Out

The next day, Jiang Qing'e breezed out of Li Luo's room, looking refreshed after a good night's sleep. Li Luo waited for a long while before he skulked out of his own door in a grumpy mood.

Man, it hadn't been a good night.

Being in the study alone had been uncomfortable.

"Jiang Qing'e, you little minx," he swore to himself.

"Li Luo!!" A voice called out to him, shrill with a hint of hysteria. He turned around to see Lu Qing'er standing by the staircase. She was staring at him wide-eyed, both furious and frustrated.

"Oh, hey, Qing'er." Li Luo waved.

"Did Senior Jiang spend the night in your room?" she demanded in an enraged whisper.

Li Luo nodded.

Her little hand clenched and unclenched, but she did not lose her temper. She had seen Jiang Qing'e walk out of the room just now, and from the gait of her step and mood, Lu Qing'er could tell with her own arts that nothing had really happened between the two through the night. Still, Jiang Qing'e was going to ruin Li Luo's reputation at this rate!

A man and a woman spending the night alone? Who wouldn't misunderstand?!

But then again, the two were engaged. Even if something happened, what could anybody do about it?

Lu Qing'er was angry at her own conclusion. "Senior Jiang never plays by the rules!" she wailed.

She rounded on Li Luo again. "Li Luo, you are still young," she said seriously. "You have to be more circumspect, you know. Your cultivation will be affected otherwise. Besides, you're a boy, but you still have to protect your own modesty. Otherwise, no one will want you!"

Li Luo's expression was martyred.

Lu Qing'er stuffed a bag into his hand. "Here's the breakfast I helped you collect, you ungrateful thing."

She huffed and stomped away.

Li Luo looked down at the bag in his hand and saw that the contents were still steaming hot. "Thanks, Qing'er," he called hurriedly after her.

Li Luo leaned against the banister and wolfed down the breakfast. Other students passed him once in a while, throwing him unfriendly and jealous looks.

They could do no more.

Evidently, news of Jiang Qing'e spending the night in his room had spread faster than a Duke-level wind resonance user could fly.

But again, the two were engaged and therefore there was nothing improper about the arrangement, so they could only seethe.

Li Luo was just finishing up his breakfast when Vice Principal Su Xin's voice sounded in the ear of every single student.

"Assemble in the main hall on the first floor, everybody."

Li Luo crammed the last bit of bun into his mouth and then dusted the crumbs off. He headed briskly down the stairs, curious to hear what Vice Principal Su Xin would share with them regarding the mixed-level competition.

What sort of format was it going to be?

Li Luo rounded the last corner of the staircase and ran into the First Princess.

Perhaps because they were competing, the First Princess was not dressed in her usual finery. She was clad in a simple shirt-and-pants combination in lavender, but their cutting demonstrated fine tailoring nonetheless.

Her lithe manner and sexy body made certain appealing parts of her body bounce as she walked down the stairs, and the male students were all eyes.

The two paused in a moment of mutual surprise at seeing each other, then Li Luo hurriedly took a step back. "After you, Your Highness."

The First Princess threw him an amused look. "Li Luo, I hear Qing'e spent the night in your bed?"

"She spent the night in my bed," Li Luo said grouchy. "I was punished with a night in the study room."

"Oh? Why the punishment?" she asked teasingly. "Didn't you do quite well in the first half? I thought there'd be a reward instead."

"Enough teasing, please," Li Luo pleaded sourly. *no ve)LB*.In

"Let's head down together." She laughed.

Li Luo followed by her side, making small talk.

Li Luo was watching their surroundings, and when he spotted a good moment, he suddenly leaned in to the First Princess.

She did not move away, smiling at him instead. "Something to ask me?"

"I wanted to ask if you're interested in winning the Holy Grail Meet," Li Luo asked directly.

She stared at him, surprised. "Would I be here if I wasn't?"

Actually, the rewards were not the main draw for her. Rather, it was the favor of the school, which would be infinitely more valuable to her in her position.

After all, the Astral Sage College might claim to be neutral, but it was still an important faction to win over in the Xia Kingdom.

She sighed. "Interest is well and good, but there are too many strong opponents at the Holy Grail Meet. I couldn't even do well in the hall-level competition. How can I aim for anything in the mixed-level competition?"

Li Luo grinned. "Difficult individually, perhaps. But you could just find a couple of trustworthy companions."

"Each team can only send two squads," she said doubtfully. "And every school has a finite pool of talent. The Astral Sage College can only send out one strong team. You and Jiang Qing'e are definitely in that seeded team, but me? I don't think so."

"Gong Shenjun did better than me in the hall-level competition," she admitted grudgingly. "You three form the ideal team."

The First Princess would just have to choose from the remaining members, although none of them could compare to these two.

Li Luo was silent for a few moments. "What if me and Qing'e want to team with you, Your Highness?" he asked softly.

Her foot paused mid-air over the next step, then a shiver of anticipation shook her from head to toe. She quickly recovered her composure.

Li Luo politely averted his gaze.

The First Princess turned to him in amazement.

"You and Qing'e? With me?" she asked in disbelief.

"You would rather not?"

"No... but why me? Logically, Gong Shenjun should be your choice."

"Because the First Princess is beautiful and kind, and that makes our group a nicer place to be in."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Li Luo, this is no joking matter."

"Would I joke about something like this, Your Highness?" Li Luo said with a serious smile. "And don't bother asking me why either. Qing'e ordered me. Perhaps she trusts you more than him?"

The First Princess smiled self-consciously despite herself. "Does Qing'e really think that way?"

"Or perhaps Your Highness thinks that this is going to be a mistake, and you're much weaker than Senior Gong Shenjun?"

"No way!" the First Princess said indignantly. "His potential might run deep, but I don't see myself as that much weaker than him. And with Qing'e in support, I'm afraid of no one, not even Gong Shenjun or Lan Lan!"

Li Luo smiled and nodded, satisfied.

She fixed him with a look. "But you're serious? You and Qing'e will join me in the mixed-level competition?" This pleasant surprise was too sudden for a cautious person like herself, and she had to confirm the fact again.

Li Luo was starting to feel a little grumpy about the whole business again. Qing'e this, Qing'e that, Qing'e by my side—what about him, damnit!? The strongest One Star Hall champion was in front of her in the flesh, and she was giving him as much credit as the wallpaper. It was a three-man fiesta, not a two-man comedy show.

"Yeah, well, we'll see about it," he said huffily, stalking off.

She reached out to grab his elbow and hold him a moment longer, but Li Luo had vanished already. She gritted her teeth.

That little rascal had gotten her all riled up and now he was running away? He really knew how to play with her feelings!

Her sudden movement was attracting some curious looks from the other students, and so she resisted the urge to chase after him, instead walking into the hall at her own pace.

Chapter 0523: Mixed-level Competition Format

The hall was packed with students from all four levels.

Li Luo squeezed his way through to where the One Star Hall students were gathered.

"Brother Luo."

Yu Lang popped out as if triggered by an automatic sensor. He seized Li Luo by the hand and pumped it up and down heartily. "Oh, Brother Luo, I thought you were just an ordinary and average person in every way, just like me, except for your good looks. But this time, you've really impressed me."

The hearty hand pumping was matched in vigor by the pumping of his eyebrows in a knowing man-to-man manner.

Li Luo took it in stride, idly wondering what trouble his friend had cooked up this time.

Yu Lang was about to explain his predicament when Bai Doudou appeared just as magically, her hand pinching the back of Yu Lang's neck. "You watch your mouth from now on. If you talk about Senior Jiang like that again, I'll cut your tongue out!"

Yu Lang cringed like a caught rabbit.

"Why is my leader so fierce!?"

"Leader, have you had breakfast yet? I still have some here," Bai Mengmeng said with a sunny smile, offering him a bag.

"Thanks, but Qing'er already gave me some," he said with a smile.

Yu Lang was aghast. Why did some people just wake up with a win in the pocket already? Senior Jiang in bed the whole night, then Lu Qing'er feeding him in the morning? If that wasn't heaven, he didn't know what was.

Bai Mengmeng smiled and nodded, putting away the bag.

When she leaned forward to offer the bag, her sharp nose had not detected any other scent on Li Luo's body. It seemed like nothing had happened between Li Luo and Senior Jiang last night; otherwise, there would definitely have been some mingling of scents.

"Is Leader's restraint that strong?"

"He was faced with a goddess like Senior Jiang and didn't waver throughout the night at all?"

Even Bai Mengmeng had to give him some respect for that.

Truly befitting of her leader. While the covert speculation continued, the great hall fell silent as Vice Principal Su Xin walked in, stepping up on the stage.

She smiled at them and clapped twice to draw their attention. "Everyone, information on the Holy Grail Meet's mixed-level competition has been released," she announced to the eagerly listening students.

"As you may have heard, each school can only send two squads." This was disappointing news for the rest of the students who had trained hard but knew they would not be chosen. After all, this was a good chance for them to gain once-in-a-lifetime experience and expand their horizons.

The two-squad limit shut down that opportunity for most of them.

"Vice Principal, why is it so few? There were at least four or five squads in past iterations..." someone asked.

Vice Principal Su Xin nodded sympathetically. "That is because this iteration of the mixed-level competition is far more dangerous."

The students broke out into confused murmurs.

"The mixed-level competition will not be held in a direct competition style, nor is the competition even held within the Holy Grail space."

They looked around at each other. Not within the Holy Grail space?

"This time, it will involve Others," she stated calmly.

The word cooled the atmosphere down fast. Many students were looking fearful. They remembered their time in the Umbra Cave all too well.

How was the mixed-level competition going to involve them?

Vice Principal Su Xin summoned a bit of light, then expanded it into a map.

Li Luo looked at the terrain closely, but he could not find any familiar topographies. This was not in the Xia Kingdom at all.

"This is the Blackwind Empire, located in the north of the East Divine Continent. It is a vast nation, comparable to the Xia Kingdom, and a powerful one as well. Despite its reputation, it was met with a terrible catastrophe in the last three years, and the entire nation crumbled.

"The reason for this is the Blackwind Sage College, or rather the Umbra Cave that the Blackwind Sage College was supposed to guard. For some reason, there was a breach that was not discovered in time. As a result, the Others entered the Blackwind Sage College and decimated it.

"The Blackwind Empire no longer exists. The entire region is rife with Others roaming the land. We call such phenomena Other Disasters. There is no life at all within the land," she said quietly. The students fell into a hushed silence.

The Blackwind Empire's sage college had failed...

They were all elite students who had faced the Others in battle before, and they were all currently imagining a land completely overtaken by those monstrosities.

A grand nation reduced to rubble.

They could only imagine the devastation in that land.

"After the Blackwind Empire's Other Disaster, the neighboring countries all lent aid to suppress it, drawing on the strength of many sage colleges. But clearing out that many Others is no easy task, and progress has been slow."

"Vice Principal, are you saying we're supposed to go to the Blackwind Empire and help with this mission?" Gong Shenjun asked.

Everyone else swallowed nervously. No wonder only two teams were allowed. This was crazy dangerous!

Vice Principal Su Xin nodded gravely.

"Exactly. To cleanse Others in the Blackwind Empire. That is the mission of the mixed-level competition."

The students paled.

A land completely taken over by Others, transformed into a horrific dystopia. Even Dukes would not dare to wander freely there. What use would students be? Wasn't it suicidal?!

"Vice Principal, there's definitely been some cordoning off regarding the area of operation, right?" Li Luo asked hesitantly.

Of course, there would be regions that were far beyond their abilities, and Li Luo thought it impossible that the Academic Federation would just send them to die. This was the only possible explanation.

Vice Principal Su Xin nodded, pointing at one region. "This is called the Red Clay Province. It's where the mixed-level competition will take place. It has been thoroughly scouted, and the strongest Others there should be Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class."

The students heaved sighs of relief. The Lesser Heavenly Disaster-class was equivalent to the Heavenly Pearl sub-stage of the Heavenly Dipper General Stage. For elites like Gong Shenjun and the First Princess, they were manageable with proper squad backup.

"After the competition starts, squads will be transported to various locations all around the Red Clay Province. You will also receive maps. The goal is to cleanse the area and purge all Others. Those will then be calculated with points, a process you are all familiar with. We use the same system for our own Umbra Cave.

"The final goal is the capital city of the Red Clay Province, Russet Rock City," she said, pointing to a skull symbol at the center of the province.

"Once Russet Rock City is cleansed, the mixed-level competition ends.

"But let me remind you," she said, looking gravely at each of their faces, "Russet Rock City is where the pollution is strongest. There might even be Greater Heavenly Disaster-class Others there by that time. Be very careful."

Even Gong Shenjun and the First Princess looked worried when they heard this.

Greater Heavenly Disaster-class.

As strong as Heavenly Resonance Stage cultivators.

This was going to be a grueling challenge!

Chapter 0524: Choices

The hall was dreadfully silent.

Many students were in shock at the idea of facing Greater Heavenly Disaster-class Others.

Now they knew why this mixed-level competition was different. Indeed, weaker students like themselves would only come to harm if they participated.

Although the school would definitely provide some protection, Others were just too deadly and tricky. Corruption could strike from any direction.

It was not just them—even Li Luo was worried by the idea of Greater Heavenly Disaster-class Others. He had faced one before, the grinning demon in their own Umbra Cave. Back then, Jiang Qing'e had given everything she had, ending up seriously injured while barely being a minor inconvenience to it.

If not for the three-tailed heavenly wolf that he had lured over in the end, all of the students would have died at its hands.

Although they eventually dealt with it, Li Luo would involuntarily flinch whenever he saw anybody smile for the longest time after that. A bit of leftover trauma.

That was how scary a Heavenly Disaster-class Other was.

And now they were supposed to cleanse a province with such monsters? Were the schools really lacking manpower?

He sighed. Well, at least there were going to be two major carries in his squad. At this sort of level, they would be the main fighters, while a puny Resonant Master cultivator like himself could back them up at best.

Of course... he had his own backup of sorts.

Li Luo touched the dark red bracelet on his wrist. In it was trapped the three-tailed heavenly wolf that had beaten the grinning demon.

According to Principal Pang, this three-tailed heavenly wolf was something special. It was already at the peak of Heavenly Dipper General power, equivalent to a Heavenly Resonance Stage cultivator... Back at the Umbra Cave, when the First Princess had rushed to his "rescue," he felt that she would have died to it as well if not for the seal that Principal Pang had given him.

"It is a dangerous and risky task, but as members of sage colleges, purging Others is part of our duty. There's no need to overthink this. Just treat it as another mission to the Umbra Cave.

"The two squads will be led by Gong Shenjun and Gong Luanyu."

Hearing her nomination, both Gong Shenjun and the First Princess stood up calmly. Although they were also intimidated by the notion of taking on Heavenly Disaster-class Others, they handled the news with aplomb, as befitting of their status as royalty and the two strongest students present.

They had experience dealing with Others of that class before.

"Next the two squads need two more members each. According to the rules, there cannot be two members at the same hall level."

"Jiang Qing'e, Li Luo, you two don't want to be separated, I assume?" she said a little mischievously.

There was a smattering of envious laughter from the others, directed mostly at Li Luo.

Although Li Luo's performance was superb, many still regarded him as inferior to their goddess, Senior Jiang. Not like anyone gave a rat's ass about what they thought though.

Gong Shenjun was looking in their direction as well. He smiled warmly and extended his invitation again. "Junior Jiang, Junior Li Luo, if you two are willing to join my team, I think the three of us stand a good chance of winning the championship."

This was no surprise to anybody present. Of course, his main target was to secure Jiang Qing'e to his team. She was definitely the strongest person present outside of the Four Star Hall.

Definitely a great asset for the team.

Li Luo's usefulness was a little more debatable. Even though he was the strongest One Star Hall student, there were also Two Star Hall options available. n/-0ve1b1n

Zhu Xuan, for example.

Even though he had not fared too well in the Two Star Hall, he was still a Fourth Changing, whereas Li Luo was a Third Changing. Of course, he had shown that he could temporarily increase his level to the Fourth Changing as well.

In any case, Li Luo was not an immediate choice like Jiang Qing'e.

But...

Everyone knew that the pair was inseparable. They came as a package deal.

Vice Principal Su Xin was waiting for their reply too. In terms of strength, the two of them and Gong Shenjun would form the strongest possible team, which would increase the chances of them winning. This was both a competition against Others and other schools.

Still, she remained silent. Choosing teams was the privilege of the members, and not even she could force any team to form, even though she was the vice principal.

The First Princess' face was carefully neutral, although there was tell-tale tightness in the rims of her phoenix eyes. She was not sure whether to believe what Li Luo had said to her at the staircase earlier.

The strongest choice was Gong Shenjun after all.

Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo exchanged a look, and then Li Luo smiled apologetically at Gong Shenjun. "Sorry, Senior Gong, Qing'e and I cannot join your team.

"We have to join Her Highness' team."

There was an astonished gasp from the crowd.

Gong Shenjun looked genuinely shocked as well. When Li Luo had dodged his request last night, he had suspected that something of the sort might happen, but he had not judged it that likely.

"Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e have chosen the First Princess..."

"Is this just a simple choice that stands by itself?"

"Or do they mean that House Luolan stands with the First Princess?"

"Senior Gong, you might be the best choice in the eyes of the others, but we already accepted the invitation of the First Princess before the Holy Grail Meet, so..." Li Luo's voice trailed off with apologetic appeal, then he turned back to the First Princess with a broad smile.

"First Princess?"

She recovered quickly, not missing a beat. "Royal Brother, there has to be order in all things. I have laid down many efforts in the past to win over Qing'e to my team. I'm afraid you won't be able to poach her from me so easily."

"Luanyu," Gong Shenjun said impatiently, "is this the time to talk about order? Winning the championship and upholding the school's reputation and honor is what's important here."

The First Princess smiled sweetly but dangerously. "Are you implying I don't have what it takes to win, Royal Brother?"

"I wouldn't dare," he said courteously, shaking his head. "Junior Jiang, I respect your desire to uphold your promise to Luanyu, but this concerns whether we can bring the Dragon Bone Holy Grail back home with us. I hope you can reconsider. I know that Luanyu is also a good choice, but I do feel that the odds are slightly better with me instead."

He spoke with tact and fairness, and many students found themselves nodding in agreement with his reasonable proposition.

Surely power was king here, and Jiang Qing'e and Gong Shenjun made the best team.

Jiang Qing'e's face was as still as a lake. She looked at him calmly, waiting for him to finish before she spoke at a measured pace.

"In our house, Li Luo makes the decisions. He has spoken. We work with the First Princess. I would not dare to shame him. Sorry, Senior Gong, I look forward to working with you in the future."

Her words left them all speechless.

Chapter 0525: Kicking It With The First Princess

Everyone looked at Jiang Qing'e oddly after her declaration.

Although Li Luo was formally the young lord in House Luolan, everyone knew that Jiang Qing'e far exceeded him in reputation. While Li Luo's performance had been a delight so far, he was still not the heavyweight that Jiang Qing'e was.

It was clear who held the reins of power in their household.

Jiang Qing'e's words were just to help him save face.

But even doing so spoke volumes about their relationship.

Gong Shenjun showed no emotion in response. He stood silent for a moment, then smiled regretfully. "A pity. I wanted Junior Jiang to lend me her strength and chase the championship together."

With this, the team was settled.

"Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, are you sure you will choose Gong Luanyu as your squad leader?" Vice Principal Su Xin asked.

Both of them nodded.

She blinked once thoughtfully but said no more. Choosing teams was a sacred right that could not be interfered with. Besides, even though Luanyu was a little weaker than Shenjun, she was still strong in her own right. All in all, the difference in strength was not that big.

Nothing that someone like Jiang Qing'e couldn't overcome.

As for Li Luo... he was a bonus sparrow flitting about the match. Such was the case for mixed-level competitions. "Alright, then, the three of you form a team. I hope you can work well together and bring more success to our school."

All three nodded firmly.

Vice Principal Su Xin turned back to Gong Shenjun. "Well, it seems like you'll have to find two other squad members, then," she said with some sympathy.

"Whatever is best for the school," Gong Shenjun said with an agreeable nod. "If we win, nothing else matters."

Even Su Xin found herself nodding at this attitude. He truly lived up to his reputation as the foremost student in the Astral Sage College.

Gong Shenjun picked the Three Star Hall's Duzhe Honglian and the Two Star Hall's Zhu Xuan as his two squad mates. Both of them gratefully accepted.

And so the second squad for the mixed-level competition was confirmed as well.

Both squads looked rather strong, but all in all, the First Princess' squad seemed a little better because of Jiang Qing'e's presence. Together with the First Princess, they could probably take on Lan Lan without much fear.

As for Li Luo, he was simply too lightweight. Compared to his General Stage squadmates, what could a Resonant Master cultivator possibly accomplish?

If not for the stipulation that all three squad members had to be from different halls, the One Star Hall would probably never see the light of day in mixed-level competition.

Not like the Two Star Hall would see much action either.

Zhu Xuan was also only a Fourth Changing, and not much stronger than Li Luo. Although in this iteration, perhaps only the North Sea Sage College's Ao Bai was better. It was said that he had reached a quasi General Stage, which was above other Resonant Master cultivators.

"This mission is both a competition and a purging mission," Vice Principal Su Xin said to them gravely. "Although you have gone through training in the Umbra Cave before, they are completely different once they reach the outside world. Within the Umbra Cave, the school conducts frequent and thorough filtering to weaken their ranks. In the Red Clay Province, Others have devoured many humans, making them even more dangerous. All of you, please be extra careful."

She flicked out wisps of white light as she spoke, and they deposited a white mirror and a crystal phial in their hands.

"This is a spirit mirror with many uses. It can update you on squad missions and the point leaderboard. Of course, most importantly, you can smash the mirror if you're faced with death. The power within will protect you and transport you back to the Holy Grail space, but once the mirror is broken, you'll be eliminated.

"The liquid in the bottle is cleansing dew. Once you clear out the Others in the Red Clay Province, you will need to pour it and create a purification spot. Once there are enough of them, they will join up together and cover the entire Red Clay Province, freeing it from the corruption."

The students nodded. This was not an alien concept. They had activated purification towers back in the Umbra Cave as well. This cleansing dew probably had a similar role.

"You will get more information once you get into things. The mixed-level competition will officially begin in two days' time. Go and prepare and rest until then."

The atmosphere in the hall lightened once Vice Principal Su Xin stepped out. All eyes were on the two squads, and those closer to Gong Shenjun and the First Princess stepped forward to offer encouragement.

The First Princess thanked them as she moved through the crowd towards Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e.

"A moment," she called out.

The two of them turned to her and dipped their heads in acknowledgment.

"Your Highness. We'll be in your care in the mixed-level competition." Li Luo grinned.

The First Princess rolled her eyes. "Why so courteous, Young Lord? How could a small vessel like me hope to contain the overwhelming talent that comes from you two?"

Jiang Qing'e smiled slightly. "Your Highness is no small vessel."

The First Princess took Jiang Qing'e by the elbow in a tender fashion. "Don't worry, Qing'e, with you and me working together, I'd like to see who can stop us."

"I'll be looking forward to it, Your Highness."

"Ah, yes," Li Luo thought to himself grumpily, "the casual snubbing... again."

In this squad, his presence was just... pathetic.

Chapter 0526: Elder Ling Yu

Two days passed in the blink of an eye.

A circular arena made of white jade had appeared in the Holy Grail space.

All the participating students at the Holy Grail Meet were gathered there. They were the handpicked elites of their respective schools, but they were only spectators here. Not many of them would play a part in the mixed-level competition.

Squads continued to stream in to rousing cheers from their schools.

"Looks like a transport ward," Li Luo said, noting the regulated light patterns across its surface and a latent energy in the floor beneath him.

His two squadmates, Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess, nodded in agreement.

The two of them standing together was just about the prettiest view in the whole Holy Grail Meet. Moreover, Jiang Qing'e's reputation had spread far and wide over the last few days.

The First Princess was a real beauty as well, and she had that royal bearing as part of her charm.

"Why isn't Jiang Qing'e teaming up with Gong Shenjun for the Astral Sage College?"

"Yeah, that's strange. Gong Shenjun's the strongest Four Star student, right? They'd be unbeatable together."

"You guys don't give Xia Kingdom's First Princess enough credit. She's not that much weaker than Gong Shenjun. With Jiang Qing'e beside her, they're still damned strong."

"Oh and Li Luo too... Keke, a squad with two strongest students? That's sick."

"Ah, but Li Luo's only One Star. His advantages are nullified by the Two Star Hall students who have an extra year of cultivation on him. He might be strong, but how can he hope to compare to the North Sea Sage College's Ao Bai?"

"Well, I think the strongest squad overall is still going to be Enlightened Sage College's. I hear Lan Lan, Lu Jinci, and Jing Taixu are all in the same group. They might only have one brooch on that squad, but it's the Four Star Hall brooch, which is the most important."

"Well, that's true..."

Li Luo could hear them all clearly. He spotted the familiar visage of Jing Taixu some distance away.

He was talking and laughing with his two squadmates, Lan Lan and Lu Jinci.

As if sensing his gaze, Jing Taixu looked up and their eyes met. The smile on Jing Taixu's face faded a little, and he looked away stiffly.

Lu Jinci saw it happen. "I was about to follow you to taunt them," he said irritably.

"At least your loss to Li Luo was a dignified one-on-one. What about me? I fought her with a team and still got nailed." He was rather grouchy at how disproportionate the whole thing had turned out. The idea had been Jing Taixu's, and all he had done was follow him over to see Jiang Qing'e. But he'd been hung up like a slaughtered deer and quartered.

Jing Taixu laughed a little apologetically, then he quickly changed the subject. "Senior Lan Lan, please help us save the situation if you can."

"Junior Jing, you've already sabotaged Lu Jinci. Now you're trying to sabotage me?" Lan Lan laughed.

"Not at all. You're the strongest in the Four Star Hall, a Heavenly Pearl Stage expert. Even though Jiang Qing'e has a ninth-grade light resonance, she is only an Earth Fiend."

Lan Lan shook his head smilingly but did not refute him.

Li Luo only took one look at Jing Taixu before turning his attention to Lan Lan. He could sense what a gigantic threat this guy was.

"That Lan Lan is really something," Jiang Qing'e said to him in a low voice. "He only has an upper seventh-grade water resonance, but he's strong enough to crush many upper eighth-grade resonance elites."

"Although resonance grade provides a cultivation advantage, it's not absolute. And no one can really compete with the threat of the Enlightened Sage Scripture." The First Princess nodded gravely.

Li Luo nodded, noting the apprehension in her voice. Truthfully, he had never met a King expert before. Principal Pang had been an echo back then as well, and even so, he had felt the crushing mountain of pressure from the echo's presence.

Lan Lan had managed to cultivate the Enlightened Sage Scripture despite that. Truly impressive.

Li Luo cast his eye out across the other squads, spotting a few more familiar faces. Sun Dasheng, Lu Ming... nothing surprising. They were definitely One Star Hall students that held their ground against even the best of Two Star Hall.

Suddenly, Li Luo's gaze stopped.

He saw a handsome, prince-like person with a fan in hand, and he recognized the person from the intel they had received.

The Two Star Hall's strongest student, the North Sea Sage College's Ao Bai.

Although he had not fully broken into the Earth Fiend Stage, his Fiend Palace was already starting to form. This was known as the quasi General Stage, and he was far beyond the other Two Star Hall competitors like Zhu Xuan.

"You could throw a stone and hit a genius by accident in this place," Li Luo noted dryly. The cream of the East Divine Continent crop was truly all gathered at the Holy Grail Meet.

A gong sounded out, and a person walked out onto the stage. The person was followed by the school representatives.

Vice Principal Su Xin was also among them.

But it was the main person that had Li Luo's attention.

He was dressed in the Academic Federation's uniform. The old man had a head of fully white hair, but his eyebrows were dark red and fiery. He had a charismatic aura about him, and Li Luo felt himself heating up physically just by looking at this man, despite the man not showing any signs of resonant power.

It was not just him. Many around him were dabbing at their sweat.

"That's the elder who was sent by the Academic Federation to organize the Holy Grail Meet, Elder Ling Yu," the First Princess informed them.

Li Luo was very curious. Was this some super-high level guy from the Academic Federation?

The red-browed elder took a step forward. Without so much as a word or a smile, his gaze alone was enough to make the chatter of the crowd fade away. When there was silence, he spoke in a gravelly voice.

"East Divine Continent students. Firstly, let me congratulate you on making it here. Being chosen to compete in the mixed-level competition means that you are the strongest of your schools. Even so, for many of you, your efforts for your schools will end here. The mixed-level competition this time is different, for reasons already made clear to you.

"You will soon head for the Blackwind Empire... No, that empire is no more. There might never be a Blackwind Empire again in the future. It is now completely overrun by Others, and your mission is to purge what was once the Red Clay Province. The corruption level in that area is rather light, and perfect for your training.

"One more thing: I'd like to give you all a warning. Others might not be the only thing you have to watch out for."

The students sat up straighter at this. Not just the Others?

His old, wrinkled eyelids opened up wider.

"We suspect that the Umbra Cave that Blackwind Sage College guarded was sabotaged, leading to the Other Disaster."

Silence, and the students reeled.

The seal on the Umbra Cave had been broken on purpose? They could hardly imagine what sick-minded terrorist or evil faction would do such a crazy thing.

Chapter 0527: The Mixed-Level Competition Gets Serious

Elder Ling Yu's announcement about a possible traitor was met with shock. The Umbra Cave was the stuff of nightmares, the worst enemy of humankind. An Other Disaster was worse than any other sort of disaster.

The uncomfortable atmosphere built and built, and then Elder Ling Yu spoke again. "Of course, it's not certain whether the Blackwind Empire really fell because of a traitor. At present, it remains only a possibility, but one that we cannot dismiss. Just be careful in the Red Clay Province.

"Now that the Blackwind Empire has thoroughly fallen, the corruption continues to deepen and expand. It is hard even for us to know what is within. From what I see, the deepening corruption might well have already formed an Other nestportal. Once such portals open, the shadow world has complete access to that location, and the Blackwind Empire will be a true horror indeed. When the Other Disaster broke out, the neighboring countries sent Dukes to scout the place out, but many of them returned injured. Perhaps there are already Other Kings present within," Elder Ling Yu continued tonelessly.

The other students were nervously thanking their lucky stars that they had not been chosen.

"Other Kings... Old man, are you trying to shorten our lifespan until it's the same as yours?!"

This was way beyond the pay grade of a student!

"I tell you all of this information not to scare you, but to impress upon you how serious the matter is. Your mission will play an important role in the greater plan to stop the Other Disaster in the Blackwind Empire, although we do not have enough resources to completely purge the place. That is why we have chosen to seal it away for now.

"The seal is made of an enormous ward that encloses the entirety of the Blackwind Empire. It stops the Others from spreading to other countries. There are many points that will help support the ward. We've already established the others, and the Red Clay Province is the last place remaining. Once it is completed, the entire seal will kick into action.

"At the same time, other countries will be helping to run interference in other zones, to prevent the strongest creatures in the Blackwind Empire from turning their attention this way. It should buy you more time.

"I hope you do not see this mission as just a competition. Your success or failure overall will determine the future of the Blackwind Empire and the safety of all our people. If the ward fails, it will be an unparalleled disaster for all of us."

The students were silent as stone.

Li Luo shared a worried look with Jiang Qing'e as well. The mixed-level competition had just gotten a hell of a lot more serious.

This level of mission... it was high in both difficulty and importance.

However, there was no reason to refuse. This was not just about a championship anymore, it was the safety of their home, a responsibility that none of them could run away from.

Although the Blackwind Empire was a long way away from the Xia Kingdom, if it got out of control, none of them would be safe.

"All of the East Divine Continent's sage colleges and the neighboring countries together can't handle an Other Disaster at the Blackwind Empire?" Li Luo asked quietly.

"It's not that simple," the First Princess said, shaking her head. "Each school has its own responsibilities to take care of. The principals can rarely leave their schools even for a moment. Just look at the Holy Grail Meet—all the schools have sent vice principals only, despite how important this is. The principals can't leave. They don't dare to leave. As for the other countries, besides the neighbors, who would send their experts to contain the Other Disaster in a forsaken land? In truth, the cutthroat politics, border disputes, and threat from each other isn't much easier to deal with compared to an Other Disaster. And as Elder Ling Yu said, the Blackwind Empire is suspected to have Other Kings roaming around. The situation is dangerous and complicated. Only Kings can really deal with such enemies, and yet they are few and far between in the East Divine Continent.

"That is why sealing off the area is the best plan for now."

"What about the Academic Federation?" Li Luo asked. "Aren't they super strong? Can't they send a King over?"

"The Academic Federation is very strong indeed," the First Princess said with a sigh. "But the world is much greater than us, and they have many other things to deal with. If not for the Holy Grail Meet, Elder Ling Yu would not even be here. The Academic Federation has its hands full dealing with all the Umbra Caves already. You cannot expect them to be omnipresent and omnipotent. They cannot be saviors. This is not their only concern either, and they are not the only superpower in this world either.

"And finally... Kings are precious assets even for the Academic Federation. Before ascertaining the situation at the Blackwind Empire, they would not send such a powerful person. If an accident were to happen, even the Academic Federation would feel the loss keenly."

Li Luo hung his head. "Humble pie baked and eaten."

The First Princess smiled at that. "Well, the Academic Federation is shrewd, I'll give them that. The Holy Grail Meet presents a unique opportunity that they're using well. The elites are gathered here, and yet we are still students who will only leave a smaller footprint, reducing the chances of detection by greater dangers.

"And once the Red Clay Province's purification spot is established, the Other Disaster will at least be contained."

Li Luo nodded admiringly. Indeed, the Holy Grail Meet gathering was quite a strong group. The One Star Hall students might not count for much, but the Three and Four Star Hall students were already uncommonly strong and at the General Stage. This level of power was quite impressive in any nation.

For example, House Luolan only had the three Heavenly Dipper General ancestors, besides his parents and Uncle Biao.

On the dais, Elder Ling Yu had finished with his dire warnings, and he put his hands together. "Students, I will not belabor the point any further than I already have. I hope that all of you who enter the Red Clay Province will follow the spirit mirrors' instructions and complete your missions smoothly.

"The champions of the mixed-level competition will be the squad with the highest points. As for how points are calculated, you will find out from the spirit mirror once you enter the Red Clay Province.

"Does anyone have any questions?"

Silence.

Elder Ling Yu nodded. "Prepare yourselves, then. Teleportation will happen soon. I await your good news here."

With that, blinding light beamed upwards from them, and soon they felt their bodies being squeezed through a rift.

The space around the white jade arena started to twist and warp.

Less than a minute later, the energy built up to the critical level, and each of them was teleported away.

Outside the area, the other students watched them go, wishing them well in their hearts.

The mixed-level competition had officially begun.

Chapter 0528: Red Clay Province

When the dizzying teleportation ended, Li Luo opened his eyes and then opened them wider.

The sky before him was a dreary grayish-green. Dark, poisonous, green mist hung in the air, lending to the gloomy complexion of the land. From all around him came low whispers that played on his negative emotions.

Li Luo felt like he was back in the Umbra Cave.

"This is the Red Clay Province?" Jiang Qing'e's voice came from behind him. She was carefully studying their surroundings too.

The First Princess bent down and took a handful of soil. It was an earthy-red color. "Should be correct. The Red Clay Province produces a red ore that creates a special metal that attracts electricity when tempered. That is why thunder is often heard over the Red Clay Province, and also how the region got its name."

"So... what's the plan, Leader?" Li Luo grinned.

"Wow, it's a real honor to be called leader by the strongest One Star Hall student," the First Princess teased back as she pulled out her spirit mirror and activated it. A map beamed out of it, covered with many red dots.

This was a map of the Red Clay Province, and those red dots were the various cities within it.

"We're currently in the periphery of the western area," the First Princess said, pointing with a slender finger. "These hamlets are the places that we must pass, and you can see that the bigger light dots indicate bigger cities. The corruption will definitely be deeper there, and that's also where the Others should be stronger and greater in number. Of course, that's where we can get a lot of points.

"It seems to me that there are three tiers of points to obtain. Level one would be these isolated hamlets and towns on the periphery. The corruption is light, and they should be easy to cleanse. Once the cleansing dew is placed in the middle, we get 5,000 points.

"Level two would be the bigger cities. These are worth 20,000 points if we can place the cleansing dew successfully.

"Level three only includes a handful of cities... I count maybe a dozen or so at most throughout the Red Clay Province. Those are worth 50,000 points."

"A very familiar system," Li Luo observed dryly.

"Yes, it's exactly the same as what our school uses in the Umbra Cave. I guess it works, so they adopted it wholesale," Jiang Qing'e said. Li Luo remembered that the purification towers in the Umbra Cave had also been divided into three levels.

"As a side reminder, these points are not just used for the championship. School points are tied to it as well, which means we get to keep them after the competition and can redeem cultivation resources back at school," the First Princess told them in good humor.

"That's very generous!" Li Luo was now excited.

This was a huge amount of points. Even divided by three, it was a huge haul if they could just cleanse a few towns, far more than what they would get in the Umbra Cave. "That's because the mission is very dangerous," Jiang Qing'e reminded him mildly.

The First Princess nodded in agreement. "Also, the points aren't as important as winning the Holy Grail Meet. It's not even close in terms of the benefits. So our goal here is still to win the thing."

Both Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e agreed wholeheartedly. School points were the cherry on top, but they should not forget about the cake itself.

Eyes on the prize.

The school points were really a consolation prize for the squads that could not win.

"What about this one in the center? How many is that worth?" Li Luo pointed to a sinister, red dot in the middle. He knew it was their final destination, Russet Rock City.

"500,000."

Li Luo inhaled sharply. "That's too damn high, surely?"

That city alone was probably equal to all the level three cities added up together!

"500,000, but probably no one squad can take it all for themselves," Jiang Qing'e reminded him. Li Luo had to concur. All squads would converge on Russet Rock City eventually. As the final goal of the mixed-level competition, the corruption was thickest there. And if there were Heavenly Disaster-class Others there, one squad alone would not be enough.

There would have to be cooperation, and so the 500,000 points would have to be split.

"We might not be able to get it all, but if we could get just half, we'd be swimming in points," the First Princess said cheerfully.

"Well, well, well." Li Luo rubbed his hands. "Looks like we'll have to fight our guts out over there."

Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess glared at him. He sure talked big for a guy who wouldn't be doing the heavy lifting.

"Oh, and do you see this city?" The First Princess pointed to another big, red dot, which was outlined with a faint, yellow border.

"This level three city is a compulsory objective. You can take it as the primary mission that the organizers have set for us. If that city is not taken, we not only cannot get points, we will even be penalized a corresponding amount of points."

Li Luo's jaw dropped. "A negative point system?!"

The First Princess nodded. "If the organizers have demarcated it as such, then it must be a very important location."

"Perhaps a key point for the ward," Jiang Qing'e offered.

Li Luo shrugged. "Well, I'm the fly swatter here. Whatever my mistresses decide."

"Oh, what a good boy you are," the First Princess said mischievously, reaching out to tousle Li Luo's silver hair.

Li Luo hurriedly ducked away. "Be careful, Qing'e will be jealous."

"I'd hardly be jealous of a playboy like you," Jiang Qing'e said without missing a beat.

"Don't slander me," Li Luo protested. "I am Li Luo, the purest of waters, the clearest of crystals."

"Pfft." The First Princess watched the two banter. She had never seen this livelier side of Jiang Qing'e before in school. Only with Li Luo did her coolness seem to melt away a little.

Suddenly, the First Princess froze, turning in another direction.

"Something there."

Jiang Qing'e whirled to face the same direction as well.

Li Luo was slower, chasing them with all his might.

A few minutes later, they reached a high slope and were looking out at a small hamlet covered in dark-gray mist.

They could see that there was unnatural movement within the town.

They looked at each other, confirming their thoughts.

An Other cluster.

Chapter 0529: Tale Of A Small Village

Wow!

A greenish-gray mist hung outside the town walls, coiling around the perimeter like an ethereal concertina wire. Within the smoke, figures flitted here and there, and the villagers' eyes darted back and forth, desperately trying to track their movements.

Finally, they emerged from the gloom, wolf-like creatures with eerily human faces and four limbs looking like human hands.

Their human eyes glittered with feral malice, fixed on the walls that were keeping them out.

They prowled the outside perimeter, held temporarily at bay by a faint, golden light that covered the walls. The source of this power was a Golden Tiger Talisman that floated in mid-air, surrounded by small, golden fangs.

Occasionally, an Other would cry out like a baby and then leap on the talisman.

And the fangs would immediately shred it into black pulp.

This resulted in a growing pile of foul pulp-sludge at the bottom of the talisman, which was horrid to look at.

A disturbance in the mist. The villagers shrank back fearfully, and a tall man-wolf walked out. This one had two faces!

"A two-faced man-wolf!" the villagers shouted in dismay.

"Commander, we're doomed now! The tiger talisman probably can't hold it!" They looked towards a middle-aged man with a grim face for guidance. He pumped a well-muscled arm.

"We have to hold the line, no matter what!" he exhorted. "If we fail here, everyone in the village will die! I don't want my mom to be eaten by all those foul things. Do it for your families! Come on!" The others nodded grimly and tightened their grips on their weapons, summoning what resonant power they could.

He heaved a sigh of relief upon seeing the morale go back up and then turned back to the front with a frown.

This man's name was Huang Lou. He was an Earth Fiend cultivator, at the first Fiend Palace Tier. He was a city defense commander in the Blackwind Empire's heyday. But all of that had disappeared into smoke once the Other Disaster had broken out.

Order in the empire had fallen almost overnight.

All the powerful factions with a place to flee to were already fleeing without a backwards glance.

He had left the city where he worked as well, bringing some close friends with him and establishing a new base in this hamlet. But eventually, the Other Disaster spread here as well.

With his Fiend Palace Tier strength and the Golden Tiger Talisman that he had stolen from the city rulers, he had managed to protect this village up till now.

But before long, the Others grew stronger.

And now the two-faced man-wolf.

His instincts told him that it was trouble. Big trouble.

Could they hold out even with the lower gold-eye treasured artifact that was their Golden Tiger Talisman?

The two-faced man-wolf made a keening baby's cry, and the other man-wolves rushed forward as one.

The green-gray smoke moved forward with them, bringing with it a nauseous stench in the air.

Huang Lou immediately activated the Golden Tiger Talisman.

Roar!

A golden tiger leaped out from the talisman and roared a ring of power that vaporized all of the man-wolves.

But the Others showed no fear. They were single-minded killing machines, charging on even as their comrades fell.

More and more man-wolves came surging on, and the tiger's roar rang out a little more weakly with each pulse of power. It did not have infinite energy.

And just as the tiger started to weaken, the two-faced man-wolf leaped forward. Both of its mouths shot a jet of sticky, black sludge that flew like arrows, timed perfectly to hit the golden tiger in between roars.

Hooo!

The tiger whined in pain, and its golden light was extinguished by the black sludge. It disappeared back into the talisman.

Now there was a new purplish-black stain on the talisman, as though it had suffered corruption.

"Damn it all!" Huang Lou swore, hurriedly stowing the Golden Tiger Talisman away.

Without the golden barrier to protect them, the way was clear. The two-faced man-wolf led the way, brackish saliva dripping down its jaws as it made its eerie, baby-like screams.

"Prepare yourselves!!" Huang Lou cried, drawing his sword.

They were the last line of defense for this village. If they were broken here, the village would be slaughtered completely.

"Charge!!" The few dozen defenders on the wall shouted, in part to try and blow away their fears. They had faced the Others many times before, and many of their comrades had fallen before their very eyes. They had watched once-beloved brothers warp and twist before them, turning into monsters.

Behind them, other villagers were watching in abject terror. They knew that if the defenders fell, all of them were in for horrible deaths.

No, compared to being corrupted by the Others, perhaps dying was the far more preferable option.

Boom!

Huang Lou's gray-white resonant power flared into life as he watched the two-faced man-wolf charge straight at him, then his skin hardened.

He was a stone resonance user.

Bang!

Huang Lou led the charge, his sword in hand as he chopped down powerfully at the head of the two-faced man-wolf.

The two-faced man-wolf blocked it with a human hand that had wolf claws for fingers. Putrid bile dripped from the fingernails.

Clang!

The clash of steel on claws sent sparks flying.

Huang Lou's face changed. He could feel the monstrous strength behind his foe's defense. As a stone resonance user, physical strength was supposed to be his specialization, but even so, he could feel that he was completely outclassed here.

Bang!

The claws flicked out with brutal strength.

Huang Lou was sent flying backwards, crashing hard into the castle wall. A crack appeared on the wall and blood dribbled out from his mouth.

"Commander!" The hapless cries from his men.

Huang Lou staggered to his feet. From their first clash, he could tell that the two-faced man-wolf was probably an Earthly Disaster-class, equivalent to a Fiend Body Tier expert, the second tier of the Earth Fiend stage.

"This is going to be troublesome," he muttered to himself. As a Fiend Palace Tier expert himself, he would have to go all out against an enemy that was a tier higher than himself. Regardless of the result, he would pay a heavy price here.

It might well be his last fight.

He did not fear death, but there were many people in the village that he had hoped to protect, including his infirm mother who could not walk far.

"This is life, and this will be death. The circle is unbroken." Huang Lou sighed. He lifted his sword and watched the two-faced man-wolf's eyes turn red. Its fur bristled and turned a blood-red color.

The next clash was about to break out, when a blinding golden light suddenly lit up on the horizon.

A single blazing comet of gold was flying against the velvet-blue night sky, like a wishing star had come to their rescue.

A cool voice came from behind it.

"World of Light."

Chapter 0530: Overwhelming Force

The light across the sky dispelled the gloom over the village, and even the grayish-green fog started to recede rapidly.

There was an incredibly pure power arriving.

The ordinary man-wolves yelped and shrieked as they began to disappear.

Even the two-faced man-wolf's bile had started to dry up.

"Awhoo!"

It howled angrily, turning its demented eyes towards the light and loping towards it.

Swoosh!

Two beams of light appeared from above like fire from heaven, shooting straight at the two-faced man-wolf.

Huang Lou narrowed his eyes. They were nails made out of pure light, burning with heat from their intensity. The nails of light had enough resonant power charged in them to send a shiver down his spine.

A shiver of fear and respect hit him, but also a shiver of joy.

This was light resonant energy!

They were about to be saved by a light resonance expert!

“Praise the heavens!”

The two-faced man-wolf sensed the danger behind the attack and fired two more puffs of black smoke from its mouth. They formed two cloud-like claws that flew out at the nails.

Pssh!

At the point of impact, the two light nails blazed with power, completely evaporating the smoky claws. They continued on their trajectory unhindered, burying themselves into the terrified two-faced man-wolf's head and tail.

Weng!

The two-faced man-wolf was pinned to the ground at top and bottom, then the nails burst into flames, burning it from both ends.

The two-faced man-wolf struggled desperately, clinging on to its life force.

Swoosh!

A wash of green energy came from above, and a green Luan bird swooped down gracefully. The two-faced man-wolf was smashed into bits, cutting it off mid-howl.

The pieces were quickly incinerated by the light nails.

Huang Lou and his other defenders watched the entire development agog.

The two-faced man-wolf had been strong enough to raze their entire village, but now it had been so easily disposed of.

Huang Lou swallowed hard. That light resonant energy was strong, and the user of the green light stronger still.

He cupped his fist and called out to them. "This humble person is Huang Lou. I do not know what manner of ally you are, but let me thank you on behalf of the village. You have saved us."

The flashes of light sped over and appeared before him soon enough.

Huang Lou and his men squinted curiously through the brightness and then gasped.

Before them were two beautiful, young girls.

The one on the left had golden eyes with a unique charm to them. She looked cool and aloof, and yet the golden light resonant energy she exuded filled them all with a sense of relief.

The one on the right was an out-of-this-world beauty with a kindly expression on her angelic face. She looked a lot more approachable than her companion at first glance, but there was something about the manner in which she held herself... "Is this a Heavenly Dipper General expert?"

With a start, Huang Lou realized that there was one other person, a silver-haired young man who stood behind them. He was handsome enough, but the overwhelming resonant power in front of him had caused Huang Lou to overlook him at first. He was probably a Resonant Master cultivator.

Two girls, one guy.

A Heavenly Dipper General expert, a light resonance expert he guessed was at the third and final Fiend Finisher Tier of the Earth Fiend Stage, and a Resonant Master.

A strange group indeed.

Huang Lou forced a smile despite his reservations. "My thanks to you three for saving us."

He was polite but guarded. The Blackwind Empire was no more, and what remained was lawless and orderless. He could not be sure that they had helped the village out of the goodness of their hearts, bearing no ill will.

He once stood with the might of the Blackwind Empire at his back, and he would not have feared even a Heavenly Dipper General. But things were different now.

"You are too kind," the First Princess said with a smile at his welcome. "We too are just carrying out our mission."

"Mission?" Huang Lou was puzzled. With no semblance of a system remaining in this land, who would commission rescue missions?

"We are from the Academic Federation!" the First Princess explained. "The Academic Federation is joining forces with some other factions to cleanse and cordon off the expansion of the Others."

She did not hide their true purposes here. When they entered the town to place the cleansing dew, they would also need Huang Lou's help.

"Academic Federation?" Huang Lou's eyes lit up with hope. He had heard of that powerful body before in his work at the Blackwind Empire. "Are they coming to end the Other Disaster?"

"The Blackwind Empire's Other Disaster is too severe," Li Luo said gravely. "The Federation can only limit the expansion of the disaster, even with collaborative help. At the same time, we can do some basic cleanups, but completely resolving the disaster is no easy feat." He did not wish to give Huang Lou any false hope.

"Ah, thank you for bringing me back from my fantasies," Huang Lou said with a self-deprecating smile. "But it is still a good thing that the Academic Federation is helping. Any life saved is still a life saved."

Li Luo nodded. "We're going to place a cleansing object in the village. Things should be safer afterwards, and it should help stop the corruption from spreading. We'd like to ask for your cooperation."

"That's great!" Huang Lou's face lit up. He had seen such objects in the past, but creating them was a tricky process that was too advanced for him. If these three could help with that, it would be a real blessing for them.

"Please enter, saviors!" Huang Lou ushered them in happily.

The trio nodded to each other, then followed him inside the village.

The paths within the village were slick with moss, and many curious villagers poked their heads out for a look at the three strangers.

Huang Lou announced loudly to all of them that these three had come to set cleansing objects, and they were immediately welcomed warmly with a cheer.

Li Luo studied their faces carefully and spotted a faint, green-black tint on many of their complexions.

He frowned. This was a clear sign of corruption.

Bang!

A door on the left blasted open, and a person rushed out on all fours, howling.

The villagers nearby screamed and fled.

A woman holding a crying baby rushed out and grabbed the chain around the madman's neck, forcefully dragging him back into the house.

Li Luo watched with concern. The man's face was starting to warp, and the green-black hue on it was markedly obvious.

"Get him back in, quick!" Huang Lou ordered, and some others rushed up to restrain the corrupted person.

Li Luo's group waited.

After Huang Lou dealt with the incident, he came back over to them. "Although our village is far on the outskirts, the Others have grown stronger over the last few years. There have been more cases of corruption amongst the weaker-willed villagers recently. They lose their minds."

"Why don't you destroy them?" Li Luo asked carefully.

Huang Lou sighed. "Close-knit communities in a small village. That man had a wife and a child, as you can see... We can't really kill him right in front of them, at least not before he completely loses control."

Li Luo's heart was heavy. They had not encountered such a problem back in the Umbra Cave. After all, those who entered the Umbra Cave were elite students. But here at the Blackwind Empire, he was witnessing the devastating effect of Others on ordinary folk firsthand.

And this was just the outskirts, where corruption was supposed to be lighter. He could only imagine how much worse things were in the depths of the Blackwind Empire.

"When the cleansing objects are placed, such situations should lessen," the First Princess said comfortingly.

"I hope you are right," Huang Lou said with a short nod.

"We will be leaving after we finish our task," Jiang Qing'e said. "We are headed for Riverguard City. You are from the Blackwind Empire, do you have any useful information for us?"

Riverguard City was the primary mission that the school had deemed compulsory for them, a crucial base point for the ward.

"Riverguard City?!" Huang Lou exclaimed, his eyes wide with dismay.

"You're going to Riverguard City? You can't! There are Heavenly Disaster-class sightings there!"