

Resonance 421

Chapter 0421: School Prize

On the fifth day after the ticket match, Li Luo finally reached his favorite part of any competition.

Prize presentation.

Although the ticket match had helped his reputation soar, Li Luo didn't really care. If you had a soaring reputation and a potion worth 10 skygold, you could trade it for 10 skygold.

He was a greedy, materialistic rascal, and what he wanted was to see the inside of the school vault.

That had been his only goal from the start. "I want a gold-eye treasured artifact in my pocket now, please."

What he really wanted was a twin sword type gold-eye treasured artifact. Even his backup pair had been shattered in the fight with Lu Cāng. And as his opponents got stronger, it was going to be critical to have a proper weapon. A gold-eye treasured artifact would have a marked boost to his fighting ability, which he urgently needed.

He could not possibly be using his Lambent Hawkeye all the time, especially in close combat. Although it was a gilded white-eye treasured artifact with a rather solid build, bows were not built to tank things. And if it was whittled down, it might be broken for its actual purpose of shooting arrows. He'd have to spend both time and effort repairing it.

He didn't want to have to fight gingerly at the Holy Grail Meet. Which was why he needed a complete arsenal.

Li Luo had actually prepared backups. He'd asked Cai Wei to help him search as well, although twin sword gold-eye treasured artifacts were few and far between, and cost a bomb. House Luolan's finances might be healthier than they had been for a long time, but lavish spending would quickly put them back in the red. Which was why Li Luo had been eying the school vault this whole time. Ample options, all for free. Perfect.

Li Luo was happily skipping alongside his mentor down the school boulevard.

Chi Chan swept her robes behind her with a hand, striding forward as aloof as ever. Still, Li Luo could sense that she had been in a good mood for the last few days.

"Mentor, have I given you a lot of face?" He grinned at her impudently.

She stared at him. "How thick-skinned must you be to fish for compliments like that?" she demanded exasperatedly.

"Mentor, it is more important to be honest than humble," Li Luo said piously.

There was amusement in her eyes, and she did not refute his question. "You did well. You didn't let me down.

"But I'm in a good mood not just because of that. It's also because Shen Jinxiao is in a bad mood."

Li Luo chuckled. Any bad news for Shen Jinxiao was good news for them.

They spoke happily about the subject, united by their hatred.

The commute passed cheerfully, and they reached the school vault before long.

The vault was shaped like a giant tortoise, built after the symbol of defense. Its mouth was stretched open, bronze doors shaped like inner beaks closing it tight. The tortoise's shell shimmered in the sunlight, a mesmerizing yet intimidating dome that imparted life into the building.

There was already a line of people waiting outside the vault. Li Luo recognized Jiang Qing'e, the First Princess, Gong Shenjun, and a few others.

Including him, there were seven—the representatives of the ticket match.

"Why are Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding here as well?" Li Luo remarked witheringly. Those two had been defeated in the ticket match, almost costing them the ticket match. The psychological pressure on Li Luo had been huge in the last match.

Why were they being rewarded as well?

"Well, the bigger reason remains unchanged," Chi Chan answered. "The school wants to raise the overall level of all the students before the Holy Grail Meet. Giving out treasured artifacts is the most crude way, but it's nevertheless straightforward and effective. Of course, the school has its principles as well—excessive rewards will be reproached by other schools."

"Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding had barely adequate performances. The school will not give them gold-eye treasured artifacts. They will probably get gilded white-eyes at best. In the end, it was you that carried the school through to the ticket. Without it, the school would have no further incentive to help them along," she said softly. Li Luo flexed his arms belligerently. So these guys were riding on his coattails to glory?!

"Keke, our ticket match hero finally arrives." The First Princess smiled at him elegantly.

The others looked over as well.

"Your Highness, please don't paint a target on my back. If not for you seniors who laid down the foundation, my match would have counted for nothing," Li Luo said, hastily turning down the idea of being a hero. The idea was so highbrow, it would be like skewering him and hanging him over the fire to roast.

"Your Highness, please don't bully him." Jiang Qing'e laughed.

"Are you protecting your beloved?" the First Princess demanded, a teasing elbow bumping up against Jiang Qing'e.

"Who wouldn't," Jiang Qing'e replied directly.

Duze Honglian pursed her lips.

Gong Shenjun watched the exchange with a polite smile.

Vice Principal Su Xin coughed lightly to get their attention. She had a warm smile on her face today, and they lit her kind features well. The students felt comforted by her.

"Well, I'm sure all of you know why we are gathered here, so I won't belay the point. I hope you all find suitable treasured artifacts."

She gestured simply with her hand, sending a pulse of resonant power forward. It twisted itself midair into a complex rune that floated towards the bronze doors.

The mark pressed itself into the bronze door, spreading against it like a coat of phosphorescent paint on the metal.

A moment later, the doors started to vibrate. Deeper in the corridor that was the turtle's neck, a low roar rumbled the building.

Slowly, the bronze doors opened.

Vice Principal Su Xin led the way in. Li Luo and the others looked around happily at each other, and followed eagerly.

They walked past a long corridor of stone, with ceiling-to-floor glass panes lining up along the walls. Behind them they could see heaps of treasure, but these were mainly white-eye treasured artifacts, and not particularly interesting.

Still, seeing mountains and mountains of these cheaper treasured artifacts was a titillating sight.

Li Luo was reasonably cool-headed about it. After all, he had seen an even more ridiculous amount back in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. It gave him some immunity against losing his head to greed.

They followed Vice Principal Su Xin down the corridor, struck by the enormity of the wealth that lined their way forward.

They soon ended up in a large hall, where ten stone pillars stood. On top of each pillar was a nimbus of light, and what was within made their breath catch in their throats.

Energy was being attracted to the nimbuses, as were the students' gazes.

Ten golden eyes.

Mouthwatering golden eyes.

Ten gold-eye treasured artifacts...

Li Luo was seized with an urge to steal them all.

Chapter 0422: Choose Your Weapon

Each of the ten stone pillars had worldly natural energy gravitating towards their peak, creating a glorious sight of energy orbs in the air above them.

Li Luo saw that the nimbuses of light were irregularly shaped, each one changing slightly to wrap around the sword or armor or whatever piece of equipment they held inside.

"So these are genuine gold-eye treasured artifacts," Li Luo thought to himself. These treasured artifacts had energy auras that far surpassed his Lambent Hawkeye. Moreover, he could sense sentience in the pieces of gear above him. Which meant that they were consciously pulling the worldly natural energy towards them, breathing and absorbing it.

These gold-eye treasured artifacts were, in a sense, alive. Only the First Princess and Gong Shenjun were less awed. Given their status as royalty, gold-eye treasured artifacts were rare but not wonders that would make them gawp. The poor kids like Li Luo, on the other hand, were drooling out both sides of the mouth at the same time.

Even Jiang Qing'e was excited. Although her Imperial Fortress Sword was also a gold-eye treasured artifact, that was the only one she had. Of course she would not mind another.

The others were eying the pillars hungrily as well, with the exception of Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding, who knew they would not be getting these treasures. They could only wait for the winners to finish choosing before they humbly accepted what gilded white-eyes the school deigned to provide. Still, a free gilded white-eye was not a bad thing, although it was definitely not on the same level as a gold-eye.

Still, they had contributed nothing at all to the win. If not for the others, they wouldn't even be in the vault right now.

In other words, Li Luo had given them this gilded white-eye.

Given their petty natures, it wasn't in either of them to show him any gratitude.

Which Li Luo did not care about. If he had their gratitude and 10 skygold, that just meant he could buy a spirit liquid priced at 10 skygold. Their gratitude? Pfff.

He was more interested in the school's gratitude, which was worth one gold-eye treasured artifact. Still, he was disappointed when he saw that there were no twin-sword type treasured artifacts among the ten.

It was an outcome to be expected. After all, twin swords had to be forged separately, which meant they technically counted as two gold-eye treasured artifacts. Whether in terms of price or rarity, they were a whole notch higher than other weapons.

Li Luo's previous pair had just been normal resonant artifacts, not even white-eyes. Of course they were easy to find. But at the gold-eye level, it would be naive to think that they might be lying around in just any armory.

Li Luo had been mentally prepared for this outcome, and he was ready to settle for a single sword instead.

That was much easier to find.

There were two sword-type treasured artifacts among the ten. He squinted at the fine lettering that hung in the air, describing the weapons.

"Frosty Cave Sword, gold-eye treasured artifact. Made from frozen subterranean ore, harnessing the dual powers of frost and metal with a sleek finish. Known as the Ice Cutter." The sapphire-blue sword

winked with cold light that was dulled through the misty, cool air that hung around it like a block of dry ice.

"Ink Scale Sword, gold-eye treasured artifact. Made from the ink scale fishes that roam the depths of the Eastern Sea. Their knife-like bodies are covered in black scales. Usually swarming in hundreds, if not thousands, they move swiftly where the current takes them. Even Dukes hide from their sheer number."

The Ink Scale Sword was a shorter and thinner blade. At regular frequencies, a flash of light would dart down the blade, creating a thin cut in the space beyond its point.

Li Luo barely paused on the Frosty Cave Sword, because it was not very compatible with him. He had resonant powers aplenty, but none of them were ice. He would not be able to bring out its powers efficiently. The Ink Scale Sword, however... that one piqued his interest.

The black light almost hurt his eyes when he stared at it.

Such a sharp and powerful edge, it would serve him far better than the pair of sharp sticks that he had been using before.

He liked it more the more he thought about it.

"Do you want these two?" Jiang Qing'e's voice was by his ear.

"We can take one each," she said, blinking questioningly at him. He felt his heart skip a beat.

"No, no need," he said hastily. "You need the gold-eye treasured artifacts here too. There's no need to waste it on two swords."

"Don't you prefer dual swords?"

"Given my cultivation level, I don't think I could handle two gold-eye treasured artifacts if they weren't of the same make. Might as well focus my strength on one weapon."

Jiang Qing'e thought about it and then nodded. Li Luo was right. Gold-eye treasured artifacts were strong, but they wore down on the user's resonant power significantly as well. At the Evolving Resonance Tier, Li Luo would not be able to power two of them.

"Alright, then. Actually, I've always thought of getting you a gold-eye treasured artifact. After all, mine came from Master and Mistress, but you never got one." She smiled at him.

"That sounds suspiciously like bragging," Li Luo grumbled.

"Is it?" She opened her golden eyes much wider than usual in feigned innocence. Li Luo rolled his own eyes. "Black-hearted white swan."

"Found anything you like?" he changed the subject.

She pointed towards a pillar where three golden pearls lay. Each had a small line down the middle, making them look like closed eyes.

He looked at the writing.

"Three Golden Pearl Eyes, gold-eye treasured artifact. Powered by resonant power, and it can weaken or negate resonant power in turn. Once it enters the opponent's body, their resonant power will be rapidly nullified. The destructive light comes in three hues, and a combination of the three can disable the opponent completely."

Li Luo admired it for a moment. It was quite a unique treasured artifact, suitable for a unique fighter like Jiang Qing'e. She would become an even greater force to be feared with it.

The school had clearly prepared this room carefully, with an eye on what the students might need for the Holy Grail Meet.

While Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were admiring weapons, Vice Principal Su Xin walked up to Gong Shenjun and the First Princess. "I know you two don't lack gold-eye treasured artifacts, but this is a mark of the school's appreciation. Choose anything."

Gong Shenjun gave her a sudden, curious smile. "Anything?"

The First Princess's eyebrows raised up.

Vice Principal Su Xin started, then nodded. "Anything."

Gong Shenjun grinned more widely. "Well, since the Vice Principal has spoken so generously, then I can't be blamed for being greedy."

She nodded knowingly.

They had spoken at a normal volume, and the others were near enough to overhear this conversation. They looked over curiously, wondering what Gong Shenjun meant. Indeed, ten gold-eye treasured artifacts seemed quite little...?

Gong Shenjun strode over to the back of the hall and reached out towards an object protruding from the wall.

It was a long handle, gray and unremarkable. No one had even paid it any attention before Gong Shenjun.

Gong Shenjun eagerly moved towards it.

Li Luo felt his heartbeat quicken.

That long handle... it might be a hilt...

He shared a look of astonishment with Jiang Qing'e.

There was a sword buried in the wall!

Chapter 423: Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade

With everyone watching in astonishment, Gong Shenjun halted before the wall, looking at the hilt with clear excitement.

"What is that?!" Duze Honglian asked.

Neither Jiang Qing'e nor Li Luo knew, but they could sense that there was something unusual about that hilt. Although it was covered in dust, a burnished gold tint shone through from underneath. There was no energy aura around the weapon, unlike the others on the stone pillars, and yet it somehow felt dangerous.

This sword-in-the-wall in the middle of the schools' treasure vault was clearly nothing ordinary.

It was the First Princess who explained it to them. "If I'm not wrong, that should be the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade. Made from the Golden-Jade Onyx Elephant's tusk, it's said to channel the beast's rampage in its offensive power, enough to carve a mountain in two."

"Gold-eye treasured artifact, huh?" Li Luo repeated to himself.

He was a little disappointed. For such a mysteriously hidden sword, he expected it to be a violet-eye treasured artifact. Or at least a gilded gold-eye? Just a gold-eye treasured artifact.

It wasn't that he thought gold-eye treasured artifacts were any less valuable. It was just that such a huge reaction from a guy like Gong Shenjun had shot his expectations up all the way to the moon.

Gong Shenjun was the son of the Regent after all. He surely had expensive tastes, and wouldn't want more gold-eye treasured artifacts.

"Is there something special about the history of the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade?" Jiang Qing'e asked carefully.

The First Princess laughed softly. It was Vice Principal Su Xin who answered with a smile. "This was once the partner weapon of the Principal."

The students' eyes widened. The Principal!

The weapon once used by a King?

Suddenly, there was prickly excitement in the air. Even Jiang Qing'e was slightly flushed.

"The Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade was with the Principal for the longest time and witnessed his growth. When the Principal reached the King Stage, the weapon was no longer as useful for him, so he sealed it here. In terms of grade, it is indeed only a gold-eye treasured artifact. But it has a particularly sharp sentience after being with the Principal for so long. In fact, he left it here in the vault with the hopes that the other gold-eye treasured artifacts would nurture it further."

"Besides that, Kings' possessions have a lingering aura called King Qi. Being constantly exposed to it helps to lengthen the path of one's future growth."

The excitement in the air only heated up further with Vice Principal Su Xin's explanation.

This sword was hella good! No wonder Gong Shenjun was so worked up over it.

"Information about the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade has been kept rather quiet. But I guess nothing slips past you two," Su Xin said to the royal pair. From Gong Shenjun's reaction, he had clearly been aiming for the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade since the beginning.

"Vice Principal, you're really willing to let us take the blade?" the First Princess asked.

"Like I said, anything here can be chosen. Since you have found the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade, of course it is also one of the options on the table. I will not stop you," she confirmed with a smile.

"I," she emphasized, "will not stop you.

"But can you pull it out from the wall?"

They stopped short at that question.

Was it so hard to remove a blade from a wall?

"Like I said, this blade possesses sentience far beyond other gold-eye treasured artifacts, and it has King Qi lingering on it. Moreover, it has been joined to the treasure vault for a long time now. It will not be easy to remove.

"If you are interested in it, you may try, of course. Whoever pulls it out can select it."

"Well, I'll give it a try, then," Gong Shenjun said with a broad smile. No one raised any objection. He had been the one to raise the idea first, so it only seemed fair that he got to go first.

Li Luo bit the inner wall of his cheek. Of course he was tempted by the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade as well. Still, he felt like these waters were too deep for him. If even Gong Shenjun failed, how could he possibly succeed? Rumble!

While Li Luo was lost in his own thoughts, Gong Shenjun had already gotten down to action. He was rapidly bringing his resonant power to bear, summoning all of his heavenly pearls.

With a deft rotation of the wrist, he cleared all of the dust from the hilt, leaving its original, burnished gold color exposed.

Gong Shenjun laid his palm carefully on the hilt and hesitated. He could feel a strong resistance from the weapon. He wrapped his fingers deliberately and slowly around it.

The shriek of metal rang out shrilly in the air.

Gong Shenjun's face was grim as he pressed on. His scaled-dragon power coated his arm, and his veins bulged.

His heavenly pearls started to settle on his hand, studding it like stars.

Everyone could feel the incredible power in his right hand.

One punch from this arm would split rivers and mountains alike.

How could it possibly not pluck the sword out?

BOOM!nove)l/1n

Gong Shenjun gave a tremendous yank, his resonant power roaring out like a fired engine. A terrific wind started to blow and the entire hall began to shake.

His robust resonant power came again and again in steady waves, turning his entire body into a scaled-dragon, starting from his arm. And yet the hilt in the wall did not budge at all, no matter how much power he used.

Clearly, the walls of this vault were also built of some special material and reinforced with runes. Otherwise, it would not have withstood Gong Shenjun's strength.

It was a riveting sight, and also sort of discouraging.

BOOM!

One final, superb blast of power, and the residual power echoed off the walls, ricocheting towards the other students. Vice Principal Su Xin negated it with a simple lift of her hand.

Gong Shenjun's hair and clothes were in disarray. He panted heavily as he let his resonant power fade back away.

He rearranged his clothing more properly, and gave a rueful laugh. "No wonder the Vice Principal let us try it. I have overestimated myself."

"What can I say now?" he said, spreading his hands and giving up gracefully. Vice Principal Su Xin nodded kindly to him, and Duze Honglian looked at him admiringly.

In the ensuing silence, it was Li Luo who spoke up hesitantly.

"Well... you can say something like 'sorry? I've interrupted the treasure selection'?"

Chapter 0424: Blade, Come

Li Luo's suggestion turned the atmosphere from awkward to super awkward. The others stared at him strangely. Gong Shenjun was trying to step back gracefully, and you just had to kick him off the stage.

Sorry for interrupting?

Even Gong Shenjun was tripped up by the sudden comment. "Junior Li Luo, very humorous," he said dryly.

"Vice Principal," he said to Su Xin, "I am not destined for this weapon."

His tone was light, but of course there really was nothing else he could do about it.

Vice Principal Su Xin simply nodded. She was not surprised by the outcome. The Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade had been here for many years already. Past students had come here before as well, before Gong Shenjun. No one had managed to pull the sword out.

She knew the reason well. The Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade had followed the Principal for many years. With its improved sentience came a strong sense of pride. After tasting a King's power, how could it acknowledge anyone else? And given how long it had remained in the treasure vault, it was already well integrated with the hall. Trying to take it out with brute strength alone was like trying to uproot the entire vault. As if the school would ever construct a vault so flimsy that even non-Dukes could take it down.

So even though Gong Shenjun was the strongest student in the Astral Sage currently, he was never going to be successful in taking the sword out by force.

"Anyone else want to try?" Su Xin asked the others. Since Gong Shenjun had already opened the proceedings, it was only fair that everyone be allowed a chance.

The First Princess stepped forward as if on cue. "I know it's unlikely for me," she said with a sweet smile. "But it looked quite fun. And it can't hurt."

Su Xin smiled and gestured her forward.

The First Princess laid a slim hand on the sword, and a large, green Luan avatar appeared behind her.

Beating its wings furiously, it gathered worldly natural energy to it.

The power flowed down her slim, pale hand, and she gritted her teeth.

A heroic pull!

Nothing.

The hilt had yet to budge an inch.

The First Princess did not seem discouraged, turning away and shaking her head. "I'm not destined for this weapon either."

Now that both Gong Shenjun and the First Princess had failed, the others felt even more hopeless. Clearly, the sword had remained here for many years because it was too strong to be plucked.

Mentally, they were ready to give up on it now. Powerful, yes. Unattainable, also yes.

However, Jiang Qing'e was not daunted. On the contrary, the failures of Gong Shenjun and the First Princess tickled her interest. There was a rare flair of excitement in her golden eyes.

"Qing'e, going to try? We've never had a ninth-grade light resonance user before. Perhaps the Principal's partner weapon will consent to bend its pride for you," Vice Principal Su Xin urged her.

It almost seemed like Vice Principal Su Xin wanted to see Jiang Qing'e try. Perhaps she stood a chance.

Li Luo puckered his lips up sourly. Was a ninth-grade light resonance that awesome? Damn, he was jealous.

Jiang Qing'e nodded slightly, then turned to Li Luo. "I'll give it a try. If I can take the sword, it's yours."

Everyone stared at her.

The First Princess smiled vaguely.

Duze Honglian snorted, while Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding screwed up their eyes in frustration. This f*cking Li Luo was carried to victory on a daily basis. Li Luo fought to keep his face straight. After all these years, the golden train to victory was as reliable and speedy as ever. He ignored the others. It was just jealousy, pure and simple.

"Come on, Sister Qing'e!" he yelled in encouragement.

Jiang Qing'e laid her own hand on the sword, and her ninth-grade light resonant power flowed out of her, brighter and brighter as she shot it down her hand.

Weng!

There was a high-pitched keening sound in the air. The blade, which had not budged an inch during the last two attempts, was responding. And they could see that it was gradually sliding out. There was a new inch of blade that was exposed to the air.

It was working!

Another inch, and with it a burnished-golden light. The blade grated against the wall with a dull rumble like an ancient elephant's.

Everyone held their breath. Could it be?

But suddenly, Jiang Qing'e felt a new force. The hilt came to a halt again. No matter how much resonant power she poured on it, it would not budge again.

"Still not willing, hmm?" Jiang Qing'e whispered softly.

This Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade was indeed intelligent and stubborn. It pined for its previous owner, and was too reluctant to switch allegiances.

The ninth-grade light resonance had tempted it, but it made its choice to stand firm in the end.

"As you wish, then." Jiang Qing'e gave up gracefully, letting her hand fall. She let the sword slide back into the wall, until only the hilt could be seen.

She backed away, shaking her head. "Vice Principal, this blade is too strong-willed. The shining jewel of the Principal is still bright in its memory. Perhaps no other owner will do."

"Stubborn," Vice Principal Su Xin said. "Like weapon, like owner," she added with dry humor.

With Jiang Qing'e's failure, the others gave up completely now. Those like Duze Honglian lost all interest in trying.

Their thoughts were already turning back to the ten gold-eye treasured artifacts on the stone pillars.

Li Luo was of a like mind. The failure of those three had proven the difficulty. Even a madman like him gave up hope. Sighing deeply, he turned his thoughts back to the Ink Scale Sword.

Perhaps that was his only choice today.

Suddenly, he felt a surge of flaming pain on his wrist. He looked down in surprise. It was the dark-red bracelet on his skin...

Inside it was the three-tailed heavenly wolf.

What was going on?

Weng!

At the same time, Li Luo heard a high-pitched keening from the sword in his ear.

His eyes widened as he whirled back to the sword in the wall. Had he imagined it? He thought he saw the sword hilt vibrate...

Surely he had imagined it.
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The heat on his wrist flared again, searing hot.

A flash of inspiration.

The Principal had left him this bracelet... and the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade was simping for its owner... could it be that the two were connecting?

Had the blade acknowledged him as the Principal?

Li Luo almost laughed at himself. What madness was this?

He raised his palm from a good distance away, pointing it at the wall.

Jiang Qing'e, the First Princess, and Duze Honglian stared at this bizarre moment.

What on earth was this madman doing?

Li Luo flushed a little out of embarrassment, but he could only follow through with it now. Half-baked strategies only led to injury. "Blade, come!"

Chapter 0425: Blade Has Come

Li Luo's shout made all the others turn towards him. They stared at him incomprehendingly, and some sneered when they saw his palm outstretched towards the sword in the wall. "Li Luo, have you lost your mind?" Zhu Xuan spluttered. "Does he think he can just shout at it, and the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade will come running?"

"You think you're the main character in a cheap novel?"

Only Jiang Qing'e looked surprised in a positive manner. "Could it be there's some resonance between you and the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade?"

Everyone else thought Li Luo was fooling around. What hope did an Evolving Resonance Tier cultivator have? Only Jiang Qing'e believed that Li Luo was not any weaker than the other two. If even she had managed to make the blade hesitate, then it was entirely likely that Li Luo stood a chance too.

"Jiang Qing'e, you might be blinded by love, but you could smell the outcome of this a mile away," Duze Honglian said scathingly, rolling her eyes. Jiang Qing'e was the calmest, most rational person she knew in battle. But when it came to Li Luo, she was like a cat in heat.

Jiang Qing'e ignored Duze Honglian, only looking at Li Luo.

Li Luo did not reply either. After shouting "Blade, come," it had taken all of his effort to resist the burning pain on his wrist. He looked down, surprised to see his skin still intact and not burned away to the bone.

At the same time, the metallic shriek of the sword retuned itself to a sound of joy and urgency.

It was not a change that Jiang Qing'e, Gong Shenjun, or anyone else could detect. Only Vice Principal Su Xin's eyes widened in wonder.

Shing!

The metallic ring of the sword was audible now, ringing out clearly across the hall.

Everyone watched in amazement.

Swoosh!

The unbudging blade had started to move out of the wall on its own. With each new inch of exposed blade, the golden light shone brighter and brighter, blazing through the entire hall.

It was like an ancient elephant emerging from the dusty plains, shaking off the mud and dust to reveal gold and ivory underneath.n)-Ove**Lb1n**

The blade gleamed in its own light.

The students watched, rapt.

The sword hilt in the wall was gone.

Everyone turned to Li Luo. In his hand was a new sword.

An ancient, straight blade.

It was now shining with a dewy, new light of gold and jade, covered in a pattern of runes that resembled the wrinkled skin of an elephant. Golden light circulated along the blade, although it did not appear particularly sharp. On the contrary, it was sturdily built with some heft to it.

Although the blade felt light enough in his hands, it seemed to slash with immense power when Li Luo swung it back and forth.

In the shocked silence of the hall, Li Luo lowered his head to the blade, hunger burning in his eyes.

His heartbeat was through the roof. A wild sense of bliss and gratitude fogged his brain with heady ecstasy.

Who would have thought that the clowny shout would actually get the Onyx-Elephant Blade to come to him?! The sword that had not budged for Gong Shenjun or the First Princess!

It was a casual test that got him unimaginable rewards.

Li Luo touched it carefully and felt the power wash through him. This was not resonant power, it was raw, physical power...

The Onyx-Elephant Blade imbued its user with enormous physical strength.

Truly magical.

Li Luo smiled with satisfaction. The Principal's partner weapon was truly something else. Although it was also a gold-eye treasured artifact, it was in a completely different class from the Ink Scale Sword.

His palm moved across the blade. The heavy, solid feel was like petting an old elephant. The blade did not resist, and Li Luo felt secretly relieved.

He knew that the Onyx-Elephant Blade had responded not to him per se, but to the bracelet seal on his hand that the Principal had placed.

Although the Onyx-Elephant Blade had sentience, it did not have much real brain to speak of. It did not seem to have understood that Li Luo was not the real deal.

Otherwise, he would be cowering behind the Vice Principal's skirt right about now.

Li Luo looked up to see complex expressions and frustration all over the other students' faces.

Especially Gong Shenjun. His handsome features were rigid with self-control.

He could not understand it. Why had the weapon that he had entreated so sincerely with... gone to Li Luo so obediently?

"Weren't you supposed to be the Principal's partner weapon? Where is your pride from before?!"

"You... made me look like a fool." Even the well-bred Gong Shenjun felt like cursing. He settled for a sharp exhale of frustration.

The First Princess's lovely face was also covered in surprise, although she was not as affected as Gong Shenjun. The Onyx-Elephant Blade had not been suited to her at all, but she was also puzzled as to why the sword would have chosen Li Luo.

"Is this kid really that brilliant? Even more brilliant than Jiang Qing'e?"

"How has he succeeded where a ninth-grade light resonance cultivator has failed?"

Her mind was reeling from the strangeness of it all.

"Li Luo, what the hell did you do?" Duze Honglian burst out.

"What can I say? Fate. And with fate, who can say? Maybe the Onyx-Elephant Blade recognized the potential to be a King in me, so it came."

"Dream on!!" Duze Honglian almost bit her tongue in rage. "Potential to be King? Potential to be the King of Thickest Skin, maybe."

"How the hell should I know what happened?" Li Luo said, flailing his hands helplessly.

"I was just fooling around, and it just came. Maybe it has, like, a, er, rejection limit. We hit the limit, and then it came to the next person who called. Should have been you. You passed up on the chance."

"Maybe if it had been you to wave at it, it would've come to you too."

Duze Honglian stared at him. What nonsense was this guy talking about now? This reason was even more preposterous than Li Luo's potential to be king bullsh*t.

The sword would have come if she had gone first?

But what if... her chest was wracked with painful regret and hope.

"Cheeky boy, that's enough." Vice Principal Su Xin laughed. "The Principal's partner weapon chose you, for sure. I find it surprising as well, but in any case, congratulations. You are now the second owner of the Onyx-Elephant Blade."

She was looking closely at him, still surprised by this outcome.

She had thought that Jiang Qing'e was the most likely candidate.

This Li Luo was truly full of surprises at every turn.

Li Luo's face lit up with happiness at Vice Principal Su Xin's words. "I can really take it away?"

The Onyx-Elephant Blade was even more ideal than the Ink Scale Sword for him. Vice Principal Su Xin smiled breezily at him. "Like I said before, if you can come here, you can take the Onyx-Elephant Blade away by any means that you can think of.

"Before long, the real Holy Grail Meet will be upon us. Li Luo, I hope you can carve the Astral Sage College a path to glory with the sword in your hand," she said with great formality.

After all... he was the Principal's chosen one.

Chapter 0426: Nobles' Tattoo

The school's prize presentation came to a conclusion, and Li Luo naturally became the hottest topic on the block again.

"With the end of the selection, let me once again thank all of you for your contributions to our ticket match win." Vice Principal Su Xin brought the little trip to a proper closing as they stood before the vault entrance.

"However, I'm sure that all of you know that the ticket match is not the end, but only the beginning. Our school's real goal is not a ticket, but the ultimate prize of the Holy Grail Meet... the Dragon Bone Holy Grail itself."

Those four words. The senior students like Gong Shenjun, the First Princess, and Jiang Qing'e were especially moved, understanding the implications of the reward.

Throughout the East Divine Continent, all of the sage colleges labored desperately to get the Dragon Bone Holy Grail. It symbolized glory and students' lives.

The ticket match fight was already hotly contested, and they knew that the Holy Grail Meet itself would be on yet another level of intensity.

Li Luo recalled the Principal's task to him with some trepidation. As a mere One Star Hall member, how much could he really contribute to a fight on that level?

"Principal, surely you've overestimated me," Li Luo thought ruefully to himself as he scratched his head. Without the Dragon Bone Holy Grail, he would not be able to get the complete version of the Heavenly Libation Chant. His control over the three-tailed heavenly wolf would be limited, and his secret weapon at the Housemeet curtailed. Without this powerful secret weapon, he might not even be able to participate in the Housemeet.

Leaving all of the burden on Jiang Qing'e's slim shoulders.

Not good.

Li Luo vowed to do all he could to help secure the Dragon Bone Holy Grail.

"Vice Principal, what sort of format does the Holy Grail Meet run on?" Li Luo asked.

"The format should follow the long-established precedents. The first is a fight by halls. There, the strongest of each hall will be chosen. That's the highest individual honor for any student."

"Of course, this title is far more prestigious than something like the Seven Astral Pillars of the Astral Sage College. And fortunately, we might actually have the strongest Three Star Hall student this time."

She beamed at Jiang Qing'e.

Literally a shining star with her ninth-grade light resonance, Jiang Qing'e was the brightest student that the Astral Sage College had seen in many years, and she was predicted to do well even on the big stage of the East Divine Continent.

"Qing'e, if you can win that title, then the Astral Sage College will truly stand a chance in the running for the Dragon Bone Holy Grail," Vice Principal Su Xin declared with hope.

"I'll do my best," Jiang Qing'e said with a neutral tilt of her head.

"Are there prizes for winning the strongest student title?" Li Luo blinked furiously.

"It can't be just an empty title, right?"

"The title is not empty at all," Su Xin replied with a little laugh. "Many generations have chased the glory that it holds."

Li Luo nodded in agreement. "Yes, yes, Vice Principal. Glory is very good and all, but is there anything a little more... substantial?"

Vice Principal Su Xin looked at the squirming Li Luo. "You are a very practical young man."

Duze Honglian harrumphed. "Why do you care so much? As if you could win it." ~~nove-1B)In~~

Li Luo tutted at her with a superior tone. "It has everything to do with Qing'e. And is there really any difference between her and me?"

Duze Honglian scowled. This guy was completely shameless.

Vice Principal Su Xin almost laughed. "The East Divine Continent is only one of the outer divine continents. It cannot compare to the inner divine continents, but we are nonetheless supported by the Academic Federation. The prizes will be generous. For example, one of the prizes for the strongest student is the Nobles' Tattoo."

"What is that?" Li Luo pressed eagerly.

"Put simply, it is a tattoo on the body," Su Xin said.

"And it does..." Li Luo believed that any example Vice Principal Su Xin raised would definitely be something special. If he had never heard of it before, it only meant he was ignorant.

"The Nobles' Tattoo uses Duke blood essence as the core ingredient, and it is a magical piece of craft. There are many types of Nobles' Tattoos, each with their own special properties. For example, the previous Holy Grail Meet gave out the Nine Jeweled Tree Tattoo. It increases one's worldly natural energy absorption and processing rate. It's a powerful new engine for cultivation."

"Whew!" Li Luo whistled softly to himself. This Nobles' Tattoo sounded sick. And it used Duke blood essence as a core ingredient?! That was some high-level stuff. He'd never even heard of it before! Besides, the Nine Jeweled Tree Tattoo sounded awesome. With such a tattoo, cultivation would be smooth sailing as could be.

"The Nine Jeweled Tree Tattoo is more of a supporting tattoo. There are Nobles' Tattoos with more offensive augmentations, while others specialize in defense, survival, or other broad functions. It's almost like a special type of treasured artifact, and yet it is always with you. It cannot be taken away. Still, the drawback is that despite their name, these tattoos fade with time as the ingredients' potencies wane."

"Nobles' Tattoos are more commonly found in the inner divine continents. They are quite rare in the East Divine Continent."

Li Luo bit his tongue. From this alone, he could tell that the inner divine continents were truly on a different level. Here at the Xia Kingdom, Dukes were rarer than a blue moon. As if they would consent to donating blood essence to make these Nobles' Tattoos easily. Only in the inner divine continent could such luxuries be found.

The paucity of ability, talent, and wealth... there was no way the outer divine continents could ever compete.

It was not just him. Duze Honglian and the others had fallen quiet as well, thinking about the same implications.

"And what about the prizes of winning the Dragon Bone Holy Grail?" Li Luo asked eagerly, licking his lips.

Vice Principal Su Xin did not laugh at his ambition. Instead, she welcomed it.

"The Dragon Bone Holy Grail itself is the best prize, of course. But that's from the school's perspective. For you who have won the cup for the school, what would you want?"

"A violet-eye treasured artifact? An eighth or ninth-grade spirit liquid? A secret watersource or lightsource? Or a Duke technique?"

Vice Principal Su Xin's smile grew wider and wider as she continued to tempt Li Luo.

"Bring the Dragon Bone Holy Grail back, and the school will give you everything within its power to give."

Chapter 0427: Gong Shenjun's Offer

Vice Principal Su Xin bid them farewell after handing out the prizes and letting them know about more that could potentially come.

"Whee-ew. The Astral Sage College is truly something else. Wealth stores for days." Li Luo sighed happily. Everything that the Vice Principal had told them about was an exciting reward. Even royalty like Gong Shenjun and the First Princess would be tempted, let alone a mere young lord like him.

There was little the school would not do to get the Dragon Bone Holy Grail.

"Li Luo, congratulations on getting the top prize," the First Princess said with a mischievous smile.

"I don't deserve that at all," Li Luo replied modestly. "Actually, it's all thanks to Your Highnesses. If not for your introduction to the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade, how would I ever have had such a blessed outcome?"

A vein pulsed on her temple, and suddenly her smile looked more like teeth gritting. "Are you asking for a beating?"

Both she and Gong Shenjun had come expressly for the hidden Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade. However, neither had expected that the blade would end up in the hands of a puny Resonant Master like Li Luo.

Although they had come with tempered expectations regarding the sword, Li Luo's reminder was infuriating nonetheless.

Li Luo hurriedly tugged Jiang Qing'e over, placing her carefully between the First Princess and himself.

"You should manage your house lord," the First Princess said irritably to Jiang Qing'e.

"If you want to beat him up, feel free," Jiang Qing'e said cheerfully. "I promise not to interfere."

"Not a promise I believe," the First Princess tutted. "As if anyone doesn't know that you'd fall out with anybody who messed with your beloved."

A rare blush crossed Jiang Qing'e's face, and she glanced back...

... to see Li Luo's impudently grinning face.

She jerked an elbow violently backwards.

Li Luo's smile froze on his face as the breath whooshed beautifully out of his lungs. He groaned in pain and scowled at Jiang Qing'e.

The First Princess watched the lovers' tussle with amusement. The exchange deepened her understanding of their relationship yet again. Jiang Qing'e's personality was well known to her. Strong-willed, sticking by her own opinions, and a clever, careful thinker. Combined with her talent, even someone as prideful as the First Princess admired her. That was why she was trying to develop their relationship.

Jiang Qing'e's reputation in school was pristine as well. Although she did not actively reach out to connect with people, she spoke to everyone without a hint of pride at all. Yet the First Princess knew that Jiang Qing'e rarely let anyone get too close to her, herself included.

Only with Li Luo did she sense Jiang Qing'e's unshakable demeanor carefully put aside to rest.

Their friendly squabble very quickly died down, because Gong Shenjun was walking over to them.

He smiled courteously at the three, then got straight to the point. "Junior Li Luo." His eyes were fixed on Li Luo's face. "I have quite a presumptuous preposition. I wonder, would you hear me out?" he asked sincerely.

"If it is presumptuous," Li Luo quipped back at him, "perhaps just... don't presume to say it?"

Gong Shenjun was taken aback by his bold and direct rejection to even hear him out.

"Looks like Junior Li Luo has already guessed it. Indeed, I am here about the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade," Gong Shenjun said, skillfully maneuvering the conversation around his rejection with a royal's wit. "I'd like to ask Junior Li Luo if you are willing to make a trade with me. You specialize in twin swords. I can trade a twin sword gold-eye treasured artifact for the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade that you hold.

"Twin swords that come in a pair."

Li Luo was indeed swayed for a moment. Gong Shenjun's offer was highly tempting, speaking straight to what he wanted.

Li Luo glanced over at Jiang Qing'e, but she seemed content to remain silent and let him make his own decision.

Li Luo was silent for a few moments. "Why do you want this weapon, Senior Gong?" he asked to buy some time.

"It was the partner weapon of the esteemed Principal," Gong Shenjun said impatiently. "With a King's possession, I might be able to get a revelation."

Li Luo's eyes flickered, and then he shook his head. "My apologies, Senior Gong Shenjun. A twin sword gold-eye treasured artifact is indeed one of my greatest desires at the moment, but this sword chose me. If I trade it, I might break its little sword-heart. I couldn't be so sword-heartless!"

The First Princess and Jiang Qing'e stifled a laugh. Sword-heart?

Gong Shenjun was silent for a moment, then he asked again. "Will Junior Li Luo not reconsider? If a twin sword gold-eye treasured artifact is not enough, I can sweeten the deal further."

Li Luo shook his head firmly.

"Alright, then I guess it was presumptuous of me after all," Gong Shenjun said with another wry smile. He nodded to Jiang Qing'e and the First Princess, then turned briskly to leave.

Li Luo watched him go. "Will there be repercussions for my refusal?"

The First Princess laughed. "Don't worry. My royal brother has quite a lot of self-control. You possess something even more valuable than the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade, and he hasn't done anything to you yet, right?"

"Even more valuable than the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade?" Li Luo repeated, puzzled.

He saw the First Princess' meaningful look in Jiang Qing'e's direction.

Li Luo chuckled. "Ah, Your Highness is mistaken. I don't possess, I'm the possession here."

"Whatever you say," she said with amusement. "In any case, you don't need to worry about Gong Shenjun. He has grown his reputation in school for many years, and he would not stain it on your behalf. Forcing someone to hand over a treasured artifact is not a particularly honorable deed."

Li Luo nodded.

"Oh, and if you have time in the next few days, come with me to the royal palace."

Little emperor treatment time.

Li Luo nodded. The ticket match was over, and they had another half a month to rest and recover before the main event.

As for Li Luo, he had another big question to consider.

Now that he was at the Evolving Resonance Tier, it wouldn't be long before he made the breakthrough from the final tier of the Resonant Master Stage to the General Stage.

Which meant that he needed to consider the matter of his third resonance.

Chapter 0428: Palace

At the heart of Xia City was the royal palace, and in the shadow of the magnificent building was an unremarkable villa on the royal grounds. Guards patrolled vigilantly, and there was an intangible web of power that protected it from less physical assaults.

This was the Regent's palace, and the power that his house wielded was presently even higher than the royal palace.

Gong Shenjun alighted from his carriage, striding up the well-maintained pavement back to the villa. Servants bowed as he passed.

"Your Highness."

"Your Highness, welcome back."

These words, spoken however sincerely, were but chatter in his ear that he had come to take for granted. Cutting across the lush, carpeted hallways, he emerged in a study that overlooked the lake. The room was sparsely furnished, without much in the way of luxury. Not a soul was to be seen, although Gong Shenjun knew that it might well be the most well-guarded place in the entire palace.

This was a study that not even ordinary Dukes could hope to approach.

Gong Shenjun stepped in front of the study, and the door swung open silently before he needed to knock. He walked in without breaking pace, and saw the Regent taking notes from a couple of books at the table.

The Regent glanced up from his work at Gong Shenjun, who bowed respectfully. "Royal Father."

Regent barked a short laugh. "No need for that at home."

"You did well in the ticket match," he said with pride, laying his books aside.

Gong Shenjun shook his head. "My opponent was not that strong. Liang Kui is quite a bit weaker than Zhong Nan. Blue Abyss' greatest shield is much better than their greatest spear. Not even our Wang Chao can compete against him."

"I might not have been able to break his defenses in time either."

Regent gave a low laugh. "It is but a competition, not a fight to the death. No one wins a real battle just by defending. The boy is built for soft, coddled matches. He poses no real threat."

He beckoned for Gong Shenjun to come beside him, then he threw the document in his hand down onto the table.

Gong Shenjun looked at it, and saw "House Luolan" written on it.

"It was not Jiang Qing'e who surprised us the most in this ticket match. It was Li Luo."

The Regent tapped the cover page thoughtfully. "I've been looking through information on House Luolan in the past six months. This Li Luo is not an easy one. House Luolan is no longer on a precarious beam out above the choppy seas. Ever since his dual resonances were revealed in the City of Southwind, his rise has been unstoppable. House Luolan has stabilized its situation, and the Sunreek Villa flies high under its banner. The house is showing signs of overtaking its heyday with Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan at the helm."

"I see Li Luo's hand in all of this."

Regent smiled slightly. "Everyone was dazzled by House Luolan's phoenix, but the hidden dragon is just as much of a force to be reckoned with. Still, only a fool would imagine that the son of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan would end up an invalid."

"Just about everyone's a fool, then," Gong Shenjun said gravely.

The Regent chuckled in admission. It was so. Blank palaces... it was a death sentence that no one had doubted.

Imagine killing a fish, packing it in brine until it was well pickled, then smoking it and leaving it out in the sun to bake... and it was swimming happily again when you came back.

"How do you see Li Luo?" the Regent asked.

Gong Shenjun considered the question for a moment. "His potential is superb. Besides, he's not like Jiang Qing'e or his parents. He prefers to remain low profile. If not for circumstances pushing him to the fore, I would still be one of those fools who did not believe in his talent."

"With him and Jiang Qing'e in charge, I think it's only a matter of time before House Luolan takes the lead."

The Regent nodded thoughtfully. "But what they lack is time."

He paused and smiled. "You like Jiang Qing'e, yes? I've said this before as your royal father: if you can court her back successfully, you have my permission to marry."

Gong Shenjun sighed heavily. "I have not seen even an iota of a chance since Li Luo appeared. All of us have underestimated the connection between those two. Their engagement is no sham.^{n).o--v/-ε.)l.-b)(1)(n}

"Besides, I thought Li Luo was just an ordinary person before. I thought that I would be able to get close to them, and outshine Li Luo naturally, showing Jiang Qing'e my good side."

Those were arrogant words coming from anyone else, but Gong Shenjun spoke them matter-of-factly, stating them without any arrogance. He was indeed excellent in every aspect that you could ask for. Status, talent, riches—he surpassed all of his peers.

He was the jewel of the new generation in the Xia Kingdom.

"But unfortunately, Li Luo's performance in the last half a year cannot be topped." Gong Shenjun shrugged. "I think I don't have a chance anymore."

"Admitting failure so readily? That's not like you."

"One should always face reality straight on. Besides, I might admit to failure, but that does not mean I've completely given up."

The Regent patted the folio on the table again with a sly smile. "So you need your father's help? Jiang Qing'e's talent is exceptional. That phoenix in our nest would brighten our house greatly."

Gong Shenjun smiled. "I want to see if I can win her heart first."

"Youngsters," the Regent snorted. "Heads always in the clouds."

"And it seems like the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade did not end up in your hands?"

Gong Shenjun nodded irritably.

"It was a mere possession of Pang Qianyuan's, but it witnessed his path to King. Its sentience is very strong. Even you would have trouble subduing it. Just as well. Let it remain in the school vault, then."

"Li Luo took it."

The Regent went dead still, his eyes widening as he searched Gong Shenjun's handsome face. "Li Luo... took it?" he whispered.

"As unbelievable as it sounds, yes. That's what happened."

The Regent drummed his fingers agitatedly on the surface of the table. "Li Luo is getting more interesting by the moment."

He gestured wordlessly, and Gong Shenjun left the study accordingly.

The study fell back into silence.

The Regent half closed his eyes. "No more partner weapon, then," he said aloud.

The study seemed to dim, and a pair of dark eyes shone out from the gloomy corner. "A mere Resonant Master..." the voice whispered.

"Li Luo is not worth the attention."

The Regent shook his head. "The Holy Grail Meet draws near. Li Luo is heavily favored by the Astral Sage College. The school will not sit idly by if anything happens to him now. Relations will be strained in the investigations for sure. It will ruin the greater plan," he said, looking straight at the pair of eyes.

A dissatisfied silence hung in the air.

"You used to praise our plan as perfect," the Regent said, raising his voice. "Surely your faith is not shaken just by the loss of one partner weapon?"

The figure in the shadows flickered and swayed like a candle in the wind, and a raspy laugh floated forth. "Let it be. Merely a cherry on the top. It matters not. And what about you..."

Unspoken amusement, almost taunting.

"After all these years, have you not yet found the resolve to join us?"

The Regent's face was weathered in the candlelight. He took up the kettle and poured two cups of tea. He set one aside and sipped delicately from his own. There was a considering look in his eyes, and he said nothing for a long time.

A mottled hand reached out of the shadows to take the other cup. On one of its fingers was a vermillion ring, with an eye on its polished surface. This eye had a white iris instead of the usual black, while the sclera was black instead of the usual white. It stared balefully outwards, as black and white gradually seeped into each other until the entire face was gray. The whispering voice came at him again, out of the shadows.

"Light and dark are born the same, good and evil die the same."

Chapter 0429: Yuan Qing

The lake outside House Luolan was a willing canvas of sun and sky, a rippled rendition of azure-blue and pale yellow.

BOOM!

Terrific blasts of resonant power ricocheted off each other, generating large waves across the lake that splattered back down noisily as they sprayed the surrounding banks.

Two people were fighting on the surface, trading blows back and forth.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e.

They were having a sparring match.

However, Jiang Qing'e had restricted her own resonant power to the First Changing Tier. Even so, there was an obvious difference between the two. Li Luo was being pushed back at will. No matter what resonance art he applied, he was easily repelled by Jiang Qing'e.

In this sparring match, Li Luo once again learned the meaning of getting wrecked on all fronts.

Ping!

Li Luo drew water inwards as he activated both his resonant powers. His fist thundered out towards Jiang Qing'e's face, charged with enough resonant power to create a sonic boom around his wrist as he punched out.

Jiang Qing'e crossed two fingers, coating them in light resonant energy like a glove.

Ping!

Jiang Qing'e's slim frame held her ground easily, while Li Luo was sent staggering back, his feet scrabbling to find purchase on the lake surface.

"Seems like the strongest One Star Hall student is at his limit," she said teasingly.

"Limit?!" Li Luo was outraged. How could you tell a man that to his face?!

He whipped out a straight blade with a leathery elephant skin. It held so much power that the water level around him dipped.

Li Luo's face turned serious.

Jiang Qing'e's eyebrows shot up when he pulled out the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade.

"Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade, Level One Divine Elephant Power!"

Weng!

The Onyx-Elephant Blade was humming with a faint sound, as if a trumpeting elephant was in the distance. A rush of strength flooded Li Luo's arms.

The water around him sunk a level further, until he was in a visible water crater.

BOOM!

With a simple stamp of his foot, the water exploded, and he lanced out at Jiang Qing'e with the blade.

The sword flashed out, moving feather-light through the air with the weight of an elephant.

Light flashed in Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes. She did not retreat, but struck out with a glittering fist, still coated in what looked like molten gold glass.

Clang!

The thin sword struck the translucent, yellow hand, both looking fragile as could be.

Yet the aftershock from their impact was disconcertingly strong, blowing apart the water of the lake.

Li Luo was still sent staggering backwards, while Jiang Qing'e swayed, the impact snapping her upper torso downwards and backwards. Her core struggled to hold the force, and then finally she took two steps back.

"I won!" Li Luo declared proudly, sheathing his sword.

"You won what, exactly?"

"I managed to beat you back two steps. How's that not a win?" he demanded. "You think you can just limit your resonant power to the Evolving Resonance Tier and we're even? You clearly used your Glass Fiend Tier body just now! So I've won this sparring contest."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said innocently. "That was just physical strength. Even if I stood here with my arms by my sides, you couldn't hack past my defenses."

Li Luo's teeth were itching with irritation. Jiang Qing'e was right. She had passed the Fiend Body Tier, so her physical being was already fortified beyond belief. It was not something that a puny Evolving Resonance Tier cultivator like him could crack. Even if she did not use resonant power at all, her body alone would easily withstand anything he could throw at it.

The gap was too wide.

"Still, the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade is something special. You've only gotten the first level down, and already you can push me back."

"I've been studying it carefully for the last few days," Li Luo said. "I think I can sense three levels to the Divine Elephant Power, but I've only unlocked the first one."

He was satisfied with the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade. It was his first gold-eye treasured artifact, and it was much stronger than the Lambent Hawkeye.

"Still..."

He rolled up his sleeves with some resignation. Both his arms were covered in long, red wounds, the flesh torn up badly.

"The Divine Elephant Power is too strong for me. Even a little use tore both my arms to bits."

Jiang Qing'e touched his forearms lightly, her cool hands titillating on his skin. He could not resist reaching up with his own fingers to clutch her hand.

Jiang Qing'e dug a finger vengefully into his wound, and he yelped and howled.

"Weak flesh," she said clinically. "Your body's not strong enough to hold the Divine Elephant Power. If you unlock the second level of this power, it might eviscerate your arms completely."

"Which means... the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade is a little wasted in your hands," she concluded.

"I'm only at the Evolving Resonance Tier," he said defensively. "Of course I can't compete with what you have."

She tapped her chin. "Indeed, physical fortitude is not something that Resonant Masters think about... it's even in the name. If you cannot strengthen your body quickly, then perhaps you can try healing it quickly instead. That's your strength, isn't it? After all, you have both water and wood resonances, which amplify healing."

Li Luo had thought of it himself as well. It was the most straightforward application of his powers to solve the problem. He had done the same before this as well, creating the skill he called Unyielding Form in order to increase his survivability.

However, that sort of rejuvenation was too weak to withstand the Divine Elephant Power.

"Divine Elephant Power is mainly concentrated in your arms, so you can try concentrating your healing there as well. I recall that there should be some relevant resonance arts using wood and water resonances. You can check them out," Jiang Qing'e suggested.

Li Luo's eyes lit up. This was good thinking from Jiang Qing'e. Focus his regeneration to strengthen the effects. Perhaps that would work.

"Truly the strongest Three Star Hall student in all of the East Divine Continent," he said approvingly, holding a quivering thumb up.

She gave him a dry smile at the title, but was cut off from her reply by the sight of a person running towards them.

She gestured with a jerk of her head, and the pair headed to the bank.

"Young Lord, Young Mistress."

It was Pavilion Master Lei Zhang, who watched over House Luolan's headquarters' security.

"What has happened?" Jiang Qing'e asked, noting Lei Zhang's grave expression with concern.

"Young mistress, I must tell you that Ancestor Yuan Qing has returned." nDvE(ℓb-In

"Ancestor Yuan Qing?" Li Luo's eyes lit up at the name. He was one of the three ancestors of House Luolan, and the only one of the three who had not favored Pei Hao.

The return of this Heavenly Dipper General ancestor was definitely a welcome boost to their ranks.

Jiang Qing'e smiled happily, but it faded quickly enough when she saw Lei Zhang's uneasy expression.

"Something else?"

He nodded unhappily.

"Ancestor Yuan Qing was ambushed on his way back. He's unharmed, but his only disciple was hit with a strange poison... it looks like Pei Hao's doing."

"He's threatening Ancestor Yuan Qing to get him to leave House Luolan."

Chapter 0430: The Real Target

In one of House Luolan's halls.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e hurried in and saw a middle-aged man seated comfortably. He was well-muscled, his hair long and braided into a neat ponytail. He was dressed in a simple shift, and his strong features were calm, his eyes bright. He reminded one of a majestic lion, radiating power even while he sat neutrally.

A powerful Heavenly Dipper General.

This middle-aged man was the only Heavenly Dipper General expert still loyal to House Luolan, to Li Luo, and to Jiang Qing'e. One of the three ancestors, Yuan Qing.

Yuan Qing looked up as they entered, and his eyes softened when he saw Li Luo. In his youthful face he saw the image of two people that he respected above all else.

"Yuan Qing greets the Young Lord," he said, rising from his seat and cupping his fist towards Li Luo with a small bow.

Li Luo was very surprised by the huge respect that he was being shown. "Uncle Yuan, you are an elder of House Luolan, so there's no need to stand on ceremony," he said hurriedly. "My youthful frame can't withstand the weight of such respect."

Yuan Qing's creased face crinkled in a smile. "Ah, the Young Lord has grown so much in the years that we've been apart."

He turned to Jiang Qing'e with a smile. "As has the Young Mistress. Even when far abroad, your name was one that often reached my ears."

Jiang Qing'e shook her head modestly. "Rumors travel faster than the wind, which proves that they are even more insubstantial."

"Honestly speaking, I should not have spent such a long time away from the house," Yuan Qing said apologetically. "Otherwise, that dog Pei Hao would not have been so bold."

There was a murderous anger in his eyes when he said Pei Hao's name.

"Uncle Yuan, I heard you were attacked on the way back?" Li Luo asked concernedly.

Yuan Qing nodded darkly. "Mo Cheng had a hand in it as well. That old devil has a heart as black as his name. If not for the two house lords granting him all the cultivation resources he needed, he would never have made it to Heavenly Dipper General. Now that they have disappeared, his gratitude has vanished as well. Helping Pei Hao to take down House Luolan? Disgusting!"

Mo Cheng was the ancestor that supported Pei Hao the most.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e exchanged a look. They could sense his murderous intent.

"They did not harm me in the ambush, but I think I was never their goal in the first place. It was my disciple. They kept me occupied, isolating her and poisoning her with something strange."

Yuan Qing turned to a young girl with short hair. Her pretty features were pale as she sat listlessly in the chair. Black mist was rising out of her alabaster skin at intervals, before burrowing back down like

worms. She coughed weakly, and Yuan Qing immediately rose and went to her side. She looked at him, face pale. "Master, Master, don't worry about me."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e approached cautiously as well.

"This is my disciple, Guo Ling," Yuan Qing said tenderly to the two.

"My... my respects to the Young Lord and Young Mistress," Guo Ling said in a faint voice. Li Luo waved to show that she need not worry herself with courtesies. "Poison. Truly Pei Hao's favorite method. Not the first time he's chosen it."

His last poisoning had wreaked havoc at the Sun creek Villa, sending poisoned people and hoping that they would die and ruin the villa's reputation.

"That dirty bastard! I'll hang him up by his feet and break every bone starting from his head!" Yuan Qing swore, his resonant power pulsing around him as he was on the verge of losing control.

"Pei Hao has declared his terms," Lei Zhang said in a low voice. "As long as Yuan Qing swears to leave House Luolan and Xia City, he will provide the antidote."

"Not everyone is as spineless as he is." Yuan Qing sneered coldly.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e shared a look. Pei Hao sure knew how to pick his moments. There was only half a month left until the Holy Grail Meet. Both of them would be away from Xia City at that time. Once they were, House Luolan would need someone to hold the fort. Ox Biaobiao had been the ideal choice, but he was busy making the miracle paste for Li Luo, and it was best not to divide his attention. Moreover, he could not leave the headquarters grounds, which made things inconvenient.

Yuan Qing was the next best answer, and he was also strong enough that Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e would be happy to leave with peace of mind.

Pei Hao must have guessed the same thing, and so he was trying to frustrate their plan to bring Yuan Qing back.

"That thankless wretch is a viper indeed. Or maybe a python, because I seem to feel him on my neck every second," Li Luo grumbled.

"Uncle Yuan, don't worry. Let me try to deal with the poison in Guo Ling's body. I managed to deal with Pei Hao's poison once before."

In the last few months, his understanding of poisons had deepened even further through his healing of the little emperor. In a way, he had become a bit of an expert at antidotes. Of course, it was thanks to his water and wood resonances, which had anti-poison properties.

Yuan Qing looked at him in surprise. "Young Lord, you can nullify toxins?"

"I have some experience," Li Luo answered modestly.

Yuan Qing turned to Jiang Qing'e, who nodded reassuringly. His doubts cleared. "Then I beg you to do your best, Young Lord."

"Bring her to the bedroom," Li Luo ordered, and serving girls hurried up to do his bidding.

"Young Lord," Guo Ling said faintly when they were alone together in the bedroom, "Please..." She gestured for him to come closer.

"If the poison cannot be removed, please let me know and I will take my own life so they cannot use me to threaten my master. I know that he will not betray House Luolan."

Li Luo was moved by her words, then he smiled down at her reassuringly.

"Don't worry. I'll help you."

...

In a room somewhere else in Xia City.

Pei Hao leaned on the brick window sill, enjoying the afternoon scenery. The hot sun lit up the streets below, while passers-by scurried back and forth in the shaded avenues.

He swung back to the room, taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness. He walked over to the table and picked up his tea cup, then sat down opposite an elderly man in black robes. It was the other House Luolan ancestor, Mo Cheng.

"You put a Hellish Caterpillar on the wench? What a waste of a rare poison," Mo Cheng lamented. "It's such an expensive and exotic one. You could even have used it on Yuan Qing himself. It'd have crippled him."

Pei Hao snickered softly. "You think Yuan Qing is worthy as a target?"

"What are you talking about? How is the kid any more of a target than Yuan Qing?" Mo Cheng asked, puzzled.

Pei Hao smiled mysteriously.

"My target was never Yuan Qing or his disciple from the start."

"Wasn't the plan to threaten Yuan Qing to leave House Luolan by poisoning his disciple?"

Pei Hao took a sip of tea. "Yuan Qing is a bother, but nothing to fear. His strength has long fallen within our calculations."

"But Li Luo..."

"He likes to neutralize poisons, doesn't he? Let him try this one."