

Resonance 401

Chapter 0401: To Cook A Tortoise

Kiii!

The exultant shriek of the green luan agitated the air with its sonic vibrations. And then green fire spilled from its beak, spreading out to enclose a large area around Zhong Nan.

The green flames were special. They spilled forwards with a lightness to them, as though the essence of wind was captured within the heat. They drifted across the ground in a sea of fire that burned down everything in their path.

The temperature in the mountain range steadily climbed.

Zhong Nan was drowned in a sea of fire.

He was fully serious now, sensing the skill level and the very real threat that these flames posed. First Princess had specially prepared this secret technique to deal with him - the flames were too fast, and too widespread to avoid. His only way of dealing with it was to tank it head-on.

Although...

He indeed did not lack head-on tankability.

Zhong Nan put his hands together and closed his eyes. His gray-white power started to form rings around his feet that began to expand outwards. All that they touched - tree, leaf, flower - all of it turned to stone.

With Zhong Nan at the center of the locus, a huge area several meters wide was turned into a zone of stone.

BOOM!

The green flames roared on relentlessly.

Zhong Nan stood his ground and did not budge, although the set of his jaw was grim as he braced himself.

"The Immovable Xuan Art."

Suddenly he pulsed once more with gray light, and suddenly the entire stone zone shattered all at once into rock dust that hung in the air for a moment before it started to gather.

In a few short moments, it had reformed into a gray tortoise dozens of meters tall.

The enormous tortoise stood quietly, calm turtle eyes peering out from its ancient and well-weathered shell.

The green flames fell from the sky onto the great dome of keratin, spilling off to burn the ground all around it.

The tortoise stood calmly, not budging an inch. It let the fire burn away at it.

From the viewing platforms, the students were awestruck by the scene. Where a lush forest had once stood, now green flames burned in its wake, burning as high as the canopy used to be. And in the midst of this forest of fire, the gray tortoise stood unmoving.

Li Luo was just as awed as the rest of his peers.

"This is the power of a Heavenly Dipper General?" Both the sea of fire and invulnerable tortoise displayed magnitudes of power that were far beyond his own capabilities.

He was feeling very inadequate as a Resonant Master right now.

Still, he was not completely discouraged. Heavenly Dipper General might be a faraway dream for now, but he had complete confidence he could reach it in three years' time.

He had to. Or he would be dead.

"Leader, do you think Zhong Nan can endure that?" Bai Mengmeng whispered, watching the struggle below with eyes wide open in fascination. Even at a distance, they could feel the sweltering heat.

There was a pang of sympathy in her voice, for Zhong Nan. Of course, she was not hoping that he won, but his situation looked extremely nasty indeed.

Turtling desperately in the midst of flames from all sides.

To be able to hold on through the conflagration demanded intense skill and willpower. It was an admirable feat indeed.

An opponent worthy of respect.

Li Luo watched the flames carefully. "If this was a fight to the death, it'd be hard to say who would win. But this is a timed fight. First Princess' green flames are awesome, but I think Zhong Nan's reputation has spread further than those flames ever will... First Princess is testing his willpower with this move - once his will wavers, then his perfect defense will crumble, and it will be her win."

"Still..." he paused.

"Zhong Nan has never lost a single battle throughout his entire record. Do you think such a man will waver easily?"

Bai Mengmeng shook her head.

The cheers of the spectators had died away now. All eyes were on the tortoise, waiting to see if it would fall. The position of the fighters made the students want to cheer for Zhong Nan, who looked like the underdog. Even the Astral Sage College students' hearts went out to him.

"Blue Abyss Sage College must be very proud of him," vice principal Su Xin said to vice principal Qiu Jizi.

Qiu Jizi smiled at the high praise. "The kid is not as shrewd as Zhao Huiyin, but we Violet Vibrance mentors think his future brightest."

Su Xin nodded in agreement.

All was silent except for the roar and crackle of the flames, searching for any weakness along the stone.

It did not remain unharmed. The fire was causing definite damage to the shell, which was starting to peel away under the heat. Chips of rock and dust fell away from the shell.

Large fragments began to fall, and burn marks developed into weak points that began to deepen.

Through the gaps in the flames, an unmoving Zhong Nan stood like a statue.

Still, the experts present could tell that the intensity of the flames were ebbing away. They could not be sustained for much longer.

From the beginning, the outcome had already been decided.

Time ticked on.

The great tortoise weakened and weakened, until finally it was at its limit. It crumbled away all at once into white ash.

Zhong Nan's outline appeared in the ashy cloud, still surrounded by green flames.

A collective sigh from the crowd, some out of sympathy for Zhong Nan.

But he did not look defeated at all. He looked at the flames without concern as they roared around him.

He took a step into the fire.

Everyone gasped, then gasped again. Where he trod, the fires went out, and then the adjacent flames winked out as well.

In a few short moments, all the flames had been completely extinguished, leaving thick black soot on the floor.

Zhong Nan stood still, his gray figure a shining spot amidst a landscape of black. He looked up at First Princess, still floating in mid-air. "Thank you for the fight."

First Princess smiled back with some irritation. She looked up to see that the joss stick had been burned down.

The battle was over.

Dong!

The gong sounded across the battleground.

First ticket match: draw.

Chapter 0402: Round Two

The viewing platform was held in enthralled silence when the curtains fell on the first battle. The First Princess and Zhong Nan stood in silence for a long moment before the crowd slowly shook off the spell and began to cheer.

They cheered sonorously and equally for both sides, grateful for a magnificent showing.

Although it had ended in a draw, there was no fault to be found in either. They had both done their best preparations, executed their finest moves, and brought the exchange to new heights together.

"Heavenly Dipper General level battles are really something else," Li Luo said, exhaling sharply. The outcome had been more or less predictable, but watching a rollercoaster and riding one were two completely different experiences. Perhaps they might have revealed other trump cards in a battle to the death, but they had been evenly matched in this fight.

Zhong Nan had defended his title as the Blue Abyss Sage College's aegis, while the First Princess had displayed uncommon power as well in testing him, making the Astral Sage College proud.

The crowd slowly quietened, and then suddenly the cheers redoubled loudly. Now the name on their lips was Gong Shenjun.

Li Luo looked up to see Gong Shenjun slowly descending to the scorched battlefield.

He was clad in white today, his usual handsome and charismatic self. The whole Astral Sage College rallied behind the strongest of the Seven Astral Pillars, and many girls were gushing over him.

Nobility radiated from him. Even the Xia Kingdom elders nodded slightly and smiled in approval.

"Regent, you are really blessed to have such a great son," House Jiyan's Zhu Qinghuo said.

Duze Yan nodded as well. "His Highness Gong Shenjun brings glory and pride. Such an outstanding member of the younger generation will definitely be a great successor to you, Great One."

The Regent smiled at them warmly. "You are too kind, gentlemen," he said with a modest wave. "All of this was thanks to the Astral Sage College's nurturing. If not for them, Shenjun would not be what he is today."

"It is you who are too kind, Your Highness," Vice Principal Su Xin replied with a smile. "Gong Shenjun's talent and hard work are noted by mentors and peers alike. His accolades were not obtained with mere luck."

The little emperor frowned at the exchange. "My sister is excellent as well," he said loudly.

The others were a little surprised, but they nodded as well.

"It is true, Your Majesty. The First Princess' excellence captured all of our hearts but a moment ago. Who could doubt it?"

Below, the Blue Abyss Sage College's Liang Kui had taken to the field.

He was a hulking figure dressed in black, but his juxtaposition to Gong Shenjun's white was not at all an equal one. His features were slightly skewed, an abnormality that didn't mark him fully ugly, but stood out starkly against the heroic handsomeness of his counterpart.

The girls of the Astral Sage College turned their eyes away from him.

Liang Kui was used to such behavior. He ignored them, eyes firmly on his opponent. He showed no signs of wanting to exchange courtesies. With a twist of his hands, he produced a long, black spear.

It thrummed with energy, and there was a golden mark on its shaft that caught one's attention.

This was a gold-eye treasured artifact.

BOOM!

Electricity blasted out of Liang Kui's being in all directions, summoning an electrical storm that crackled and flashed. The dancing electricity forked out, creating a sinister hiss at each object it touched. In the center of it all, six heavenly pearls began to appear.

The distinctive blue-white color of lightning cast strange shadows on his already imperfect face, giving it a demonic cast. The storm demon.

Liang Kui was coming in guns blazing, without any intention of testing the waters. He knew how deep the waters were with this one—probably deeper than he could handle. Anything less than his best, and he would be sunk immediately.

Facing such a feisty start, Gong Shenjun smiled slightly and pulled out his own silver spear.

Like Liang Kui's weapon, his was also a powerful conduit to focus worldly natural energy on. The space around his weapon seemed to distort because of the overwhelming energy.

This was a gold-eye treasured artifact too.

Silvery-white resonant power flowed out of Gong Shenjun in rivers, rising into the air like smoke stacks. From their midst, an enormous, silver scaled-dragon rose in its signature coiling movement up to the sky. [1]

The silver scaled-dragon's beautiful scales took one's breath away... just as the deadly claws below looked capable of taking one's life away.

Li Luo looked at the scaled-dragon with great interest. Clearly, this was Gong Shenjun's resonance.

Upper eighth-grade, silver scaled-dragon resonance.

This was the first time that Li Luo had actually seen one.

Gong Shenjun did not stop there. The energy within his body only continued to grow stronger, and then seven heavenly pearls burst out of his body to float around him, glowing with silvery light.

They were even brighter than the First Princess' pearls.

Li Luo took it all in with a measured eye. Although seven heavenly pearls was already an incredible feat, somehow his gut was telling him that this might not even be Gong Shenjun's full power yet. The foremost student in the Astral Sage College might still be holding back.

And if that were true, he was truly something special—it took immense confidence to hold back against an opponent of Liang Kui's caliber.

While Li Luo was still trying to size up Gong Shenjun, the latter was already responding to his opponent. His spear lined up against Liang Kui, and he still dipped his head slightly as a gesture of respect, even though his opponent had not bothered with the courtesy.

"Astral Sage College, Gong Shenjun. I look forward to learning from our exchange, my Blue Abyss friend."

Liang Kui looked at his stronger opponent, no fear or intimidation on his unflattering features. He slowly lifted his spear and then spoke in a raspy, thrumming voice.

"Onnne move," he hummed, as though his entire body was brimming with electrical energy.

"Hmm?" Gong Shenjun inclined his head.

"Receive onnne move frommm mmme, annnd I surrennnder." [2]

Gong Shenjun laughed. "Risking it all on one shot? Are you trying to get a draw in this fight as well? Is this the battle plan of Blue Abyss—to get more draws?" Liang Kui did not reply, simply waiting for Gong Shenjun's reply.

Gong Shenjun smiled at him, flexing his fingers around his silver shaft. He spoke with a warm and measured pace.

"You are our guests from afar. As the host representing both school and kingdom, I am happy to oblige to your request.

"So, friend... come at me."

Chapter 0403: The Storm Demon's Spear

Boom!

The moment Gong Shenjun accepted, lightning resonant power burst out of Liang Kui's body, flying up into the sky. Dark clouds began to form out of nowhere, and lightning bolts leaped like fish between them.

One mighty bolt of lightning crashed suddenly down, but it was not aimed at Gong Shenjun. It landed on Liang Kui instead.

BOOM!

Struck by lightning, Liang Kui's six heavenly pearls were agitated, becoming even brighter than before. They now formed a large lightning snake that hissed and coiled.

Liang Kui took a deep breath, screwing his face up in complete concentration as his eyes sparked with power.

The little threads of electricity were now joining up into thick, roiling tendrils as they flowed in full strength towards the black spear. The six heavenly pearls entered the black spear as well, and the air around it was distorted from the concentrated energy.

It was all too plain to see that Liang Kui was charging up for the ultimate attack of the century.

On the other hand, Gong Shenjun stood his ground, not interfering. He was happy to give Liang Kui the time he needed to prepare. One could see it as weak and passive, or absolute confidence.

If Gong Shenjun won in the end, he would not only win the battle, but also the hearts and praise of everyone present. Even the Blue Abyss Sage College would have nothing to say.

The fact that Gong Shenjun was aiming for that outcome spoke volumes of his ambition.

Rumble!

In a short time, Liang Kui had charged up an epic attack. He was funneling every last bit of lightning he could into his weapon. He was at the limits of his control, and bits of electricity escaped from him and leaped away to the ground.

Even the other Seven Astral Pillars members shuddered at the lethality of the attack that was incoming, while the normal students could not even begin to imagine what would happen to them.

This attack would eviscerate them into a puff of smoke.

"Pssh!"

A lazy wisp of white gas escaped Liang Kui's gritted teeth. His spear was heavy with power, criss-crossed with lightning and a figure of lightning appearing behind him in the air.

The figure was several dozen meters wide and had four arms. Although its features were hidden in shadowy darknesses, the savage aura it radiated was undoubtedly demonic.

"This attack... I call it the Storm Demon's Spear.

"But I know that even this amount of power is not enough to deal much damage to you," Liang Kui rasped.

"And so..."

The hand that gripped the black spear suddenly exploded, his fingers disappearing into a mist of bone and blood. It was sucked into the spear too, making it suddenly change colors from black to dark red.

The lightning on it had also changed from blue-white to a demonic red.

The aura around the spear doubled sinisterly.

Things had taken a sudden and wicked turn, and the level of fear among the spectators rose as well. The Seven Astral Pillars were looking worried.

After he sacrificed his fingers, the storm demon behind Liang Kui reached out one monstrous limb to grip the spear, keeping it upright. And then it gradually drew back its hand in a pitching motion.

Time and space itself seemed to freeze.

BOOM!

A thunderous sizzling sound filled the air as the bolt of blood lightning zipped through the air.

It moved at blistering speeds, and few of the spectators could actually track its movement. A streak of red was all most of them could see.

The soot-covered battlefield was divided into two by the attack zipping forward.

Of course, the lightning bolt destroyed everything in its path. This was the one shot that Liang Kui had mustered, even sacrificing his hand for it.

Gong Shenjun stood his ground. He watched the blood spear streak through the air towards him, and he nodded with approval as he noted the energy aura around the bolt. "Truly the strongest spear of the Blue Abyss Sage College," he said softly to himself.

"Still...

"Not enough."

Gong Shenjun's own eyes gleamed with silver power, and his irises contracted into the serpentine eyes of a scaled-dragon. In his hands, his silver spear seemed to melt into liquid power, reforming as a mini silver scaled-dragon that coiled itself around his arm before finally sinking under his skin as a spear tattoo.

The tip of the spear was at his finger.

Gong Shenjun lifted that finger, which gleamed with silver light.

"Dragon Soul Claw."

"Roar!"

A dragon's defiant roar accompanied a burst of silver light from Gong Shenjun's finger, and a scaled-dragon burst out of his fingertip, swimming forward with scales shimmering and fangs bared.

The soul of the dragon met the blood spear square on.

BOOM!

The impact was colossal. The already tattered battlefield was ravaged anew, with deep gouges cutting through fallen trees and broken rocks alike. The aftershock radiated outwards like a spider's web, leaving symmetrical, radial gouges on the ground.

So strong was the aftershock that it would have reached the spectator stands, but the Violet Vibrance mentors were on hand to negate the shock before that happened.

All of them watched the field anxiously.

As silver and red energy burned out against each other, it was the silver dragon soul that gave out first.

The Astral Sage College students gasped in dismay.

Had Gong Shenjun failed to defend against this attack?

After bursting past the silver dragon soul, the blood spear continued forward, aimed straight at Gong Shenjun. The man in white watched it come with a faint smile on his face.

He stood his ground quietly, arms loosely at his sides.

As the spear neared him, its energy was also being depleted, and when it was within a few meters of Gong Shenjun, the red tint was completely gone. The spear was now black again.

Even so, it was a powerful attack that was on track to punch into Gong Shenjun's brow.

Clang!

A faint, white spot appeared on Gong Shenjun's brow, and the black spear clattered downwards.

Gong Shenjun reached out to grab it, then he casually flicked it with a finger. It flew through the air to land in front of Liang Kui, buried point-down in the ground. He bowed his head slightly.

"I admit defeat."

Chapter 0404: Three Star Hall Fight Begins

Liang Kui had ultimately lost, as expected.

Many Astral Sage College students wiped cold sweat from their brows. "All as we predicted," they might say, putting on brave smiles, but damn did Liang Kui not give them a good run for their money. For a moment, they had been legitimately worried that the Astral Sage College would end the Four Star Hall battles behind.

Fortunately, Gong Shenjun had come through as the strongest student of the Astral Sage College. A dependable fighter.

Now was the time for cheering, and the Astral Sage College students celebrated their first win in the ticket match.

Li Luo was thinking about Gong Shenjun too. This senior had not just won, he had won it with pizzazz. The boost to his popularity and reputation would be amazing.

In comparison, the First Princess' match had looked almost dull. Although it was a known fact that Zhong Nan was harder to fight, the result sometimes counted for more than the process.

And the result was a draw for the First Princess, but a win for Gong Shenjun.

It was as simple as that.

No one would dare to say that the First Princess was weak, but not many would put her on the same level as Gong Shenjun either.

"Senior Gong is really strong."

Even Bai Mengmeng was full of admiration for him. "Next will be Senior Jiang, right? I'm really excited about it—I haven't seen senior Jiang fight anyone for real before."

"Oh, I've seen her fight plenty of times." Li Luo winced. "But I'm always on the receiving end of the fists."

She giggled. So her leader trained frequently with Senior Jiang. "Leader, what do you think of the Three Star Hall lottery?" Xin Fu asked.

Li Luo thought it over. "The Four Star Hall draw favors the Blue Abyss Sage College. If their Shield had faced Gong Shenjun, it's likely they would have lost. And then if the First Princess took down the Spear, then we'd have two wins. That's, like, half the ticket secured, you know."

"For the Three Star Hall draw, I think the most favorable outcome for us is for Jiang Qing'e to face Zhao Huiyin, and Duze Honglian would take Yan Tai. Then we'd have some good odds for both fights. But if Jiang Qing'e draws against Yan Tai, and Duze Honglian faces Zhao Huiyin... probably one loss, one win."

Although Li Luo had not seen Zhao Huiyin in action before, their little exchange previously had given him all the character reference he would need. Such a shrewd girl could only be eliminated by Jiang Qing'e. Duze Honglian would be swallowed whole.

Bai Mengmeng nodded. "I want to see Senior Jiang fight Zhao Huiyin too. It will be a thrilling fight."

Li Luo agreed. He wanted to see the little fox being eaten by the plump swan too. Not only was the metaphor hilarious, it would have been an epic clash of wills.

"Leader, you're the last match. Do you think it'll even reach you?" Xin Fu suddenly pointed out.

"The One Star Hall's put at the back precisely because we're the least important tier," Li Luo said with a hint of irritation. "The odds that things will be decided one way or the other before it reaches me, are high, yes. Although your observation makes my knuckles itch to make friends with your front teeth, it is very true indeed."

"That's truly a pity, Leader." Xin Fu sighed dramatically. "I so wanted to watch you take the crowd by storm."

Li Luo rolled his eyes. "As if I'd believe you, black-hearted scorpion!"

At the Blue Abyss Sage College contingent, a girl dressed in arresting red stood up from her seat. "One draw and one loss." Zhao Huiyin smiled. "Well, that's to be expected. Not the worst case."

"Senior Zhao, we're counting on the Three Star Hall representatives now," Lu Cāng said with a bright smile.

Zhao Huiyin laughed. "Pray that I meet Duze Honglian, then. I'll be in deep trouble against Jiang Qing'e."

"I'm sure you stand a chance even against Jiang Qing'e," Lu Cāng said encouragingly.

Zhao Huiyin pouted. "She's a ninth-grade light resonance, for heaven's sake! A real ninth-grade! Not some cheated ninth-grade!" A gaunt youth walked up to her side and gave them a smile. This was the other Three Star Hall representative, Yan Tai.

The two headed down to the lot-drawing platform together.

Jiang Qing'e and Duze Honglian were already waiting there.

"Hey, Jiang Qing'e, how are you?" Zhao Huiyin called out endearingly the moment they were in earshot.

Jiang Qing'e merely looked at her and gave a small nod.

"Jiang Qing'e, that's really unfriendly of you. Is it because your fiancé and I got so close the other day? It's a misunderstanding. Please don't get angry at him. I was just trying to get directions." Zhao Huiyin blinked innocently, her voice the perfect mixture of sincerity and apology.

Duze Honglian stared at the two of them, eyes round. What was going on? Fiancé meaning... Li Luo? Li Luo and Zhao Huiyin did things two days ago? Was that guy such a dog?

Zhao Huiyin was a great beauty herself; she had natural charm and she used it well. Maybe Li Luo's recent popularity had gotten to his head, and she had managed to hook him? Still, Zhao Huiyin was really something for saying all that to Jiang Qing'e's face. Taunting her?

Pretty interesting.

Duze Honglian sniggered inwardly, enjoying the drama.

However, Jiang Qing'e did not rise to the bait. "Friend Zhao Huiyin's interest in my house's Li Luo is not unpermitted," she said casually. "But House Luolan has strict rules. If you want to join the house, you'll have to start as a servant girl. If you do well, you might be able to rise to concubine."

Zhao Huiyin flinched inwardly. Her? A servant girl for Li Luo?! She'd beat him to death with the chamberpot!

"Can I really?" she said shyly. "Li Luo's really such a kind person, and very talented too. He'll definitely be one of the greatest in the Xia Kingdom in the future. He told me the other day that it's very normal for men to have a few wives and several concubines. Maybe he'll leave a room for me if I stay at the Xia Kingdom."

"The firewood storage room is also a room," Jiang Qing'e pointed out. "What room you get depends on how good you are."

Zhao Huiyin suddenly laughed. "Do you mean that we might very well be deciding who gets the main room and who gets the small room if we meet in the fight?"

"No, it would be to decide if you get the small room or firewood room," Jiang Qing'e explained patiently.

"Friend Jiang," Zhao Huiyin said sharply, "surely the Young Lord's say counts more. Or is Li Luo nothing more than a puppet at House Luolan? You don't seem to respect him at all." Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes surveyed her coolly for a long moment, then she stepped forward and thrust her hand into the stone box, pulling out a pellet that she pinched apart with one hand. With a deft twist of her fingers, she let the pellet shell fall, unrolling the paper within all with one hand. On it was written "One."

Zhao Huiyin followed suit. She narrowed her eyes at her paper, then lifted it high up as well.

On it was written "One," and this brought a loud roar from the crowd.

The first match of the Three Star Hall was going to be Jiang Qing'e against Zhao Huiyin.

Jiang Qing'e looked back at her calmly.

"Zhao Huiyin, ready for your beating?"

Chapter 0405: Jiang Qing'e versus Zhao Huiyin

First battle of the Three Star Hall.

Jiang Qing'e versus Zhao Huiyin.

The matchup had been received with great interest by the two schools, and the students were all hyped up. This was perhaps even more anticipated than for the Four Star Hall matches.

If nothing else, it was because both sides were sending their jewels out for a show.

In terms of strength, perhaps the two girls were not as strong as the First Princess, Gong Shenjun, Zhong Nan, or Liang Kui. But in terms of looks, they had them beat hands down.

On the viewing platform, a few of the elders were sitting up a bit straighter with their wizened backs. They were all watching Jiang Qing'e. Although Li Luo was formally the young lord of House Luolan, everyone knew that she had been the real heart and soul of House Luolan ever since Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had disappeared.

And in her case, her strength was just as outstanding as her looks. She had carried House Luolan through turbulent times single-handedly, buying time for Li Luo to come into his strength.

With a ninth-grade light resonance, she was talent seen maybe once in a century. In a few years, she might well break Li Taixuan's record for reaching Duke. At that time, House Luolan would rise to greatness again.

And now she was not alone. By her side, a new power in the form of Li Luo had emerged, with dual resonances. These two youngsters had House Luolan back on its feet. In some aspects, they had even started to overtake the era of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan.

House Luolan was climbing daily, inexorably, a new sun in the morning sky.

Which... was not good news for the other houses.

"Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan are really blessed with such a disciple and son. House Luolan rises day by day. If the two of them return... hoho. House Luolan will be unstoppable," Zhu Qinghuo said with a laugh that did not reach his eyes.

No one replied. Instead, their faces darkened as they read between the lines of his words.

The silence grew stiff, and it was Su Xin who replied, "Today is an important day for the Astral Sage College. That is why we are here today, and I would ask House Lord Zhu to refrain from bringing politics into it."

"My mistake, Vice Principal. Please forgive me," Zhu Qinghuo said hastily.

She nodded with a smile and said no more. She knew all too well the predatory designs that these schools had on House Luolan, and their heroine, Jiang Qing'e, who had saved the house. Jiang Qing'e, who had overwhelming potential—if not for how heavily the school valued her, grooming her for the Holy Grail Meet, someone would have secretly taken her down by now.

No one wanted to give a ninth-grade opponent time to mature.

But the Astral Sage College remained neutral in the house struggle. As long as Jiang Qing'e was with the school, these jealous forces were held in check, in fear of the wrath of the Astral Sage College itself.

Although the Astral Sage College could not extend such comprehensive protection to every student, they would go out of their way for the rare genius that they saw in Jiang Qing'e. She was an investment for them.

In the future, Jiang Qing'e would graduate, and her future was bright enough to see her leave the Xia Kingdom, and even the East Divine Continent. She would be a great power in the world. At that time, would she be grateful or hateful towards the Astral Sage College?

If not for the school's need to remain more neutral, the Astral Sage College would have loved to put out the declaration loud and clear that they were backing Jiang Qing'e all the way.

Oblivious to the political dance happening on the platform, Jiang Qing'e was focused on her battle. Today she was clad in her usual outfit, navy shift and short battle skirt. She was no less beautiful for it.

Her ultimate weapon was her face, as if sculpted by the divine powers themselves. Arrange them into her usual, cool expression, and both guy and girl students alike were entranced.

"Jiang Qing'e!"

"Jiang Qing'e!"

They chanted her name enthusiastically when she stepped up. Her reputation and charm were all too evident in their adoration.

A figure in red walked up in front of her.

Zhao Huiyin.

She was a great beauty in her own right. In the Blue Abyss Sage College, she had her own fan club too. Red skirt cinched flatteringly around her hourglass waist, her figure spilled out voluptuously both above and below it.

Zhao Huiyin stood barefooted on a huge rock. "Oh, Qing'e, I'm afraid of pain," she said coyly. "Please be gentle with me."

"When you enter House Luolan, roughness will be unavoidable," Jiang Qing'e replied casually. "Get used to it."

Zhao Huiyin bit her lip. "I'm actually not that into Li Luo. If you become House Luolan's lord though... I wouldn't mind joining your house."

The corner of Jiang Qing'e's lip twitched. "Pity. I already promised Li Luo to take you down in this battle."

Zhao Huiyin laughed. In the next moment, golden light burst from her body in spikes, and the rock she stood on was suddenly riddled with holes.

"Take me down, Qing'e? Try me." She brandished a gleaming golden sword.

At the same time, the color of her skin started to fade away, becoming almost translucent. Her body looked like glass now, and the worldly natural energy could be seen circulating within her body.

At the moment, she looked less like flesh and blood temptation, and more like a priceless jewel.

“Wow!”

The crowd exclaimed in surprise.

This glassy appearance showed that Zhao Huiyin had surpassed the intermediate Fiend Body Tier, reaching the third and final Glass Fiend Tier of the Earth Fiend Stage. Zhao Huiyin dared to challenge Jiang Qing'e because she had the strength to back her words.

Chapter 0406: Light and Metal

The Earth Fiend Stage was divided into three tiers.

Fiend Palace Tier.

Fiend Body Tier.

Fiend Finisher Tier.

When resonance cultivators made it to the Earth Fiend Stage, they grew even more attuned to worldly natural energy, allowing them to draw on a special variety of it known as Earth Fiend Energy.

Absorbing Earth Fiend Energy helped one's resonant palace expand and strengthen, which increased one's resonant power capacity.

That was why it was called the Fiend Palace Tier.

Once the resonant palace reached a critical level of reinforcement, Earth Fiend Energy would overflow and pour out of it, strengthening one's physical body. That was the intermediate tier, the Fiend Body Tier.

Each tier even had a unique color, called the Silver, Gold, and Glass Fiend Tiers respectively.

A common ceiling for many was the Gold Fiend Tier. Reaching the Glass Fiend Tier was exceedingly difficult because physical body reinforcement was an unfamiliar concept that many cultivators struggled with. Bringing it to the final level was a feat that not many could accomplish.

This was why Zhao Huiyin's Glass Fiend Tier reveal was such a big surprise.

After the Fiend Body Tier was the Fiend Finisher Tier, the final tier of the Earth Fiend Stage. This stage was also defined by a fresh injection of power. One's body would produce a special type of energy by itself, known as Fiend Dipper Energy. This was the greatest and most recognizable mark of the Earth Fiend Stage.

"Jiang Qing'e, I hear you're at the Glass Fiend Tier as well. Show me, then! Show me how different a ninth-grade light resonance Glass Fiend body looks." Zhao Huiyin laughed, crooking a finger at Jiang Qing'e. With a quick flick of her sword, she sent a powerful attack flashing out at her opponent.

The arc of golden light flashed up into the sky, then a rain of swords began.

Jiang Qing'e raised her lovely face to the sky of swords summoned by her opponent's metal resonant power. It was a deadly attack, enough to pierce rock itself, and the metallic clangs of swords on the ground all around her was deafening. Zhao Huiyin was quite strong indeed.

Still, this attack was nothing to Jiang Qing'e.

She raised a hand and bent just two fingers.

BOOM!

A curtain of light descended from the sky, threads of light resonant power circling through it at speeds too fast for the human eye to see.

Ping! Ping!

The light weave stood strong, as though the blades were puny birds flying headlong into a cliff. They exploded into dust.

The light weave looked pristine.

Zhao Huiyin's eyes widened at the exquisite control and strength of the light resonant energy. It was truly masterful handling, on a clearly higher level than her metal resonant power. A ninth-grade light resonance was really a miracle to behold.

There was not much time for gawking. The light screen suddenly expanded, shattering into pellets of light that flew out like a hail of bullets.

They were fast enough to outpace most defenses.

But Zhao Huiyin was prepared. Raising her hand again, she gathered her metal resonant power into a flat, golden shield in front of her. It had barely formed when the bullets arrived, slamming into the shield with enough velocity to leave lumpy indents. The zinging sound of bullets was all that was heard for a few moments.

The impact of the light bullets punched Zhao Huiyin back step by step, and her flimsy shield was beginning to crack.

She had not been given sufficient time to properly reinforce her shield, and so it cracked very quickly.

When it gave way, Zhao Huiyin leaped backwards defensively.

Jiang Qing'e moved forward, appearing before her like magic. Her fingers jabbed out towards Zhao Huiyin's chest.

What speed!

Her attacks were already strong enough that they were hard to defend against. On top of that, Jiang Qing'e used her preternatural speed to overwhelm her opponents, outpacing them before they could even summon their best defenses.

Zhao Huiyin continued to back away hurriedly. "Qing'e, are you attacking me there because you're jealous?" She laughed.

Jiang Qing'e smiled mildly and then moved again, fingers jabbing out with enough force to tear the air.

Zhao Huiyin's own curled fingers answered, gleaming in a metal cast. They smashed into Jiang Qing'e's fingers. [1]

Ping!

A tinny sound pinged out from the two girls, shrieking uncomfortably against eardrums.

Around them, nearby rocks were smashed from the impact.

A fissure had even opened up in the ground.

Neither girl backed down. Both attacked with full ferocity, leaving blurry after-images in their wake as they maneuvered around to attack the other's weak points.

Light and metal engaged and disengaged over and over in flashes of gold.

Holes were left behind in the ground, dark with depth.

It was a thrilling fight that took one's breath away. Both were in great danger throughout.

Although both were girls, they fought even more ferociously than the guys.

Ping!

Another terrific clash left a spider web-shaped crack on the ground.

Zhao Huiyin gave a soft cry as she stumbled backwards. She had taken the first hit, her right hand shining with light resonant energy left over from her opponent's attack. Her fingers burned with a searing pain.

Jiang Qing'e's own hand was glittering with metallic power from Zhao Huiyin's attacks as well, but she nullified the metal resonant power swiftly and easily.

A ninth-grade light resonance had the advantage in resonant power quality.

A moment later, Jiang Qing'e was fully recovered. "Looks like my light resonant energy is stronger."

She walked towards Zhao Huiyin, gathering light resonant energy again in her hand like a mini-sun.

Zhao Huiyin's face tightened in fright as Jiang Qing'e moved towards her with steady steps. She scrambled backwards.

But Jiang Qing'e was too quick. Her measured steps were deceptively quick, and in a few short moments, she was in front of Zhao Huiyin. The fistful of light resonant energy smashed down.

Just as Jiang Qing'e lifted her hand, the fear on Zhao Huiyin's face vanished, replaced with a wily smile.

Her cherry-red lips parted, pink tongue now coated with a pale-gold power. On its tip was a golden, conical object.

"Golden Tongue Drill!"

Chapter 0407: Metal Rakshasa

Swish!

The golden, drill-shaped attack tore through the air, spiraling in an aerodynamic twist that made it even faster. All the spectators were completely fooled by Zhao Huiyin. She had faked vulnerability to Jiang

Qing'e's attack and then sprung an ambush. Anyone else in Jiang Qing'e's shoes would have panicked at the sudden twist.

The drill-shaped attack was right in front of Jiang Qing'e's face, close enough to be reflected in her calm, golden eyes. At the last moment, she tilted her head coolly to one side, and the attack passed her.

Pssh!

It whistled past her ear and continued its violent path into the forest behind, where it bore a giant hole through the first tree trunk it ran into.

A line of holes could be seen through all the trees in the drill's path. It flew on, until it finally buried itself deeply in a mountain wall, deeper than they could see.

The penetrative power of Zhao Huiyin's attack was stupendous!

If this had connected, even a Fiend Body expert would probably have been severely injured.

But not even a surprise attack could touch her. Jiang Qing'e had dodged it by the skin of her teeth!

"Whew." Li Luo silently let out his breath. He had a brow full of cold sweat when the sneak attack had been unleashed. Zhao Huiyin had clearly been planning that attack for some time, to put up such a convincing act.

And that attack was crazy!

From the damage it left on the wall, he could tell that the attack had focused all of its destructive power solely on one tiny spot, and not even a defensive gold-eye treasured artifact could have stopped it.

Li Luo was not the only spectator with cold sweat on his brow.

Zhao Huiyin was taken aback that her attack had missed. "Well, Jiang Qing'e's reputation is exactly as the reality is," she said with a sardonic smile.

"Surprise attacks will not work on me," Jiang Qing'e said serenely.

"Light resonances have speed on par with wind and lightning resonances. Indeed, it's hard to catch you off guard." Zhao Huiyin agreed grudgingly. Still, she had thought it would be worth a shot. The payoff of something as deadly as Golden Tongue Drill connecting would have been huge. Many stronger opponents had been lured in before.

Still, Jiang Qing'e's acute sensitivities and speed were not to be taken lightly.

Reacting to the Golden Tongue Drill appropriately in the heat of the moment might be extremely difficult for anyone else, but it was just another easily-read move for Jiang Qing'e.

Zhao Huiyin was retreating speedily again.

She knew that Jiang Qing'e was about to counterattack.

Jiang Qing'e watched her back away. Twisting her fingers together, Jiang Qing'e summoned another thick coil of energy, spreading it out into small light points that floated around her head.

Each point of light began to expand and flatten until they became light mirrors.

Light energy from the environment responded accordingly, gathering naturally on the light mirrors.

Soon, all of the mirrors were sparkling with light energy, like a cluster of flat spotlights around their wielder. They lit up the entire mountain range.

"Sun's Mirror," Jiang Qing'e said softly.

Swoosh!

The mirrors aligned themselves forward, then they shot blasts of light bright enough to make the audience's eyes sting. Many squinted or shielded their eyes.

Even then, they could feel the scorching heat blast past them.

This was light power intense enough to call the power of fire.

Not red flames of traditional fire, but a divine, fiery light.

The heat that was born of pure light.

"What speed!" Zhao Huiyin thought to herself, eyes narrowing as she judged the attack. It was even faster than her Golden Tongue Drill!

So fast that she could not avoid it!

Zhao Huiyin's lips parted, golden light gathering again on her tongue. She fired out another one.

"Golden Tongue Drill!"

The conical screw attack flew out again, smashing into the light rays that were flying her way.

Pssh!

The moment the attacks clashed, the drill attack began to melt at frightening speed. The metal resonant power was burned away, and the drill ground to a halt as its grooves melted down.

This fiery light could even melt resonant power!

Even the elders' eyes widened at the effect. All of them had seen light resonance cultivators in action before, of course. Indeed, light resonance could call the power of heat, when concentrated enough... that was one of its signature powers. But they had never seen a fiery light strong enough to melt resonant power before! Furthermore, Zhao Huiyin's metal resonant power was nothing to sneeze at—she was an upper eighth-grade herself!

Even so, it had not stood up against the fiery light.

Such was the queenly power that Jiang Qing'e's ninth-grade light resonance held.

Zhao Huiyin's dismay was plain to see as she watched her attack liquidized before her eyes. She could feel Jiang Qing'e just one step behind her now. All of her carefully planned tricks and attacks had not posed much of a threat to the golden-haired girl from the Astral Sage College.

Swoosh!

The light rays melted the golden drill completely, then continued on their path towards Zhao Huiyin.

She retreated desperately, gathering golden light on her fingertips. This time, it seemed to flow like liquid.

Zhao Huiyin was no pushover either. She had honed her metal resonant power to excellence as well. Turning solid metal into liquid spoke of her exceptional control over the element.

"Liquid Skymetal!"

Zhao Huiyin flicked out the drop of golden liquid, which expanded into a wave of golden liquid that surged forth to crash against the fiery light.

BOOM!

This time, the heated light was finally stopped.

Zhao Huiyin had no time to feel relieved. The light mirrors above Jiang Qing'e's head glowed again, and a dozen more light rays flew towards her. Her attack had no pomp, no additional flair to it. Just relentless, pure power that was beauty in its own right.

Zhao Huiyin slammed her hands together, digging deep to summon drop after drop of the golden liquid. She gathered them all up in a small sphere and then curled up within it.

The liquid metal was rapidly cut away by ray after ray from Jiang Qing'e.

BOOM!

The fiery light rained down on the molten sphere around Zhao Huiyin.

The intense heat left the ground unharmed. It was a unique fire that did not harm objects, but would sear flesh badly and even incinerate bone.

Part of it was due to the special nature of this fire; it used the victim's body as fuel, growing stronger upon contact.

The flames of light had completely caged Zhao Huiyin now. Everyone was watching closely. Surely the outcome would be decided here, right?

Jiang Qing'e narrowed her eyes and poured on the fire.

Weng!

Suddenly, a scythe of metallic power burst out of the nimbus of light, slicing the flames of light into two.

A figure leaped out of its midst.

The audience could not believe their eyes, watching in amazement.

Zhao Huiyin landed on the ground, her neatly-tied hair now loose and wild. Metallic ripples of power flowed over her glassy body, and she now had a golden pole scimitar in her hands.

She slammed the curved blade into the ground with monstrous strength.

Her arched and coy eyes now had a demonic look to them, a cold, crazed energy that made them twitch.

Zhao Huiyin looked like a completely different person from before.

A more dangerous one.

Lu Cāng and the other Blue Abyss Sage College students leaned back and smiled in relief.

"So she's pulled it out..."

"Senior Zhao's true trump card, the weapon that once created a slaughter in Blue Abyss..."

"The Metal Rakshasa."

Chapter 0408: I am a Fiend Finisher

When Zhao Huiyin leaped out with the pole scimitar, the whole audience shouted with excitement.

"What? What?! Her resonant power is even stronger than before!"

"Look at her eyes! There's something wrong with her eyes!"

"Must be her trump card. Jiang Qing'e's pushed her to her limit now!"

"Trump card, frump card. My belief in Sister Jiang will not be shaken!"

"Of course! Senior Jiang has never been beaten ever since she entered the Astral Sage College!"

The Astral Sage College students shouted excitedly, still rallying behind their champion.

"Leader, she looks like a completely different person... like me when I'm researching spirit liquids and purifying lights," Bai Mengmeng said thoughtfully.

"Indeed." Li Luo agreed. "I think she must have cultivated some secret technique to seal off her emotions. Her eyes look real dead right now. In return, it pushes her to some sort of super state that enhances her strength."

"Can Senior Jiang deal with it?" Bai Mengmeng asked worriedly.

Zhao Huiyin looked inhuman right now. Bai Mengmeng was right to be worried.

Li Luo looked over at Jiang Qing'e. She was watching the transformed Zhao Huiyin closely as well. She looked surprised and curious to test her opponent, but there was no fear to be seen.

Zhao Huiyin posed a little bit of interest in her advanced state.

"Not even I know how much power Jiang Qing'e is truly hiding. When her opponent is on the same cultivation level... I'm not sure anyone in the whole East Divine Continent could beat her." Li Luo grinned. Although an unprecedented change in circumstances was always unsettling, he just didn't see Jiang Qing'e losing.

He might not know the extent to which she kept her power concealed, but he had a good idea of her potential.

Even he, chasing with all his might and powered by his dual resonances, sometimes despaired when he thought about catching up to her. She was truly a monster.

He sometimes wondered if his parents had purposely found this plump swan monster-genius and brought her back to spur him onwards.

Jiang Qing'e ignored the oohs and aahs of the crowd. She bent her finger again, eyes still locked on Zhao Huiyin.

Above her head, the light mirrors again shot a ray of fiery light.

Zhao Huiyin took two small steps and leaped up into the air, pole scimitar swishing down in a grand strike that called forth a crescent slash of power several dozen meters long. It crashed into the fiery light.

BOOM!

Like fireworks, they exploded with sound and fury.

This time, Zhao Huiyin managed to block the fiery light successfully.

She did not stop there, rushing Jiang Qing'e as she charged her weapon with metal resonant power. The long weapon swept out in a wicked slash.

With a flick of her wrist, Jiang Qing'e summoned her own heavy sword.

Bringing the broad blade up expertly, she angled it perpendicularly and took the impact head-on.

Clang! Clang!

They were locked in a furious clash of weapons, exchanging dozens of breathless strikes and parries. They bent and swayed accordingly, perfect footwork supporting perfect form as they weaved in and out of their deadly dance.

Zhao Huiyin had not dared to attack Jiang Qing'e before, but her special state had elevated her to a comparable level.

Neither seemed inclined to outclass their opponent with any form of advanced tactic. They threw raw power at each other, brutal clash after brutal clash that showed no signs of slowing.

Everything in their path was destroyed.

The students could not take their eyes off the fight. They barely dared to breathe or make a sound as they watched the spellbinding fight unraveling before them. Even though the last two matches had been between higher level cultivators, the First Princess' match had been a one-sided attack, while Gong Shenjun's match had been even less of a show, over in one attack.

Zhao Huiyin had been handily crushed at the start, but now she had revealed new power that seemed to put her on par with Jiang Qing'e.

"Zhao Huiyin's true strength is very close to the third substage, the Fiend Finisher Tier." The elders agreed among themselves.

"The Blue Abyss Sage College's foundations run deep indeed. Such a fine young student has a bright future ahead of her."

"But Jiang Qing'e is fighting with restraint. She's dealing with Zhao Huiyin's aggression efficiently. It seems like she still has skill and power to spare... just how deep do her capabilities run?"

"She seems to be relishing the fight, enjoying the little bit of entertainment that Zhao Huiyin provides... What a fearsome girl, Jiang Qing'e."

"This situation won't last long. The competition time is almost up. Jiang Qing'e will probably not allow a draw against Zhao Huiyin."

While the elders discussed the fight, the two girls were increasing the pace, smashing their environment around them into gravel in the process.

Clang!

Another hard clash.

Jiang Qing'e effortlessly swung her gigantic sword in an attack powerful enough to crack the ground. Zhao Huiyin parried, the shaft of her pole scimitar wobbling dangerously as if it were about to break. The latter was sent flying backwards, her cold eyes surveying her opponent constantly.

"Time is almost up. Is that all you have?" Jiang Qing'e asked serenely. A small smile, almost a smirk.

The Zhao Huiyin from the start of the battle would have said something back, some banter, some taunt perhaps... but she was all business now. Her hands tightened on the pole scimitar's shaft.

Shifting one hand up, she deliberately cut her finger on the blade, allowing fresh blood to seep into it. There was a deep, golden gash on the blade, almost like a golden eye.

Clearly, this pole scimitar was also a gold-eye treasured artifact. No wonder it was so strong.

With the addition of blood, the pole scimitar shuddered as if awakening. Thin, crimson lines were starting to emerge, running across the blade and down the shaft.

There was a new frequency to the vibration of the worldly natural energy as it rushed to Zhao Huiyin's weapon. An even bigger pole scimitar silhouette appeared behind Zhao Huiyin, an image hundreds of meters tall that wavered in the air.

It was so high that it even reached the clouds, the blade glittering gold in the blue sky like a sun.

Sword qi filled the air.

Many of the Fiend Finisher Tier Four Star Hall students watched in amazement. Many of them were at the same level. They were supposed to be the strongest students, just below the Seven Astral Pillars.

But even they could sense the immense threat of that attack.

Zhao Huiyin was only at the Fiend Body Tier, and yet she was dangerous even to them!

She opened her mouth to release a metallic hiss.

Her eyes glittered coldly, and she began the chop down.

"Jiang Qing'e, this attack can even cleave Fiend Finishers."

Weng!

As her blade clashed down, the image of power behind her descended as well.

An eerie whistling sound accompanied the falling weapon, which gathered more power and speed as it fell.

Even before it landed, the aura of energy around the blade was denting the ground.

Jiang Qing'e waited below, looking insignificant in comparison.

Jiang Qing'e looked up, almost admiring the attack. This attack was indeed the best Zhao Huiyin had. Even ordinary Fiend Finisher cultivators might be finished off by this move.

Defeating an enemy above your tier was always the mark of a genius.

But still...

This was all that Zhao Huiyin had.

Jiang Qing'e raised her own heavy sword, her lips curling up in a smile.

"Can even cleave Fiend Finishers..."

"I am a Fiend Finisher. And you cannot cleave me."

A wild burst of light energy spilled out of her giant sword as Jiang Qing'e swung it up in a ferocious swipe.

Swoosh!

A column of fiery light roared up from the ground!

Even the elders gasped at this attack.

They could sense that Jiang Qing'e's attack was packed with great skill.

There was a macabre-green tint to the light, a new power not seen up till now.

That was... Fiend Dipper Energy!

Jiang Qing'e had already reached the Fiend Finisher Tier!

Chapter 0409: The Invincible Senior Jiang

The two mighty blades crossed along the horizon, a majestic clash of gold that bordered the blackened ground and azure sky.

The audience watched with bated breath, knowing that the victor would be decided at this moment.

Zhao Huiyin's descending slash had felt like the sun setting on the day, but now Jiang Qing'e had brought a new dawn with her own upward slash, showing a glimpse of her true power.

Fiend Finisher Tier!

That strike with Fiend Dipper Energy seemed to cut the blue dome of the sky itself.

Zhao Huiyin's slash might be able to cut down ordinary Fiend Finisher cultivators, but Jiang Qing'e was anything but ordinary.

BOOM!

Smaller pieces of the sword attacks shattered on impact, slicing through everything in the vicinity.

They smashed into the viewing platform, splintering the outer structure easily.

The Violet Vibrance mentors intervened before the students were hurt, using a combination of their resonant powers to shield the entire area and repair the structures.

The students had faith in their mentors covering their safety—most barely took their eyes off the battle.

The two attacks grated against each other, expending their energies in a thrilling struggle to the finish.

The stalemate did not last long. The light resonant attack charged with macabre green energy was clearly stronger. After a few moments, Zhao Huiyin's giant sword attacks started to waver, cracks spreading across the blade.

Jiang Qing'e looked down.

She knew the battle was over.

Clang!

The curved blade gave a final creak, then it shattered into pieces.

Swoosh!

The green energy on Jiang Qing'e's strike did not lessen at all when it cleared through the other attack. It flew on towards Zhao Huiyin.

The Blue Abyss girl's petite frame was a pitiful sight as the attack bore down on her.

The velocity of the attack pushed the air ahead of it in a powerful gust that blew wildly against Zhao Huiyin's hair. The cold, emotionless light in her eyes was also blown away, leaving only terror in its wake.

She resigned herself to the terrible attack that would soon connect.

Clang!

Just as the strike was about to land, Jiang Qing'e clenched her fist and changed the deadly, slicing strike into a blunt, rounded force. It punched into Zhao Huiyin, sending her flying backwards, winded but unharmed.

Her cry of pain was cut short as she felt a sharp tug on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes cautiously, only to see that Jiang Qing'e had pulled her away by the hand.

"You..." Jiang Qing'e saving her was the last thing she expected.

Jiang Qing'e let go of her hand. "You've lost," she stated simply.

"You should've told me you were a Fiend Finisher already." Zhao Huiyin pouted. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have bothered fighting. What a waste of effort."

"Oh, you're not too bad. Better than our Duze Honglian. At least you interested me a little."

Zhao Huiyin was speechless. What was she, a warm up?! The gap between them was actually huge! Jiang Qing'e had been toying with her.

She sighed. "If only you had come to the Blue Abyss Sage College," Zhao Huiyin said with a suggestive look in her eyes. She stepped closer.

"Jiang Qing'e, you stir me. Ditch Li Luo. Snatch House Luolan. Be the house lord, and I'll join you the moment I graduate!"

"Looks like you need another beating," Jiang Qing'e said casually.

"So fierce..." Zhao Huiyin pouted. "I'm serious. That Li Luo kid isn't your match. I can't stand seeing a swan like yourself with a toad like him. I'll bet he can't even beat Lu Cāng."

"You're not the first to underestimate Li Luo," Jiang Qing'e told her. "And you won't be the last. But you'll find many others to keep you company in the little pit of regret you find yourself in."

Zhao Huiyin shrugged. "See for yourself, then."

Jiang Qing'e ignored her, turning to face the Violet Vibrance mentors on the dais.

The mentors understood that Zhao Huiyin had run out of steam in the middle of the fight, so they nodded in understanding.

"Three Star Hall, the first round winner is Jiang Qing'e from the Astral Sage College!"

"Wow!"

"Senior Jiang, you're the coolest!"

"Senior Jiang, you're the best!"

The cheers rang out enthusiastically for the goddess of the Astral Sage College. Her reputation for being invincible made her loved.

With this, she was probably the equal of the First Princess and Gong Shenjun in terms of reputation now.

The two were indeed watching her closely, their thoughts on their outstanding junior.

"Junior Jiang's skills never fail to amaze me." Gong Shenjun sighed with admiration. "At this speed, she'll really reach the Heavenly Dipper General Stage by the end of the year. I wonder which unlucky Seven Astral Pillar member she'll target."

The First Princess smiled. "She might be the strongest Three Star Hall student in the whole East Divine Continent. If she formally takes that title at the Holy Grail Meet, the Astral Sage College will have really made a name for itself."

"Well, the other sage colleges will come well prepared too," Gong Shenjun cautioned. "A ninth-grade resonance is rare, but there's no guarantee that she's unique in this generation. Still, she's one of the hot favorites for sure."

The First Princess nodded, looking at Jiang Qing'e in approval.

In a few years, she would be one of the powers in the Xia Kingdom for sure. Given the opportunity, she would leave the Xia Kingdom behind for greater stages.

Although resonance grade was not the end-all be-all of accomplishment, Jiang Qing'e had the required character and effort to utilize it well. She had led House Luolan through turbulent times at a young age, displaying uncommon political acumen, hard work, and charisma in the process. From all angles, the First Princess found something to admire about Jiang Qing'e.

"Luanyu, you've become quite close with Junior Jiang recently, haven't you?" Gong Shenjun asked with a sudden smile.

"Of course I want to be friends with her," the First Princess replied lightly.

"Royal Brother, are you..." she raised her eyebrows.

Although Gong Shenjun had not shown any overt inclination so far, the First Princess could read him well enough.

He smiled innocently. "A winsome and talented lady. Is it not reasonable for all gentlemen to chase such a treasure?"

"Junior Jiang is outstanding, and as a hot-blooded male, it's normal for me to take interest."

The First Princess gave him a small smile. "I'm sure you've been observing Li Luo for the last half a year as well. His relationship with Jiang Qing'e goes deeper than you can imagine."

Gong Shenjun's smile faded a little. He swung away from her to rest his hands on the rail in front, a complex look in his eyes.

He had to admit that the relationship between the pair was not to be underestimated. In the beginning, he had thought it an engagement only in name, but in the last six months, their feelings for each other had been plain to see.

Jiang Qing'e was usually easy enough to approach, but with her cool manner, all who tried came away with the sense that they were talking to her through some sort of glass wall. She was beautiful and courteous, but no heat passed the wall.

Especially towards admirers.

Till date, all sorts of admirers with all sorts of charms had tried all sorts of methods to woo Jiang Qing'e. The results were all the same. They ended up not even being able to be friends.

This was also the reason why Gong Shenjun had not made a move yet. An occasional chat was all he had managed, and he had seen no opening to pull their relationship closer.

All of this was because of Li Luo's arrival.

Jiang Qing'e was very considerate towards his feelings.

"Junior Li Luo is really lucky," Gong Shenjun said slowly.

"Indeed," the First Princess said. "Although, if you look at the state of House Luolan, perhaps all is balanced.

"Royal Brother, I'm afraid you stand no chance with Qing'e. Best wrap up those feelings and give up soon. Chase someone else."

Gong Shenjun just smiled.

There was a calculating look in the First Princess' eyes. Advice to such a guy was rarely helpful. In fact, it was usually counterproductive, spurring him on to take it as a challenge. The effect was all the more stronger with guys like Gong Shenjun, who were used to winning all the time.

Which the First Princess was counting on.

If Gong Shenjun tried something, she was counting on Jiang Qing'e to break things off with him completely. That would only push Jiang Qing'e closer to her.

She did not want to see Jiang Qing'e closer to the Regent.

Of course, Gong Shenjun also had a shrewd sense. He might be wise enough not to bite on her baited advice, but there was no harm in leaving some crumbs for an attempt.

The First Princess focused back on the arena. The Astral Sage College now held the lead in the ticket match, but they were due for a real slump now. It depended on whether their subsequent representatives could hold up against their opponents. A level fight was all they needed to win.

Chapter 0410: Turning Tides

The fight between Jiang Qing'e and Zhao Huiyin had brought the ticket match to a sweltering climax, and the cheers swelled again and again.

"The first three fights are our strongest. This is not a surprising outcome, and the real difficulty comes in the next few," Li Luo commented.

"Excluding our One Star Hall fight, there are three more fights to be taken by Duze Honglian, Zhu Xuan, and Ye Qiuding. As long as those three can secure one win and one draw, the ticket match will be ours."

Lu Qing'er and sidled up alongside Bai Mengmeng to be near Li Luo. They were two of the great beauties of the One Star Hall, one cool and elegant, the other pure and cute. Put together, they covered just about all that any hot-blooded male student could ask for. "If it turns out that way, you won't even need to fight," Lu Qing'er replied. If the result was decided in the next three rounds, then the One Star Hall outcome would not matter.

Li Luo shrugged. "It doesn't matter if I fight or not. As long as we get the ticket. This isn't the main show anyway. That'd be the Holy Grail Meet itself."

Lu Qing'er nodded. "Would be a shame though," she said with a mischievous smile. "We should let them know just how strong you are. The Astral Sage College is not just a monster in the Three Star Hall fights—we have Senior Jiang's equal here in the One Star Hall too."

The students around them who overheard this remark gave her strange looks. Although Li Luo had done well for himself, it seemed overblown to say he was on the same level as the invincible Jiang Qing'e.

Still, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e had such a special relationship that not even the students knew where to begin breaking it down. They decided to keep their mouths shut.

Lu Qing'er ignored them. She knew for herself that she was not exaggerating, but speaking from the heart.

Jiang Qing'e was awesome, but Li Luo was right there beside her.

Especially in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. Lu Qing'er was one of the few who knew what he had accomplished inside.

Li Luo smiled almost shyly to her, but he did not reply. Instead, they all turned back to the arena, where Duze Honglian was now walking out.

As the second best in the Three Star Hall after Jiang Qing'e, Duze Honglian was strong herself, although her light was often eclipsed by Jiang Qing'e's brilliance.

It was bad luck for her to have been in the same year as Jiang Qing'e.

All eyes were on her as she took to the field. She was extremely pretty in her own right, and today she was clad in a black bodysuit, trimmed cleanly to give her complete freedom of movement. In her hand was a red-scaled longsword. Tall and leggy, she had a suppleness in her lithe figure that hinted at power behind her grace. And with her cool beauty, she was still a real prize put up against any girl.

The Blue Abyss Sage College's Three Star Hall representative Yan Tai had taken to the field as well. His weapon was also red, although it was a long pole. He was grinning widely.

Neither bothered to exchange words. They fired up their resonant powers immediately.

An interesting note was that both Duze Honglian and Yan Tai were fire resonance users. Facing each other, it almost looked like a performance rather than a fight.

The starting bell rang out, and the inferno roared to life around the two competitors.

A fiery atmosphere with fiery powers.

Duze Honglian and Yan Tai were perhaps the matchup with the closest power levels. Both were at the Gold Fiend Tier, and they also had the same resonance. The deciding factor would be who had the greater trump card. [1]

They viciously tore into each other, and injuries were soon evident on both.

Neither Duze Honglian nor Yan Tai showed the slightest indication of backing down. Instead, they doubled their firepower.

Fire was an ethereal element. It had little real substance, and it was hard to wield defensively. Neither fighter chose that route, instead harnessing its destructive powers to its full potential.

The spectators on both sides only grew more and more concerned as the battle continued. Both were covered in horrific burns, even on their Fiend bodies. Their movements were starting to grow sluggish as they stubbornly tried not to succumb to their wounds.

It was a gory, brutal fight, far more so than any of the previous battles.

The round was now a battle of wills.

The Astral Sage College students were baying loudly, shouting their support for Duze Honglian.

Li Luo winced a little in sympathy. He was quite surprised by Duze Honglian as well. He had not expected her to have such a strong battle will.

"Seems like Senior Jiang laid a lot of pressure on her," Lu Qing'er said perceptively.

Li Luo nodded thoughtfully. Duze Honglian was a strong character herself. Jiang Qing'e had not just won, she had won with astounding aplomb. If Duze Honglian lost here, it would be doubly devastating.

She did not want to lose too badly to Jiang Qing'e.

Even if she could not bring the Astral Sage College a win, she didn't want to take home a loss either.

"Yan Tai is very closely matched with her," Li Luo said, scratching his chin. "It's hard to call the outcome, but if this continues, I think it's likely that it ends in a draw.

"A gruesome draw," he added.

"Senior Duze is very strong too," Bai Mengmeng said admiringly.

Li Luo nodded. Even though he did not get along with her well on the daily, her current performance deserved praise.

At the same time, over at the Blue Abyss Sage College contingent.

Zhao Huiyin, Zhong Nan, and the others were also watching the battle closely.

"This Duze Honglian is harder to deal with than I thought," Zhao Huiyin said with a pang of regret. "A pity. I thought Yan Tai would win by a narrow margin."

"Duze Honglian is not as famous as Jiang Qing'e, but then again, who is? She is still not to be underestimated." Zhong Nan agreed gravely.

"Well, still. None of this is out of our expectations. We still stand a chance." She lolled her head back to look at Lu Cāng, and stretched out a hand to pat him on the shoulder. "We've done our best to pave you an even runway now. Go on and take flight."

Lu Cāng smiled breezily at her. "Don't worry, Senior Zhao.

"If it reaches that final battle, I won't let you down."

The battle raged on.

Towards the end, the wounds were so horrendous that many averted or closed their eyes.

But finally the battle ended.

Duze Honglian's sword sank into Yan Tai's belly at the same time as his own red staff smashed with a sickening crack against her back in a roundhouse smash. Mouthfuls of blood sprayed from both, then they toppled to the ground.

As predicted.

A draw.

People hurried onto the battlefield to pull them out.

The applause rang out, thunderous and solemn.

Both of them deserved to be honored for their fight.

The battle continued.

Still, the Astral Sage College had viewed the last fight quite optimistically, but the next two fights left them completely frozen in silence.

Because...

Both of the Two Star Hall representatives lost their fights.