

Resonance 211

Chapter 0211: Healing Test

Li Luo stepped into the brightly lit room and found himself face-to-face with the boy he had met before. This time he was dressed in plain robes, although his youthful features still exuded a casual confidence. The foremost power in the Xia Kingdom's royal court was something different.

"Your Majesty."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e bowed slightly in greeting.

He nodded gravely, eyes on Li Luo. He still remembered the guy who had deceived him at the Golden Dragon Bank.

The little emperor was sitting on the edge of the divan, a grey-cloaked old man with a sallow face beside him. The old man's eyes seemed almost shut, and he rocked back and forth weakly.

Yet Li Luo could sense a tremendous aura from this person. This had to be one of the strongest experts within the royal palace.

Clearly, the First Princess had made preparations for his visit and also... precautions.

If during the healing process he did anything untoward, the grey-cloaked old man would probably sense it and intervene.

The First Princess grasped the little emperor's hand briefly. She turned to Li Luo, wasting no words. "Can we start?"

There was a carelessness to her attitude, despite her friendliness. Li Luo could sense that she held no hope at all regarding this healing.

If not for the fact that the First Princess wanted to coat this courting of Jiang Qing'e with some subtlety, she might have even skipped these motions entirely.

Still, Li Luo said nothing about it. He understood that he was a tool, but House Luolan would be helped by this connection, so he did not mind.

"Junior Li Luo, please remember that nothing that happens here today should leave these walls."

She warned him, then she had the little emperor remove his shirt and face his back to them.

His back was scrawny, the bones of his shoulder blades and spine clearly visible behind his sallow skin. No one paid much attention to this because they saw a lotus flower etched onto his back in a faint hue of dark green.

However, half the "green lotus" was stained black.

It gave him an ominous feeling. Li Luo could not tell if he was imagining things, but the black half almost seemed alive and moving.

The sinister blackness was eating away at the green lotus on the little emperor's back.

Changing it into a black lotus.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e stared at it with sick fascination, riveted by the ghastly sight.

"This..." Li Luo hesitated.

"This is His Majesty's illness... The green lotus has been on his back since birth. It is a rare trait called the Yin Yang Green Lotus. It is considered a benign, even blessed, sign.

"But for some reason, it mutated, invaded by the blackness, as you can see. Our sources say that once the green lotus turns completely black, His Majesty's flesh will decay. The odds of survival are ten percent," the First Princess said, her voice hoarse as she ran her polished nails tenderly across the lotus design.

"In all these years, we have found many water, wood, and light resonance experts to treat him. There were even Dukes of uncommon talent, but none of them could work any change to this. We can only mitigate the black invasion with medicine.

"There are not many Dukes in the Xia Kingdom, and dual resonance Dukes with dual healing elements are even rarer. Wood and water—Junior Li Luo, you give me hope. Perhaps if one day you can become a Duke, perhaps you could truly heal His Majesty."

Li Luo sighed inwardly. This seemed hopeless.

Still, he had to follow through; otherwise, things would get really awkward.

He sat down on the edge of the divan and smiled at the boy. "Hello, Your Majesty. We meet again."

The little emperor looked at him disdainfully from the corner of his eye. "Liar."

Well, that was a little embarrassing. He had indeed incited the fight between the little emperor and Duze Beixuan. How was he supposed to know that the kid was actually the little emperor himself...

But then again, his deception must have been all too clear to the emperor, who must have just been playing along.

Li Luo squirmed a little. This boy was still a child, but he was not to be messed with.

Li Luo coughed. "Well, er, Your Majesty, I'll begin, then."

The little emperor ignored him, completely uninterested.

Li Luo did not mind his attitude. He was fully focused now, bringing forth his dual resonances. Blue and green power concentrated on his palm.

Although everyone was just going through the motions, Li Luo was going to take this seriously. His best healing power glowed, warming his palm.

The First Princess was interested in his dual resonances, so she was watching closely. The reticent man in grey nodded from under hooded lids. This was indeed dual resonance power.

And yet somehow the water and wood elements seemed especially bright.

Of course, this brightness was due to the light resonant energy imbued within, although it was well-hidden under the stronger primary resonances.

Sapphire-blue and jade-green orbs met in his palm, condensing against each other until Li Luo created a single drop of liquid energy, which he carefully placed on the lotus tattoo.

Weng!

The drop of liquid energy was sucked into the lotus like a drop of rain on parched soil.

Everyone looked on with a faint glimmer of hope, despite themselves.

Chapter 0212: Healing Result

Bated breath in the room, the bystanders bent over the little emperor's back.

"No hope, no chance," every single one of them thought. And yet...

The lotus tattoo on the little emperor's back remained unchanged.

There was a resigned look in the First Princess' red phoenix eyes. She sighed softly to herself, battling a disappointment she thought she had been ready for.

The other Duke healers often administered their treatments with loud whirls of sound and fury, sometimes causing the green light to grow strongly, battling the black lotus' qi at other times.

Of course, all of those tries had failed to do much.

Still, at least such epic struggles stirred hope within. This completely unremarkable action left them a little unsure of how to feel.

Li Luo's resonant power seemed to be too weak to even effect any change.

Li Luo looked a little embarrassed himself. "Junior Li Luo, don't take it to heart," the First Princess said kindly. "This is not the first failed attempt."

Li Luo hung his head. "I'm sorry you took the trouble, Your Majesty."

The little boy nodded mutely, his face a little faint as it usually was.

Li Luo rose and moved towards Jiang Qing'e, who gave him a sympathetic look as well.

"Your Highness, since the attempt has been made, we'll be taking our leave," Jiang Qing'e said simply. Both sides had achieved what they had come here to do.

The First Princess inclined her head, giving them permission to go.

"Wait."

A hoarse voice rasped.

The First Princess looked curiously at the grey-cloaked old man beside the bed, as did Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e, for whom he was still an enigma.

"Grey One, is there something wrong?" the First Princess asked.

The old man's hooded eyes flared open, bright, profound eyes that locked onto the little emperor's back.

"Your Majesty, let me have a closer look," he said in a voice like dry paper.

The little emperor looked at him, nodding as he stopped dressing himself.

The old man's eyes began to glow, as he carefully inspected the little emperor's lotus tattoo.

The First Princess could sense something strange about his manner. She knew how powerful he was, and that he might well see something they could not.

But was the change for better or worse?

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were standing worriedly together. What if the attempt had instead worsened the little emperor's condition?

Surely not. A little Resonant Master cultivator like him couldn't cause much harm...

The tension built in the silence, until even the First Princess was watching with rigid attention under the bright lights.

If the little emperor came to any harm here because of her, there would be hell to pay in the royal court tomorrow.

Her reputation was on the line.

The old man continued his meticulous inspection for several minutes.

On his face was surprise and shock.

Li Luo watched the rollercoaster of emotions on his face. "Damn, say something, old man! My heart can't take this much longer!"

He finally finished his inspection. "Your Highness," he turned to the First Princess, "there is indeed a very slight change in the lotus tattoo on His Majesty's back."

"What change?" she whispered, almost afraid to hear the answer.

He hesitated, then pointed at the lotus tattoo. "After my examination, I have determined that the black lotus energy has receded a little."

They stared at the spot where he had pointed. It was a protrusion in the black design that was incredibly small—perhaps the size of a tiny petal, if the black lotus was a fully bloomed flower.

And...

It was still black!

Li Luo stared intently at the spot. He could not detect any difference. It looked black as it could be to him.

That was it?

Was the old man exaggerating?

The First Princess ran the two steps forward. "Grey One, are you sure? The blackness has faded a little?" She could not overlook this. The black lotus energy had faded a little? That was something none of the experts had been able to achieve thus far.

By their explanations, the black lotus energy was a product of dual resonances and was exceptionally tricky to undo.

But why had it become fainter?

A small change, but still a change.

The old man known as Grey One nodded solemnly. "Your Highness, I might be getting on in my years, but my eyesight is as good as ever. And I have memorized every minute detail of the lotus tattoo after all these years. My judgment is without error."

The First Princess breathed out deeply, her heavy bosom heaving. "The cause?"

Grey One was silent for a moment. "I know it sounds unbelievable, but the only possibility is our friend here."

This was hard to swallow, even for the logical minds of the First Princess and Jiang Qing'e.

"Surely not?"

Even Li Luo himself forced a dry chuckle.

None of this was making sense. The great Duke healers had failed, and he could do it?

"Could it be a natural recovery by His Majesty?" Li Luo offered. He sure didn't want them to pin the heavy responsibility of healing the little emperor on him.

What if it went wrong? Who was going to shoulder the blame?

Grey One shook his head silently but firmly. He had looked after the little emperor all these years. Of course he knew the lotus tattoo best.

In all these years, the lotus tattoo had continued to worsen, the black spreading over the green. There had never been a reversal before.

Their years of experience had taught them just how stubborn and deadly the black lotus energy was. Even dual resonance Dukes had struggled against it. They had even asked the principal of the Astral Sage College before. He was a King, but he was unsuited to healing. He had not been able to help at all. The black lotus energy could perhaps only be dispelled by someone who wielded all three healing resonances.

But Kings were incredibly rare already, and the odds of finding the perfect King were astronomically slim.

Which was why today's events had shocked the old man so deeply.

He turned to the First Princess, awaiting her decision.

Her face was frozen underneath the lights, then she turned to Li Luo. "We cannot pass up any opportunity, no matter how slim the chance might be.

"Junior Li Luo, please try again!"

If Li Luo's healing had some small effect, they could test it again to ascertain that the change was caused by him.

Li Luo balked.

She jerked forwards to him. "Junior Li Luo, this is very important. If you can heal His Majesty, the royal court will be indebted to you!" she pleaded. "I'll support you in everything you desire!"

He could not help but blush at such a goddess begging him so fervently. "Eh, but..." he stammered. "Tha- that was the last drop."

He was just a little Resonant Master. How would these General Stage experts understand how dry he was?!

Chapter 0213: A Step Closer

The First Princess blushed at his words. "I'm sorry, I have pushed you without consideration."

Li Luo was only a Resonant Master. That single drop of liquid energy was all he had. He had to be 80 or 90 percent spent now.

Truly wrung dry.

But...

An apologetic look arose in her red phoenix eyes. "Junior Li Luo," she said softly, "I know my request is unfair, but still I must make it. We have to ascertain the cause of the change.

"I ask for your help one more time. If you can really treat the Emperor, we will all be deeply indebted..."

"Whenever you wish, at any time, call and we will answer to repay this debt."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e looked at each other with uncertainty. What was the First Princess implying?

Or did she know that House Luolan had trouble headed its way?

It was not unthinkable. As the center of power, the royal court's intelligence networks ran deep, as did its power. It sat at the core of a great network of information, while House Luolan was merely at a fringe position.

However, was she referring to the unknown agent moving against them? Or worse, was the royal court itself involved in the conspiracy? In the absence of more information, everyone else was suspect.

After all, House Luolan had a great treasure to protect, one that held the secret to becoming a King.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e exchanged a look, seeing the answer they needed in the other's eyes. They needed a strong ally.

Perhaps the First Princess had been willing to draw closer ties with Jiang Qing'e before, but it would have been a cautious and reserved relationship. Before Jiang Qing'e formally reached the Duke Stage, their relationship would have been rather casual.

That was all they could have hoped for. After all, one was the center of power, the other was a beaten house.

If they wanted to renegotiate the relationship, they would have to bring something worthy to the table.

Who would have thought that the day would come so soon? And the negotiating table itself had become the negotiating chip. Li Luo suddenly had the First Princess losing her composure...

Could he really have the power to heal the little emperor's natural frailty?

No one—not the First Princess, and not even Li Luo himself—had believed anything would come of this, and yet the Grey One had spoken with conviction.

The temptation of the little emperor's health had drawn deep commitment from the First Princess, and now the threads of fate had drawn them close.

The commitment that they would answer when House Luolan was in need.

Such was the importance of the little emperor's wellbeing.

"Your Highness, I will try again." Li Luo nodded. "But I will need a few hours. My resonant power is completely spent."

A few hours was a tricky duration. Neither long, nor short. And yet the little emperor had a schedule to keep. He had to return to the palace in time.

The First Princess took out a jade bottle, shaking out a single pill. "This is a revivification pill. It can greatly boost your resonant power recovery. I think you will find that it is exactly what you need."

Li Luo was tempted to say that he could recover by himself, but considering his state, he decided it was wiser to accept it.

He swallowed it, then he sat down in the lotus position to recover his lost resonant power.

The little emperor was looking at Li Luo. "Grey One, can... can he really make me well again?"

The grey-cloaked old man smiled tenderly at him. "Your Majesty, there is certainly a slight fading of darkness in one corner of the lotus tattoo. That is a hard fact.

"Whether it is due to Li Luo... We will need him to test it again."

The little emperor looked at Li Luo with doubt. Could he really be a better healer than all the Dukes?

The little emperor was so caught up in his thoughts that his face started to flush red, and soon a wheezing cough followed, along with a wracking pain that contorted his face in misery. He clutched the divan and keeled over.

The old man knew at a glance that the boy had become too worked up, which had triggered an episode. He pulled out medicine and made the little emperor swallow.

The First Princess quickly came to his side as well, calming him. She turned to Jiang Qing'e. "I have never dreamed that this would happen."

Both knew that this was supposed to be nothing more than playing doctor, but things had gotten real all of a sudden.

"With him around," Jiang Qing'e noted with amusement, "miracles have a way of happening."

The First Princess smiled. "Before this, I would have doubted it. After tonight? No longer."

"Your Highness, don't get your hopes up before we confirm things..."

If Li Luo truly had the ability, that would be ideal. But if this were all just a false alarm, then the royal court members would be crushed.

The First Princess gave her a slight nod in acknowledgment, then she settled down quietly to wait for Li Luo to recover.

It took close to an hour.

When Li Luo opened his eyes again, he could feel many people staring at him in silence.

He immediately went to the little emperor's side.

Both palms bringing resonant power forth, he squeezed out another drop of precious healing energy, which he dripped onto the lotus tattoo.

Everyone held their breath.

The same result—no disturbance, and the drop vanishing into the back.

The squinted eyes of the old man were wider than ever before, his breathing ragged with excitement.

"Well? Grey One?" There was an unusual note of anxiety in the First Princess' voice.

His face was solemn as he nodded.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness... A bit of black lotus energy has indeed faded with Li Luo's drop of power."

The First Princess sank down into a chair.

For once, her red phoenix eyes turned truly red as tears of happiness welled.

Chapter 0214: I'm Out

You could hear a pin drop in the silence of the room. Who was Li Luo?

"Who am I?" Even Li Luo himself was starting to wonder.

One drop of healing energy at a time, he was the light at the end of the dark tunnel of despair that the Xia royal court had been in. And as he grew stronger, it seemed expectable that he could thoroughly free the little emperor from his condition.

A miracle, one that not even the worldly old man in grey could explain.

The First Princess struggled for composure. How many years had she agonized over the boy's condition? The years of disappointment had run her ragged before she knew it.

The little emperor was her direct kin. Back when her father had fallen, he had entrusted the boy to her. She had done her best, but the affliction had resisted her best efforts.

She moved to Li Luo's side. The silver-haired youth's wavering eyes met her red phoenix ones with uncertainty. "Li Luo," she asked softly. "Can you help me? Can you treat His Majesty?"

Li Luo smiled weakly at her. "If I wasn't willing, we wouldn't be here."

The First Princess nodded. "Treat him. The royal court begs you."

Li Luo understood that she was announcing their debt for this deed.

Of course, allies would not always remain so. But at least it was a guaranteed umbrella of safety for the foreseeable future.

Fate had zipped them up together in a tight seam.

"I don't understand what's happening myself," Li Luo admitted. He reached out to grasp the First Princess' trembling hand. "But I'll do my best."

They clasped hands tightly but briefly.

The First Princess' perfect features turned to Jiang Qing'e. "Junior Jiang, you are my lucky star."

If not for Jiang Qing'e, the First Princess would never have suggested that Li Luo treat the little emperor.

"Your Highness, I hope you can keep this matter of Li Luo's healing a secret as well," Jiang Qing'e said with a small smile.

The royal court was always full of intrigue. The young king's star was rising, but he was not yet in full power, even with the First Princess behind him. Jiang Qing'e might not understand the full extent of the court's machinations, but she sensed that it might not be wise for Li Luo's healing abilities to be too widely known.

It might well invite trouble.

The First Princess's eyelids flicked with understanding. "Don't worry, I intend to keep it quiet. But... I cannot hide it forever. After all, His Majesty's condition is constantly watched by the healers as well. There are too many tongues there to silence. I'm sure you understand."

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "As best as you can."

The little emperor was too important to be overlooked for long, but perhaps they could buy some time.

"And..."

"Li Luo might be able to treat His Majesty, but you have also seen how weak he is. At this rate, it will take all too long to remove the black lotus energy. It's not a feasible plan. I hope you do not rush Li Luo with the healing. Give him time. Let him increase his strength," Jiang Qing'e said.

The First Princess was silent. She was not a hard-headed person, so she saw the logic in Jiang Qing'e's words. Li Luo had given them hope, but at this rate it was like pouring cups of water on a barn fire.

Jiang Qing'e was suggesting that they stop using the cup so he could at least upgrade to a bucket or something.

Farming the fish before you fished it. A wise strategy.

"I understand. Of course. How about once every other month?"

"I think that when he enters the General Stage, there will be more marked progress."

Li Luo sighed with relief. At least he wasn't going to be milked dry. Three times a day? Not even a body of iron would hold out.

"But..."

She smiled shyly at Li Luo. "Today is the first time, and we would ask a little more of Junior Li Luo. We still have three hours before we have to return to the palace. Would Junior Li Luo push one more healing?"

She shook the bottle of revivification pills hopefully.

"Three more times tonight, hmm?"

Li Luo trembled in fear. Three? Three more times? They were really sucking him drier than a desert.

He turned pleadingly to Jiang Qing'e, but she shrugged sympathetically. The deal was made.

He surrendered, turning to take another revivification pill. He swallowed it down and settled back to let the recovery happen.

In the next three hours, Li Luo pulled out three more healings.

At the end, he stumbled out of the room, pale as a ghost. He wobbled straight past a bemused Yu Hongxi and Lu Qing'er, muttering, "I'm out, I'm out... No more!"

The mother and daughter looked at each other. What on earth had happened in that room?

Chapter 0215: A Helping Hand

"Li Luo, are you alright?" Lu Qing'er asked with concern.

"Just a little exhausted after treating His Majesty." Li Luo waved it off.

Lu Qing'er pursed her lips doubtfully. She had been drained of resonant power before, but she had never looked as ill as Li Luo did right now.

Still, he was on his own two feet.

"President Yu, Li Luo has been worked hard today. We'll be taking our leave now," Jiang Qing'e said courteously.

"Rest well." Yu Hongxi nodded kindly.

Jiang Qing'e helped her silver-haired fiance out, Lu Qing'er's worried look escorting every staggering step.

Not long after the pair left, the First Princess and the little emperor said their goodbyes and left as well.

With the departure of the First Princess and the little emperor, the presences that had been lurking in the shadows left, their unseen bubble of protection moving with their charges.

"Mom, do you think Li Luo's healing worked?" Lu Qing'er whispered.

"Nonsense... The emperor's condition has stumped even Duke healers. Li Luo's dual resonances are poor imitations of the real deal." Yu Hongxi shook her head, all too used to her daughter's flights of fancy.

And yet...

Her Duke sensitivities had noted a lightness in the First Princess' steps when she departed.

The little emperor even more so—his body language practically screamed with happiness.

One did not rise up to lead the Golden Dragon Bank without developing a keen read of every situation. She felt that something extraordinary must have happened in the last few hours.

But what could it be? Li Luo, the proxy for closer ties with Jiang Qing'e? Had he actually healed...

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The royal carriage made its stately way down the broad expanse of the street, the route secured and cleared ahead by a swarm of bodyguards.

Inside, the little emperor's babyish face shone with excitement and eagerness. "Sis, am I really going to be healed?!" He tugged happily at her hand. "Can he really heal me?"

His little head felt a little woozy from the excitement.

It felt like a pizza had just fallen out of the sky.

The First Princess' expression mirrored his own delight. She patted his head fondly. "We confirmed it, didn't we?"

Back when Li Luo had given the little emperor his spirit liquid, she had been mildly surprised that it had the same effect as the little emperor's medicine, but she had not thought too much about it, thinking it was just a water resonance's effects. How wrong she had been.

"But how did he do it?" The little emperor persisted.

Her hand on his head paused thoughtfully. "Well... I find it strange as well. How indeed?"

She directed the last two words at the grey-cloaked man next to them.

"Young Lord Li Luo must be special... The condition should be difficult for ordinary dual resonances to resolve, and yet his can. There must be something unique about his powers that we have yet to discover.

"If Your Highness has doubts, I can probe his resonant powers deeply next time for any strangeness."

She considered it, then she shook her head. "No need. Li Luo's parents were extraordinary in many ways. Their methods were always differently inspired. It only makes sense that they left Li Luo something special.

"Right now, we're on good terms with Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo, and we will need his strength to heal the emperor. We will not break this hard-won connection for privacy.

"What's special about Li Luo's resonant power doesn't concern us too much. His ability to heal the king is the key here."

The old man nodded.

"Your Highness, are you intending to declare friendship with House Luolan?" the old man asked again.

"Jiang Qing'e's potential will eclipse all... By my estimation, she will reach Duke in less than three years. She will be the youngest Duke in all of the Xia Kingdom.

"Is what I thought before tonight. Now I see that the sun's golden brilliance has blinded me to the moon's silver glamor. Ah, Li Luo, how you surprise me.

"House Luolan might be in a rough patch now, but those two are holding things down. They are inexorable. With time, there is nothing that House Luolan cannot overcome. House Luolan is worth declaring friendship with."

The old man was silent for a beat. "Still... There are many powers set against them. Many Dukes are interested in the King realm secrets that Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan have left behind. House Luolan's defensive wards have been weakening over the years. Last Ghost Festival, an intruder's energy clone invaded...

"It could be dangerous for us to cross them, Your Highness. Will you truly extend the hand of aid to them when they are overshadowed by their enemies?"

She looked out of the carriage window, at the dark backdrop of night, watching only the stars. "We move as always, decisively. Sitting on the fence only invites more trouble later."

The old man looked at her in surprise. "And if they don't live up to your expectations?"

She sighed as the star she was watching ducked behind a wisp of cloud.

"Then House Luolan is doomed regardless. My helping hand will only shore up their defenses. Whether their boat makes it through the storm is still up to them..."

Chapter 0216: The Third Test

It was two days after Lu Qing'er's birthday passed uneventfully. Li Luo took advantage of the peaceful days to quickly familiarize himself with the power that accompanied his newfound breakthrough to the Pattern Genesis Tier.

There was also the matter of the second test at the Suncreek Villa. For the second-grade spirit liquid, both Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng still refrained from participating, and again Li Luo handily won.

The result was just as Li Luo hoped for. The branch artificers spoke of Li Luo with respect now. After all, they were all resonance artificers. Refining skill was the one thing that they did not dispute.

Li Luo might only be a second-grade resonance artificer, but his talent was exceptional. His first and second-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights were envied by even fourth-grade artificers like Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng, not to mention the others.

In the first two days, they had all been guarded and wary. But as Li Luo's promises had proved true, their guard had relaxed under the kindness of his ways...

Elder Zheng Ping was secretly sounding out the ground, and it seemed that the wavering had already begun among them.

Everything was moving as Li Luo had envisioned.

...

"Today's the third test," Cai Wei said with some worry. She was with Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e in the hall of House Luolan's headquarters.

"Young Lord, things have been going too smoothly," she emphasized.

Li Luo nodded thoughtfully. He was of the same mind. And yet the resonance artificers were already turning to him... and Pei Hao's trickery was nowhere to be seen.

Had he really been gifted this present?

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e exchanged looks. Pei Hao's foresight and planning could not be underestimated. It would be naive to think they had won.

"If he's planning anything, it must be within these next two days," Jiang Qing'e said.

Today was the third test. If it passed smoothly, then the branch artificers would be sent back empty-handed. Already used to the good life here at headquarters, many would definitely choose to stay when faced with that prospect.

Pei Hao would definitely make his move before then.

"I've already prepared a sizable number of guards at the Suncreek Villa, and made many other secret preparations." Li Luo nodded seriously.

"Let's just proceed as planned for now." Jiang Qing'e agreed.

"If you can really persuade the branch artificers, the Suncreek Villa's numbers will swell significantly. With your secret watersource, we'll definitely rise up in Xia City."

Li Luo stood up and faced the sun, exhaling deeply.

All according to plan, his plan to bring the Suncreek Villa to greatness and riches. Especially the riches.

A source of gold would go a long way to securing House Luolan's strength. And of course, it would also provide him with the high-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights he needed...

Most importantly, the defensive wards that Uncle Biao had spoken of. Surely they would recover as well, right?

"Let's go," Li Luo said to the others, leading the way out of House Luolan's headquarters. It was time to reap all the branch artificers he had spent so long nurturing.

It was time to see what Pei Hao had cooked up.

Li Luo walked out with a small smile on his face. Surely Pei Hao had never imagined that the blank palace young lord would one day face him in a head-on battle here at Xia City.

...

Suncreek Villa headquarters.

The mood today was ambivalent among many of the branch artificers, who were standing together in a tight clump.

The headquarters' resonance artificers stood by the side, but after all these days of working together, conversations diffused between the two groups, free of the mistrust and discrimination present when they had first met.

Some of the friendlier ones even mingled quite freely, and their candid exchanges put even more doubt on the faces of the branch artificers.

In front of them, Elder Zheng Ping stood with Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng.

He eyed the two loftily. "Today's the third test. When it ends, so does your time at headquarters."

The two were silent.

"I say," Elder Zheng Ping burst out, "haven't you felt the Young Lord's sincerity during this time?!"

Tang Yun grimaced. "We are branded with Pei Hao's mark. The Xiling branch has already sunk itself too deeply with him."

"He's just using you as labor! Besides, do you think he left headquarters unmolested? Look at the resonance artificers all around you. Many of them were recruited by Pei Hao. But did the Young Lord mind?"

"Don't judge the Young Lord with a narrow heart and mind. He might be young, but his skill and generosity are limitless."

Both experienced artificers looked conflicted, but eventually chose to remain silent.

The young lord's kindness had softened their hearts, but it had not yet undone the years of support that Pei Hao had provided. They were not yet ready for a complete turning away from Pei Hao.

"Let's just wait until the end of the test." Tang Yun sighed. He did not know what to do. He would take it one step at a time. If they won here, then they would see whether Li Luo would keep up his end of the promise.

If he did, they could return to the Xiling branch with the secret water source, their goals accomplished. The branch artificers would probably follow them back then.

"Aish, you stubborn fools," Elder Zheng Ping snapped.

A murmur broke out. Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and his entourage had arrived.

Many resonance artificers clapped upon seeing them arrive.

Li Luo waved in acknowledgment as he reached Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng. "Well, gentlemen? I trust you'll face me this time?"

They exchanged a look and stepped forth. Among the resonance artificers, Tang Yun's skill was highest. He was close to a 5th-grade artificer.

The resonance artificers muttered and shook their heads in disapproval.

The young lord had been more than generous in his treatment, and now Tang Yun was going to take the stage himself? That was unbecoming.

Tang Yun ignored the muttering. "Young Lord, allow me to learn from you firsthand..."

"But this time we're competing on a third-grade spirit liquid, and the Young Lord is only a second-grade artificer."

"Oh, I was in a good mood yesterday," Li Luo said brightly. "I managed a 3rd-grade spirit liquid..."

"Guess I'm a third-grade resonance artificer now."

Chapter 0217: Birds of Passage Spirit Liquid

Li Luo's casual remark was met with incredulity. Why did this young lord's artificing improve as frequently as one drank tea?

Wasn't he just a second-grade one a few days ago?

They themselves had gone through many years of cultivation to reach the third grade themselves. Li Luo had taken, what, half a year?

Was he really that talented?

"Young Lord, you're an artificing genius," Tang Yun said admiringly. Then again, resonance artificing up to the third-grade was still considered foundational. With enough talent, one could move through those grades rather quickly.

"Still, you have only just reached the third grade. I'm afraid you might not be too familiar with third-grade spirit liquids. Are you sure we should proceed with this test?" Tang Yun asked.

Tang Yun was a fourth-grade, going on fifth. Although Li Luo was a third-grade, the disparity in experience should be huge.

Li Luo might have dominated the first two tests, but Tang Yun was not at all worried about this third one.

With identical ingredients, his own experience and ability would put him at a tremendous advantage.

Li Luo smiled. "We've already agreed on this. How could I cancel it now? But don't feel burdened, and simply do your best."

Tang Yun was humbled by Li Luo's kindness. Why was he, with the advantages, being comforted instead?

"It's about time. Let's get started," Li Luo said.

They moved briskly forward to the refining workshops, each with adjacent and identical piles of ingredients laid out neatly.

Everyone was familiar after two tests. Both competitors moved to their refining workshops, screened off behind transparent glass.

Jiang Qing'e, Cai Wei, and Yan Lingqing stood together in a group, their different types of beauty attracting many furtive glances.

Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes roved about constantly. She somehow got the feeling that the Sun creek Villa was being watched by an uncommonly high number of eyes today.

"Lingqing, the Young Lord is still behind Tang Yun even though he has risen to a third-grade, right?" Cai Wei whispered to the professional.

"Ordinarily, no amount of talent would allow a third-grade artificer to compete with an experienced fourth-grade artificer..." Yan Lingqing folded her arms across her bosom. "It's not just about tempering strength. I suspect Li Luo fails quite frequently when refining third-grade spirit liquids. If it were anyone else in his position, I would say there was no point to this competition," Yan Lingqing said frankly.

This was going to be a different test from the first two. Li Luo had been familiar with the first and second-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights, but a third-grade spirit liquid was not only much more difficult, but he would also be less familiar with it.

Which would lead to inevitable errors.

"So he's going to lose?" Cai Wei whispered fearfully.

Yan Lingqing shook her head. "I said if it were anyone else in his position." She smiled at the slender figure in the workshop. "That guy is more than meets the eye."

A fair competition, identical ingredients, and no secret water source.

But... because Li Luo had helped her refine spirit liquids before, she might well be the only one who guessed that Li Luo was the creator of the secret water source.

The branch artificers might think of the Young Lord as a kind and fair person, but they didn't know that they were all being played hard.

Still, his plan so far had been ingenious.

And Yan Lingqing saw absolutely nothing wrong with it. This had always been an all-out struggle.

The match was already underway.

Both were creating a third-grade spirit liquid called Birds of Passage. It was a two-star formula, nothing particularly fancy.

As the president of a Suncreek Villa branch, Tang Yun was very familiar with the Birds of Passage spirit liquid. He moved through the procedures with practiced efficiency, fusing ingredients and manipulating them with his water resonant power in precise movements for purification.

Many were nodding in approval at the mastery on display.

Having risen to branch president was proof that Tang Yun's skill was not in question. He was showing every sign of breaking through to the fifth grade soon.

That was considered a master anywhere within the Xia Kingdom already.

The headquarters' resonance artificers were looking into the other workshop worriedly.

They could see that Li Luo's refining methods showed a lot more inexperience. There were occasional fumbblings, and his speed lagged behind Tang Yun's by a considerable margin.

It was something they all understood. It was inevitable that he was unfamiliar with third-grade formulas. Failure was part of the process.

Li Luo was already doing quite well. Despite his occasional slip-ups, he was proceeding with decent pace towards completion.

Time ticked on.

Nearby, in a luxurious inn.

Pei Hao lounged idly in his chair, Pang Qianchi fidgeting nervously by his side. The latter threw occasional nervous looks in the direction of the Suncreek Villa's headquarters, although he was too far to be able to see anything.

"Pei Hao, Sir, are you not worried?" Pang Qianchi blurted out.

Pei Hao smiled lazily and poured himself yet another cup of tea.

"Oh, the show is just about to start.

"I wonder if Li Luo can handle what I've really sent him."

Chapter 0218: A Poisoned Gift

Soon enough, Tang Yun was nearing completion.

A third-grade spirit liquid was truly nothing special for an experienced fourth-grade artificer like him.

Twenty minutes later, Tang Yun emerged from the refining workshop smiling triumphantly, a crystal vial in hand.

Within it, a pale-red liquid—the completed Birds of Passage spirit liquid.

There were cries of admiration at the speed at which he had made it.

They turned now to the other refining workshop, where Li Luo was still the very picture of concentration, carefully putting his ingredients together.

If speed was an indicator of ability, things were not looking good for Li Luo.

Still, the resonance artificers could not help but wonder. Why would a new third-grade artificer ever challenge a fourth-grade artificer like Tang Yun?

Was he prepared to lose the third round?

Did he intend to hand over the secret watersource to the Xiling branch without any trade-off? That seemed too easy.

Especially given how calm Jiang Qing'e was. Her golden eyes were unflinchingly steady, and when the headquarters' artificers looked over at her, they felt their hope renewed.

They settled back into a restless murmur, awaiting Li Luo's completion.

It took a full hour.

Li Luo had made many errors which had cost him time, but luckily not quality.

Finally, he emerged with pale-red liquid in his crystal test tube as well, and there was a collective sigh of relief from his supporters when they saw his refining go well.

Li Luo wiped the sweat off his brow. He had actually been prepared to fail and restart from the beginning, although thankfully his mistakes this time had not cost him too heavily.

He moved to the area between the two refining workshops, facing Tang Yun.

"Young Lord, your talent is incredible," Tang Yun said with sincere praise. Although Li Luo had taken a lot more time, he had ultimately succeeded.

Generally, the success rate of newly improved resonance artificers was quite shaky, but Li Luo had managed to produce the Birds of Passage spirit liquid under such high stakes.

A testament to his talent.

Li Luo smiled wordlessly and beckoned for the tempering measurement needles.

"We are at the final step now, President Tang Yun. Are you ready?"

Tang Yun's needle hovered above his product. "The Young Lord is generous." He sighed to himself. "I shall not stand on ceremony."

He plunged the tempering measurement needle into his Birds of Passage spirit liquid.

All eyes were on the climbing indicator as it slowly rose through the markings.

"57."

This result was greeted by many nods. The Birds of Passage spirit liquid was only a two-star formula, and so the limit of its tempering strength was roughly around 60 percent. 57 percent was not the maximum, but it was still a decent result.

Especially compared to a newbie like Li Luo.

Most fresh third-grade resonance artificers found it hard to break the 52 percent barrier.

Li Luo put the tempering measurement needle into his own.

He laughed.

"Well, I'll be... 58? That's lucky. Just a hair higher than President Tang Yun's..."

He lifted his needle high up for them to see.

All that could be heard was the collective thuds of the resonant artificers' jaws hitting the floor.

Li Luo's Birds of Passage spirit liquid had won?

How?!

Wow!

And yet this was the same Li Luo who had reasonably heard them out, kindly offered them opportunities, and then won them over with sheer talent. The result might be surprising, but no one suspected Li Luo of rigging the contest.

Tang Yun was equally shocked. He stared mutely at the tempering measurement needle in Li Luo's hand. "Your talent frightens me," he said simply.

They had had the same ingredients - that had been checked endlessly. And both had refined openly before the others, so there was no question of cheating.

The result had to be accepted.

Tang Yun was forced to believe that Li Luo was simply a monster. He had heard of such geniuses before, their supernatural instinct giving them an exquisite control over each combination of ingredients.

Li Luo must be that.

Li Luo almost felt bad for Tang Yun as the latter tried to smile bravely. Under ordinary circumstances, there was no way he could have won.

It was all thanks to his waterlight resonance and the secret watersource he could produce as a result.

Still, it was not really cheating either. It was indeed a part of his skill, his natural talent.

Still, he wasn't about to explain this to anybody.

Li Luo turned now to the branch artificers, who were looking as shifty as ants on a hotplate. They had lost, and failed all three tests.

According to their agreement, they would return to Xiling and headquarters would never provide them with secret watersource.

Their time at headquarters was over.

The thought alone was enough to make their panic bubble over. Move away from these comfortable surroundings, back to the Xiling branch with no future?

There, they would eke out their existence day by day. Here, they could advance to greater heights.

They didn't want to leave.

But Pei Hao had sent them!

It had been Pei Hao who had instigated this entire affair, fanning the flames of resentment until they had mobilized and come here in protest.

It had been Pei Hao who had promised them fairness and justice.

How could headquarters still keep them now?

Li Luo stood up and addressed them directly. "If anyone wishes to stay at Sun creek Villa headquarters, I welcome you on behalf of House Luolan."

"Pay no mind to matters of the past, to whatever Pei Hao might have ordered you to do. You have my word that we will not pursue it; you've experienced as much in your stay here."

Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng breathed easier to hear that. It was good to see the young lord had ambition, and wasn't entirely inhuman.

He was aiming to recruit them all.

Could they stop it?

They exchanged a wry smile. This young lord had deftly maneuvered them from protesters to supporters.

Truly the son of the two House Lords.

But even if the others chose to stay, Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng would not. They still felt like they owed too much to Pei Hao.

Both stood up.

"Young lord, your generosity overwhelms us, and we have been blessed with it far beyond what we deserve. If our brothers wish to stay here for a brighter future, I beg you to let them stay." Both cupped their fists in respect.

Li Luo was surprised. "Will you not stay?"

They shook their heads with a pained smile, and turned to leave.

Dang!

Just then, a curious gong sounded out, sending a wave of sound rippling out through Suncreek Villa's headquarters.

As the gong rang out, Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng felt some wetness at the corner of their eyes. They rubbed it, and came away with hands wet with fresh, red blood.

Li Luo's eyes widened in horror. Standing between the two, he could see the steady stream of blood pouring out from their eyes, nose, and ears, running so freely that the red turned to black.

Li Luo was dumbstruck by the dystopic scene. He turned numbly around, only to see that all of the branch artificers were struck the same way.

In the middle of summer, the sun beat down on Li Luo's back, but his shivering would not stop.

As the screams started, Li Luo's eyes went flat.

So this was Pei Hao's plan.

A gift of poison.

Chapter 0219: The Appropriate Course

"Arrk!"

The grotesque gurgles of resonance artificers choking on their own blood filled the room. For the artificers themselves, it was their worst nightmare come to pass. Blinded by their own blood, they dropped to the floor like flies.

Utter chaos.

The other resonance artificers rushed over, yelling and trying to rouse the fallen.

"Don't panic! Check their vitals!"

Jiang Qing'e's clear voice of command cut across the confusion, heeling them in.

"So Pei Hao shows his hand, finally," Jiang Qing'e muttered to Li Luo.

"A murderous hand, it is!" Cai Wei hissed.

"He must have poisoned them all beforehand. He intends for them to die in the Suncreek Villa." Yan Lingqing's eyes went cold with realization. "The other parts of his plan must already be in motion. He's probably spreading the news of House Luolan poisoning its resonance artificers all around Xia City. He will kill our reputation stone dead."

"He might even be spreading rumors that the poisoned artificers had all used Li Luo's secret watersource, casting doubt on it," Li Luo postulated. "No sane person would believe those lies, but rumors fly faster than wind resonant power.

"The truth rarely matters when the epidemic of sensation runs rampant.

"If the rumor takes hold, no resonance artificer will ever be willing to join the Suncreek Villa ever again. We'll be ruined." Li Luo's face was devoid of any emotion now, his smile completely gone. Those that knew him well knew that his killing intent had finally awakened.

"What's your plan?" Jiang Qing'e regarded him calmly.

Li Luo took a deep, steadying breath. "I anticipated a poison of some sort. I even had healers check them over the last few days, but the results were clean.

"It was no ordinary poison. That gong sound must have been the trigger for the poison. Pei Hao must be watching us at all times. Ahhhh, none of that matters now." Li Luo could feel his frustration building inside, even as the artificers' sands of life trickled down the hourglass of death.

"Sister Lingqing is right. Pei Hao's aim is to destroy the Suncreek Villa." They could not allow it. The Suncreek Villa was an economic vital point for House Luolan that they could not give up on.

Pei Hao had to have a powerful backer to launch such a daring attack.

What was his objective?

All too clear: the destruction of House Luolan's defensive wards.

"We cannot let them die here at headquarters," Jiang Qing'e emphasized.

Their entire reputation would be ruined if the resonance artificers died here.

Li Luo nodded. He glanced up to a group of people rushing over from a distance away. "Those are the healers I employed. I had them on standby for emergencies. Looks like the decision paid off."

Jiang Qing'e nodded with approval. Perhaps they might not be able to dispel the poison, but it was always the first option to explore.

The healers paled when they saw the artificers bleeding from every orifice.

"Your best efforts in purging the poison, please. If you cannot, analyze its composition and I will purchase the needed antidotes immediately," Li Luo said crisply.

"Please do your best. House Luolan will reward you greatly for your efforts."

The healers hurried off to begin their examinations.

Less than 10 minutes later, they came to report. "Young Lord, the poison is extremely rare and extremely strong. We can slow the poison's course, but expelling it is tricky."

Li Luo had expected something of the sort. If Pei Hao's poison could so easily be dispelled, he would not be Pei Hao.

"Can you tell the components?" Li Luo asked. When studying for the little emperor's treatment, he had crammed some basic physician knowledge as well.

They conferred briefly, then produced a hastily scribbled list. "We definitely need these. If the Young Lord could see to their expedient procurement, it would go a long way in helping these people."

Li Luo scanned the list briefly and nodded.

He then beckoned Elder Zheng Ping over. "Note everything on this list and buy it immediately."

Elder Zheng Ping hurried off to carry out his orders.

Jiang Qing'e's eyes flashed with new realization. "If these ingredients are helpful, then Pei Hao must have already taken care of them."

Li Luo's eyes narrowed. "You mean he's bought them all up in advance?"

She nodded. "Pei Hao is not working alone. The powers behind him must have fortunes to spare. He just needs to buy himself time for the poison to do its work. When they die, he wins."

Li Luo inhaled sharply. Pei Hao's heart was cold as ice. This attack was vicious and well calculated.

"If there is one place left in Xia City where those special ingredients can be bought..." Jiang Qing'e said meaningfully.

He nodded. There was no better-stocked cornucopia than the Golden Dragon Bank.

"Still, things might not go smoothly there either, unless..." She smiled at him.

"You have to go yourself. Use your connection."

Li Luo gave her an exasperated nod. Of course he knew she was referring to Lu Qing'er. There was no time to talk more.

"I'm going." He sped off like the wind.

A powerful shadow followed after, as did a few others.

"Pavilion Master Lei Zhang will escort you. Do not worry about the Suncreek Villa, I'll guard it myself," Jiang Qing'e called out.

Li Luo nodded as he ran, leading his small group towards their only hope.

Chapter 0220: The Rush For Herbs

Li Luo emerged from the Suncreek Villa's doors to see the vague stirrings of a crowd gathering and pointing. The whispers had grown louder.

Just as they had anticipated, word had spread of the poisoning almost as soon as it had happened.

Pei Hao.

The culmination of his coup de grace.

Li Luo ignored them. Taking the reins of his beast from a waiting guard, he heeled its flanks hard and galloped away.

Pavilion Master Lei Zhang and a dozen bodyguards escorted him.

They thundered along to stares that were perhaps a little more knowing than they should have been.

"Young Lord, our reputation is being destroyed with every wagging tongue," Lei Zhang said tersely from beside him.

He had sent a few ears out to listen. The rumor was that Li Luo had flown into a rage after the branch artificers refused to obey him, and had poisoned them all.

Li Luo gave him a curt nod of acknowledgment.

"Ignore them all and focus. Get to the Golden Dragon Bank and get our antidotes. If we can just save them, the truth will get out."

Lei Zhang nodded, comforted by the steel-like calm and resolve he saw in the young man's eyes as he dealt methodically with a madness that Pei Hao had previously reserved only for Jiang Qing'e.

He had risen from his reputation as a useless young lord to earn Pei Hao's twisted respect.

Perhaps this was a sign of Li Luo's growth too?

As they rode, Lei Zhang was on constant watch around them, his resonant power always a whisper's touch away as his eyes roved for signs of danger.

It would not be beyond Pei Hao to also try a direct attack on Li Luo. That was why Jiang Qing'e had sent bodyguards with him.

Still, Lei Zhang's worries were either unfounded or his presence was enough deterrence. They reached the Golden Dragon Bank safely, and Li Luo ran in.

He grabbed hold of a service staff, who recognized him immediately and bowed courteously.

"Can you help me check if the Golden Dragon Bank has these ingredients?" Li Luo handed over the list.

The man looked it over, his eyebrows frowning deeper and deeper as he scanned each item. "Young Lord Li Luo, the ingredients here... Amber wormroot and ambient saltpeter have all been reserved by medicinal houses all over the city. They have cleaned out our stores."

Li Luo ground his teeth in frustration. Even the Golden Dragon Bank? Pei Hao's sponsors had deep pockets indeed.

How was he supposed to turn the tables?

Lei Zhang's face was grim. Although the ingredients they needed were high-grade, they were not highly perishable or frequently used. Only a fool would think the spike in purchases was a coincidence.

Li Luo was quiet for a moment. "Please find Lu Qing'er for me. I have an appointment."

The staff nodded promptly, ushering him to a luxurious waiting room and asking him to wait.

Li Luo did not wait for too long before he heard light footsteps in a familiar cadence. Lu Qing'er's beaming face rounded the corner a moment later.

Her smile froze when she saw his stony face. "Something wrong at the Suncreek Villa?"

Such was the knowledge of one placed at the center of Xia City's activities.

And also, Li Luo had spoken to her privately on her birthday, telling her that the Suncreek Villa might soon be in trouble. He had asked if she would stay at the Golden Dragon Bank if she could, in case he came with requests.

Li Luo nodded and told his tale.

"I urgently need some special antitoxins. But the Golden Dragon Bank's supply of amber wormroot and ambient saltpeter have been suddenly cleaned out."

"Those are rarely bought precisely because of their price. Clearly interference is at foot. And if even the Golden Dragon Bank is cleaned out, then everywhere else should be dry as well."

Li Luo nodded. "Any ideas?"

Lu Qing'er chewed it over. "They must have bought up everything that the Golden Dragon Bank put up on the market recently, but the Golden Dragon Bank is huge. There has to be a storehouse somewhere for contingencies. I believe those two ingredients should be somewhere."

"Young Mistress, the storehouses cannot be opened without the President's writ!" the staff behind Lu Qing'er protested. "Which we do not have!"

Lu Qing'er looked at him loftily. "I do."

"If the storehouse is opened so casually, I'm afraid the Vice President will use that to attack the President..."

"Oh, please," Lu Qing'er snorted. "Don't underestimate my mother."

"Come," she said to Li Luo. "The clock is ticking away."

"Qing'er," Li Luo muttered fervently. "Many thanks. I'll owe you one. I'll do anything you say in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields."

"I'll hold you to that," she said happily with a toss of her head as she led the way.

Li Luo hurried after.

A few minutes later, they were standing before an enormous storehouse, ringed by an army of security personnel.

As they walked up, someone darted out into their path. "Qing'er, you cannot open the storehouse. It's against the rules."

It was Ning Zhao. His father was a vice president of the Golden Dragon Bank.

Lu Qing'er raised one eyebrow coolly. "Why not?"

"Qing'er, I'm not here to make trouble for you," Ning Zhao said defensively. "But you're going to need the President's writ, or the guards are not going to listen to you."

Lu Qing'er flipped a dainty hand up to reveal a jade slip pincer between two fingers, its rose-gold filigree catching the sunlight.

Ning Zhao stared at it agog. "How did you get that?"

"No need to worry on my behalf," Lu Qing'er said dismissively. "I have the writ, and everything here is by the rules. Besides, I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm going to take a small amount of ingredients, which I will sell at twice the price. Don't forget that the Golden Dragon Bank's motto is 'harmony breeds wealth.'

"I'm here to make us money. Out of my way." She brushed past Ning Zhao and led Li Luo onward to the store, thrusting the jade writ into the hands of an old man.

He doubtfully examined it, but he eventually nodded after ascertaining its authenticity. He ordered some servants to get the ingredients requested.

"A moment, Young Mistress."

Lu Qing'er nodded.

"Li Luo," Ning Zhao said in a low voice. "You are the young lord of House Luolan. It's unseemly of you to be encouraging Qing'er to break the rules. President Yu will not be happy when she finds out."

Li Luo looked straight into his unfriendly eyes with disinterest. "Oh, your concern is very flattering. I'm not taking them for free though. As Qing'er says, I'm willing to pay double for them."

"Is this about money?" Ning Zhao sneered.

Li Luo matched him in snideness. "You know well that the Suncreek Villa is in trouble, but here you are trying to stop me in every way. Do you have another agenda?"

Ning Zhao bared his teeth. "Watch your black tongue, Young Lord. Best clean up your act at House Luolan before you even point a finger outside."

Li Luo regarded him as he would a muzzled rabid dog. He turned away to wait for the ingredients to arrive.

Ning Zhao smiled to himself. Surely the people he had sent to inform President Yu would have reached her by now.

Qing'er must have stolen the jade writ, and President Yu would not be happy about that. And if he calculated right, her displeasure would be turned on Li Luo. Perhaps she would kick him out directly.

Ning Zhao smugly settled back to wait.

"Qing'er might be enamored, boy, but you think President Yu's going to let you off?"