

Resonance 81

Chapter 0081: The Festival Begins

As Li Luo methodically filled up the holes on the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel, another half a month of holidays passed.

But in this half a month, Li Luo's resonant power did not reach the Tenth Seal level. He was still at the Ninth Seal. Evidently, progress slowed as one climbed. Previously, he had been helped by the aid of the skygold room, not to mention he had kept up his studies despite his blank palaces. That had helped him to accrue some latent potential.

But now all that was spent. His cultivation speed had returned to normal.

Also, now that the examinations had been over for a month, the excitement was finally dying down. Now the Tianshu citizens were turning their attention to another major event on the horizon.

The Festival of Purifying Spirits.

In this world of resonances, the importance of resonances could not be overstated. They determined one's cultivation. They determined everything.

And spirit liquids and purifying lights could improve one's resonance grade. They were consumables that could not be missed out on. Therefore, anything that concerned these liquids and lights would always attract attention.

After all, the examinations were mere entertainment for those not involved. Spirit liquids and purifying lights, however, affected every single person's own abilities!

The Festival of Purifying Spirits would attract all of the villas across the Tianshu Province. They would send their finest resonance artificers to fight for the title of Artificer Prime. Having the Prime would greatly improve the reputation of the villa, and affect its market share.

The profits at stake were enormous.

All of the villas in the Tianshu Province had started preparations long ago, including House Luolans' Sun creek Villa.

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The venue of the festival was one of the arenas in the City of Southwind.

Li Luo arrived with Cai Wei, and he was surprised by the number of people. "It's really crowded," he remarked.

"The festival has already been underway for three days. But so far it has been just a product exhibit. The real show starts today," Cai Wei replied.

"How is Sister Lingqing doing?" Li Luo asked.

"No idea. She was buried in her books for a long time, and I didn't dare to disturb her. But she's already here. You can ask her yourself." Cai Wei shrugged.

Li Luo nodded. The two walked towards the area that the Suncreek Villa had been allocated. They found Yan Lingqing leaning on the rail and looking towards the center, where a refining platform was being assembled. Evidently, the tempering contest today would be held there.

"Seems like Sister Lingqing is really serious about today," Li Luo called out.

Yan Lingqing propped up her silver-rimmed spectacles. "I don't mind losing to anyone besides Song Qiuyu," she said mildly.

"And are you confident?" Li Luo asked.

Yan Lingqing fell silent. "Both Song Qiuyu and I are fourth-grade resonance artificers. We should be pretty evenly matched. I've chosen a fourth-grade spirit liquid that I'm most familiar with. I can consistently produce it at about 58% to 60%. And as far as I know, the fourth-grade liquids and lights that Song Qiuyu has produced so far are just a little behind that.

"If nothing has changed drastically, my chances of victory are slightly higher.

"But the Song family is working with THE Inkwater Villa now," Cai Wei chimed in doubtfully. "They're going all out. Would they prepare something special..."

She looked around them carefully. "Do you think Song Qiuyu will bring out a fifth-grade liquid or light?"

"Impossible!" Yan Lingqing immediately replied. "I have only barely grasped the basics of a fifth-grade resonance artificer, and all my attempts to temper a fifth-grade spirit liquid have resulted in failure. How could Song Qiuyu achieve it?"

Seeing her so resolute, Cai Wei desisted. After all, Yan Lingqing was the expert in spirit liquids and purifying lights. She knew her field best.

Li Luo smiled. "It seems like everyone can bring an assistant when tempering. Have you chosen yours, Sister Lingqing?"

She turned her beautiful eyes to him. "You don't trust me?"

"I'm just concerned," Li Luo replied sincerely. "I don't really mind if Sister Lingqing wins or loses. Even if you lose, I don't think a swing in reputation will affect the quality of the Suncreek Villa's spirit liquids. There really isn't a need to feel too pressured."

Her look softened. "I'm not pressured," she replied out of habit.

But as she turned away, she looked back, lifting her sharp chin ever so slightly. "But if you want to be my assistant, feel free to do so. You're the Young Lord anyway. Not like I can control you."

Li Luo grinned. Her aloof character was quite endearing.

After tying up the conversation, he went into the arena, planning to look around at other spirit liquids and purifying lights.

Cai Wei and Yan Lingqing watched him from the balcony. The former smiled. "Seems like our Young Lord has quite the tender side to him."

Yan Lingqing sniffed. "Kids are meddlesome. Even if something really crops up, what can a second-grade resonance artificer do to save the situation?"

"Harsh words. I sensed you were moved back there though," Cai Wei teased.

"Huh!? I have fawners aplenty! You think those few words can move my stone heart? Do you know what my nickname was back in the Resonance Tempering Hall?"

"Stone Hearted Maiden!" Yan Lingqing proudly puffed out her chest.

Cai Wei pulled a face. "What's there to be proud of? Did you temper your brain into a spirit liquid by any chance?"

"Besides... that pose doesn't suit you."

Yan Lingqing glared at her. Wicked vixen! How dare she make fun of her figure!

"I'll get you!"

She reached out a naughty hand to tickle Cai Wei's tummy and chest.

The two women squealed mischievously on the balcony, looking like a pair of young girls.

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Not fortunate enough to see this, Li Luo was ambling around the arena aimlessly, browsing through the products of the various villas.

He was a second-grade resonance artificer after all. Being exposed to more products would broaden his understanding of spirit liquids and purifying lights.

He indeed learned quite a lot from his wanderings.

After quite some time, Li Luo finally decided to head back when he suddenly saw a familiar figure.

Lu Qing'er.

Today she was dressed in a fashionably pale green. Her short skirt was paired with white lace socks. Her lovely looks were complemented by the white parasol she was holding. She was constantly drawing looks from others.

However, there was a nasty fly hovering nauseatingly near her.

It was a familiar figure. Mo Ling, who they had clashed with back at the Tower Qingfeng.

This guy was a real playboy. Despite his obvious intentions towards Song Qiuyu, he was still flirting.

He was standing by her side, smiling happily as he tried to chat her up. Lu Qing'er was keeping her expression under control, but Li Luo knew that her lack of expression indicated that she was irritated.

He snuck up on them and whispered.

"Selling flyswatters. 5,000 skygold apiece."

Chapter 0082: Mo Ling, Again

The sudden sound by her ear made Lu Qing'er jump. She turned to face Li Luo with a happy gleam in her eye.

Her girlish smile was a stark contrast to the stony expression from before.

"Your flyswatter's too expensive. Trying to rip me off?" Lu Qing'er laughed.

"Can't be helped. Your fly's too big. I suspect it's perverted," Li Luo said with full seriousness.

The corners of her mouth twitched.

Mo Ling's face darkened. "Li Luo, trying to start something?"

"I'm just talking with a schoolmate. None of your business." Li Luo smiled.

"Well, I'm your senior. You're being rude," Mo Ling said coolly. "That attitude is going to make you pay when you're in the Astral Sage College."

"Then I guess I'll bring a few more bodyguards with me," Li Luo replied.

Mo Ling's eyes flashed. He knew that Li Luo was reminding him of the Tower Qingfeng incident. Still, he knew that there was no point in kicking up a fuss now. He swallowed his anger. "Laugh while you can, Li Luo. After today, the Inkwater Villa's spirit liquids and purifying lights will dominate the Tianshu Province, and your Sun creek Villa will be screwed."

He stomped off.

Li Luo shook his head. "How did you attract such a wasp?" he asked, turning to Lu Qing'er.

She glared at him. "Nonsense. I was just wandering around. No idea why he would come over."

She was annoyed that Li Luo had implied that she had invited him.

Li Luo hurriedly pacified her. "My bad, my bad. Sister Qing'er is as pretty as a floating lotus. You were unlucky to float into a pile of cow turd."

She rolled her eyes at him, slightly mollified. "The Inkwater Villa has established an alliance with the Song family. They will definitely make their move during the festival," she said with a hint of worry.

"Don't worry. I'm prepared," Li Luo said indifferently, waving it off.

Lu Qing'er was a little curious, but she did not press further. Instead, she stared closely at Li Luo. "You're a Ninth Seal already?"

"You're a Tenth Seal already?" Li Luo countered. Their physical closeness allowed him to detect the faint frost energy she was emitting. It was much colder than before.

Clearly, her resonant power had gotten even more robust.

She was a Ninth Seal before, and reaching the Tenth Seal by this month was normal.

She nodded slightly. She was holding a parasol due to the hot weather, and now she inclined it slightly to shade Li Luo as well. "I can probably reach the first tier of the Resonant Master Stage before I enter the Astral Sage College."

"Impressive." Li Luo whistled, giving her a big thumbs up.

"You should buck up too. Don't think we'll be anything special in the Astral Sage College just because we ranked first and second in the Tianshu Province. The other newcomers from stronger provinces will be really intense."

"I heard that there's a streaming competition when we get in, that decides what class we go to. It will be far harder than the College Final Examinations," Lu Qing'er told him severely.

Li Luo nodded. Of course he would not underestimate the other newcomers. He wasn't qualified to do so. The Tianshu Province was only mid-tier in Xia Kingdom. If he really thought first place in the Tianshu Province meant anything, then he would truly be a fool.

As the two chatted pleasantly, Mo Ling had stalked off angrily to the Pine Nut Villa. He spotted Song Qiuyu watching the crowd.

"Who's pissed you off now?" She snickered at him.

"Met that Li Luo again. Grr," Mo Ling said, grinding his teeth.

"No worries. After today, I think he'll regret the way he's treated you," Song Qiuyu said uncaringly.

Mo Ling nodded, his expression softening. "Are you ready?"

"I'm roughly as strong as Yan Lingqing, but with your Mo family's secret recipe, I will definitely beat her. Hehe, I can't wait. That little squirt was really stuck up. I'm going to enjoy the look on her face when I beat her," Song Qiuyu said gleefully.

Hearing her coquettish laugh while he enjoyed the view of her hourglass figure, Mo Ling was starting to feel an itch in his heart. He reached out towards her waist.

She twisted away, teasing him. "If my father sees you, you had better be ready to propose marriage or leave Tianshu."

Mo Ling hurriedly replied, "I don't mind getting engaged immediately, as long as you are willing."

"Let's wait for a good time." She smiled.

He could only nod.

She again turned to the arena below, her eyes losing their warmth. Of course she had seen Mo Ling flirting with Lu Qing'er. The guy did his thinking with his lower half. If he wasn't still useful to her, she would have ignored him.

However, they still needed the Inkwater Villa's help to deal with the Suncreek Villa. For now, she would have to endure him. She could kick him away once her mission was accomplished.

A gong interrupted her thoughts, and there was a pronounced increase in the crowd's chatter.

Song Qiuyu looked eagerly. Finally, the tempering contest was here.

When the gong sounded, Li Luo and Lu Qing'er also followed the crowd towards the center of the arena.

Li Luo could see that Yan Lingqing had already made her way there. Her willowy figure, silver-rimmed spectacles, and long, flowing hair had caught the eye of many men.

"Does House Luolan hire based on looks? That majordomo Cai Wei is a real looker, and this president of the Suncreek Villa is an ice queen too." Lu Qing'er teased him as she checked out Yan Lingqing.

Li Luo had no immediate rejoinder to that. After all, both women were indeed great beauties. If others did not know that Jiang Qing'e was the one who had arranged for them to come here, he would indeed be slandered as a playboy.

"I'm heading over to Second Uncle's side. Want to come with?" She crooked a finger towards the Golden Dragon Bank's seats on the spectator platform. Although the Golden Dragon Bank was not a villa, their deep business connections made them interested in the proceedings as well.

Li Luo shook his head and smiled. "I'm going up." He indicated to the arena.

Lu Qing'er's surprise showed. "You're competing in the tempering arts?"

"I'm just going to assist Sister Lingqing. And gain some exposure. After all, I'm a resonance artificer too." Li Luo grinned.

"I'll be rooting for you."

Lu Qing'er laughed. Batting her luscious lashes at him with interest, she waved him off with a dainty hand before turning away with her white parasol.

Li Luo headed for the stage, where Yan Lingqing currently was.

Chapter 0083: An Old Grudge

On stage, there were refining workstations made of transparent crystal. Yan Lingqing was in one of them, currently arranging her things.

She looked up when Li Luo walked in. "You really can't get away from that girl no matter where you go."

She had spotted him walking around with Lu Qing'er.

"Coincidence," Li Luo clarified.

"I think she's a little interested in you," Yan Lingqing said.

"No way! I won't let you sully our pure and platonic friendship!" Li Luo objected.

She coughed once dryly. "Well, it's none of my business, but the girl has standards. Still, I wonder if you will be able to hold back the Empress over at the Astral Sage College."

"It's getting out of hand now. Empress? Then what am I? The Emperor?" Li Luo countered.

"You wish."

Yan Lingqing scoffed. She handed him a formula. "This is the spirit liquid I'm going to refine. Familiarize yourself with it."

Li Luo carefully read it. The fourth-grade spirit liquid was called Cyanobacteria. It was a rather difficult spirit liquid to get right, as fourth-grade liquids went. Evidently, Yan Lingqing was holding nothing back against Song Qiuyu.

He scanned the list of ingredients and then inhaled sharply. There were more than 400 of them. Processing each one perfectly would be quite a test of one's refining skill.

"This is the formula for a fourth-grade spirit liquid? Incredible." Li Luo marveled. He could only refine second-grade spirit liquids for now, for which he had to handle at most 100 types of ingredients. That was nothing compared to a fourth-grade spirit liquid.

Besides, the fusions between the fourth-grade ingredients were even more complicated. For second-grade ingredients, at most a fusion of two ingredients was required. But for fourth-grade ingredients, up to six ingredients needed to be fused. It was a huge leap in difficulty.

Staff members were starting to deliver refining ingredients, and they were soon neatly piled up nearby. As the assistant, Li Luo went to inspect them.

Yan Lingqing smiled approvingly at Li Luo's meticulousness.

Time ticked on, and soon the various head resonance artificers of the villas in the Tianshu Province were all in their own refining workshops. Li Luo spotted Song Qiuyu entering the Pine Nut Villa's as well.

The moment she stepped on stage, her eyes met Yan Lingqing's. Electricity sizzled between them.

Yan Lingqing showed a blank face, but veins could be seen popping from her clenched fist.

"Why do I get the sense that you hate her a lot?" Li Luo asked curiously. Yan Lingqing was one who rarely cared about anything besides spirit liquids and purifying lights. And yet she reacted strongly to Song Qiuyu.

Yan Lingqing fell silent for a moment. "We used to be on pretty good terms. I even forced a recommendation to get her into my teacher's refining group. But in one crucial competition, her error caused our group to lose. Our teacher was furious and kicked her out.

"That wouldn't be anything major, but later on she entered another refining group. Specifically, the one that beat us in the last competition because of her error."

"That's mean." Li Luo agreed.

Yan Lingqing was silent. It was not hard to guess that Song Qiuyu had probably been bought out by that team.

And as the one who had recommended Song Qiuyu, Yan Lingqing probably felt complicit in the betrayal and apologetic towards her teacher. No wonder it was hard for her to control her feelings around Song Qiuyu.

She bent her head and continued arranging the ingredients.

Li Luo did not press further, joining her until the bell rang. A loud cheer went up from the crowd.

Staff entered the stage and announced the various resonance artificers and their villas.

As their names were read, they were greeted by cheers from their supporters. All of them had made a name for themselves in the Tianshu Province.

From the spectator stands, President Lu of the Golden Dragon Financial Group laughed as he looked over at the Sun creek Villa's refining platform. "That Li Luo is really everywhere."

Lu Qing'er smiled. "He's a resonance artificer after all. He's here to gain experience."

The lavishly-dressed President Lu turned to Lu Qing'er and probed cautiously. "I say, Qing'er, haven't you been rather close to Li Luo recently?"

Lu Qing'er's eyes moved. "So what?" she replied calmly.

President Lu chuckled nervously. "Well, I just wanted to say that Li Luo is already an engaged man..."

Lu Qing'er looked at the handsome young man behind the crystal wall and was quiet for a beat. "That engagement is only in name, isn't it?"

"Who knows..." President Lu wrung his hands. ~~nove-1b-1n~~

"Second Uncle, you're imagining things. I'm not interested in Li Luo. But he helped me before, and saved me before. That made us close. You wouldn't deny me my friends, would you?" Lu Qing'er demanded.

"No, no..."

President Lu quickly shook his head. He seemed relieved. "Well, it's good that you're not interested. You're going to the Astral Sage College, and that's in Xia City. Your mother is there... And it's best to mention Li Luo as little as possible in front of her."

Lu Qing'er's eyebrows went up. "Why?"

President Lu chewed on the inside of his cheek for a while. "It's baggage from the last generation, really. Best not to ask. Just... don't mention Li Luo in front of your mother."

Lu Qing'er's eyes narrowed, but finally she nodded. For some reason, she suddenly felt irritated.

Ding! Ding!

The sound rang out with a sense of urgency this time, and it was clear that the competition was about to begin.

The crowd yelled and cheered.

Within their refining workshops, the resonance artificers squared their shoulders and prepared themselves.

In the next moment, there was a flurry of water and light resonance power in each workshop, and the artificers started to prepare their ingredients.

The competition had begun!

Chapter 0084: The Fifth Border

"Frostriver Algae, half a strand.

"Panshan Vitality Roots, three.

"Qianxi water, three standard measurements.

"..."

Within the Suncreek Villa refining workshop, Yan Lingqing was issuing crisp, clear instructions, all of which Li Luo was swiftly following. He would measure out whatever she needed and hand it over.

As Yan Lingqing picked up each crystal vial, she added water resonance power to crush the ingredients and release their special properties.

There was no idle chit chat now, not during the competition. It was going to be a sprint from start to finish.

However, Li Luo was picking up many things from the efficient way that Yan Lingqing was working. Her understanding of ingredient integration was superb.

She deftly worked through the complex steps, and he knew that he would have ruined everything if it was left to him.

She was indeed quite an expert in refining.

But Li Luo also knew that this was just the start.

Outside, there were commentators discussing the competition. Although those outside might not fully understand the processes, looking at the tense expressions of the resonance artificers helped them feel immersed in the situation. The tension was infectious.

More and more crystal vials began to line up on Yan Lingqing's rack, twinkling with blue light. Their preparation was finished.

Beads of sweat had started to appear on her beautiful face, but she did not even have time to wipe them. All her attention was concentrated on the vials in her hands. Her water resonance power worked nonstop, fusing yet more ingredients.

The fusion of ingredients looked simple, but it required precise control of one's resonant power to remove the impurities from within them. One had to wield the resonant power for hundreds of passes before the required essence could be properly extracted.

To the untrained eye, it looked like just a channeling of resonant power into the crystal vials, but there were invisible changes happening behind that image.

A classic case of the experts watching the hustle and the laymen enjoying the bustle.

This was a time for the resonance artificers with higher-grade resonances to distinguish themselves. A higher-grade resonance was easier to wield, and it could compensate for a lack of experience.

Watching her beautiful face carefully, Li Luo hesitated for a moment. This time while arranging the ingredients, he flicked a finger and injected a dribble of waterlight resonance into it.

"Skyleaf Juice," Yan Lingqing said. Li Luo immediately handed it over to her.

Yan Lingqing took it, imbuing her water resonance power and crushing it entirely. But this time, as the ingredients fused, her hands clenched tightly.

She was shocked. This fusion had gone much more smoothly than before. When channeling her resonant power into the crystal vial, there seemed to be another special force inside making things effortless.

However, this was a competition, so she had no time to examine it carefully. She could only quickly finish her work and move on to the next step.

Li Luo was still carefully watching her expression. Seeing her not panicking was a relief. So his bit of resonant power had not interfered with the fusion. Perhaps it was helping.

This was no surprise. After all, Li Luo's resonant power worked like a special water source; it could accommodate other water and light resonances. His waterlight resonance was a sixth-grade one, but compared to single-element resonances, it was definitely comparable to a seventh-grade.

Yan Lingqing's own water resonance was a lower seventh-grade. Therefore, Li Luo was technically stronger than her based on pure resonant power alone.

However, because she was the main artificer, and Li Luo's power was a weak Ninth Seal's, his waterlight resonance had only helped to ease the situation.

Besides, he knew that Yan Lingqing did not actually need his help for the Cyanobacteria spirit liquid. Therefore, his assistance had been just a testing of the waters.

Time continued to pass under their frenzied and tense pacing.

At this step, the refining was in its final phase. Li Luo breathed easy now. There had been no problems with her refining, and the fourth-grade Cyanobacteria spirit liquid had been completed.

Ding!

A bell rang out, and the voice of the judges could be heard.

"Greenlight Villa, Zhao Feng. Fourth-grade Greenlight purifying light, success. Tempering strength: 55%!"

"Whitefang Villa, Liu Tong. Fourth-grade Whitefang spirit liquid, success. Tempering strength: 56%!"

As these were announced, Yan Lingqing did not seem fazed, calmly holding up her Cyanobacteria spirit liquid.

However, her composure did not hold up for long, because a surprising announcement was made.

"Pine Nut Villa, Song Qiuyu. Fifth-grade Dainty spirit liquid, success! Tempering strength: 53%!" Wow!

The entire arena broke out in an uproar. Many were looking at Song Qiuyu, who was holding up a vial with a smile on her face.

Fifth-grade spirit liquid?!

The Pine Nut Villa's Song Qiuyu had actually completed a fifth-grade spirit liquid?!

Many of the other resonance artificers paled. They were virtually all fourth-grade resonance artificers. No one was a fifth-grade artificer, and yet Song Qiuyu had produced a fifth-grade spirit liquid? That would crush the competition!

Whether this was a stroke of luck or otherwise, it had been produced in the competition, and it was rightfully her result.

Song Shan and Mo Ling both grinned triumphantly.

As for House Luolan's side, the flower fan in Cai Wei's hand faltered and her lovely goose egg-shaped face stiffened. She looked worriedly over at Yan Lingqing and Li Luo's refining workshop.

The atmosphere was thick with tension.

Yan Lingqing had been focused on her ingredients, and suddenly she froze as if petrified. The crystal vial in her hand did not move an inch.

She stared at it, and the energy began to leak out of her.

"How could she have... a fifth-grade spirit liquid?" Yan Lingqing stammered to herself.

Peng!

A slip of her resonant power, and the crystal vial shattered. The liquid dripped down her fingers. She placed both hands on the desk to steady herself. Her head was hung, her long hair covering her face entirely.

There was no point in continuing now...

Song Qiuyu had produced a fifth-grade spirit liquid. Even if her Cyanobacteria spirit liquid turned out to be a resounding success, it would still fall short.

Li Luo looked at her, her resignation obvious. Through the strands of her hair, he could see that her eyes were watery.

It was his first time seeing Yan Lingqing so vulnerable.

Li Luo looked up at Song Qiuyu. She was gloating, her victory assured. Li Luo saw her looking over at Yan Lingqing with a superior sense of mockery.

He was silent for a few moments, then he suddenly spun Yan Lingqing around. He stared into her watery eyes. "Sister Lingqing," he said tersely, "you are definitely better than Song Qiuyu. I don't know how she managed to refine a fifth-grade spirit liquid, but if she can do it, you can do too!"

Yan Lingqing shook her head. "I've never succeeded, not even once," she whispered hoarsely.

"Perhaps not before, but perhaps you can do it now. We're already behind anyway. What's there to lose?" Li Luo whispered back.

He took her fair hand and wiped it dry with his clothing, encouraging her tenderly. "Sister Lingqing, I don't really care about what victory or defeat here will do to the Sun creek Villa. I just think that you're an excellent artificer. How could you lose to her?"

She looked blankly at his chiseled features. Although still raw with youth, there was a strong will there that drummed up the courage in her.

She bit her lip and gave him a small nod.

"Then... let's try."

Chapter 0085: With Our Powers Combined

"Sister Lingqing, which fifth-grade spirit liquid are you most familiar with?" Seeing her perk up, Li Luo smiled encouragingly.

"Heavenward spirit liquid. I'm most familiar with its formula, and it's the one I've been practicing. But like I said, I've never succeeded before," Yan Lingqing said.

He nodded and called over the staff to tell them that they were going to change their refining materials. Very soon, a new batch of ingredients was streaming into the refining workshop.

Song Qiuyu had already walked out of her own refining workshop with a superior smile. "Yan Lingqing, still struggling? No way you can turn the tables," she gloated to herself. She was feeling very good about having decisively beaten Yan Lingqing.

Back at the Resonance Tempering Hall, Yan Lingqing had always been firmly in the lead. Later on, Yan Lingqing had brought Song Qiuyu into the refining group, but that teacher had continued to favor Yan Lingqing and treat Song Qiuyu coldly.

It had made her extremely resentful and jealous. She felt that her talent was comparable. The teacher's bias was unfair!

Although Yan Lingqing was kind, it was a kindness that smacked of pity. She did not want it. Yan Lingqing, you were just trying to show off how nice you were!

"Now it is my win!"

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"Ready."

Li Luo looked over at Yan Lingqing.

The latter took a deep breath and then nodded gravely.

"Glass solution, 10 drops!"

Li Luo immediately pulled out a transparent fruit and squeezed gently until 10 drops were in a test tube. He put a pulse of resonant power in.

This one was slightly more than his experiment previously.

He handed over the test tube, and she started to purify it and condense the medicinal properties.

But this time, she could feel a strong and vital resonant power that was helping her tune things. She was taken aback by its presence.

Most crucially, it was not at all hindering her processing. It was as though someone had secretly added a powerful water source to it.

And then a jolt of understanding flooded through her, making her turn to look at Li Luo anew.

If she still did not understand at this point, then she would truly be a numbskull.

She did not speak about it, quickly settling herself. With the help of that revitalizing resonant power, she swiftly began to purify the ingredients.

"Citric Drizzle Fruit.

"Cloud Rootgrass.

"Blossom Paste."

The names tumbled off her tongue in quick succession, and Li Luo promptly supplied the ingredient each time.

Time ticked on.

The other resonance artificers were done. There were successes and failures, but none of it mattered. Before Song Qiuyu's fifth-grade spirit liquid, they were all defeated.

Therefore, all eyes were now turned to the last refining workshop yet to finish—Suncreek Villa.

"Not giving up yet?"

Mo Ling was smiling smugly up from the Song family's viewing area. He shook his head. "Yan Lingqing, struggling like a fish on the hook. Does she think she can produce a fifth-grade spirit liquid too?"

"Impossible. She's not at the fifth-grade level yet. Even Qiuyu could not have done it if not for the secret Inkwater ingredients."

Song Shan gave a calculated smile. "The moment Qiuyu is declared Artificer Prime, we will announce the launch of the Inkwater Villa's products. It will definitely cause a huge stir, and the Suncreek Villa can basically pack up and close."

Song Shan's heartbeat quickened as he imagined the moment.

After today, the Pine Nut Villa would be the best villa in the Tianshu Province.

At the Golden Dragon Bank's spectator area, President Lu frowned. "There must be some trouble at the Suncreek Villa side. The Song family is working together with the Inkwater Villa. They delivered huge quantities of their secret formulas before. They must be aiming to crush the Suncreek Villa today."

Lu Qing'er was alarmed to hear this. The Song family must have been planning to make their move at this festival.

Their goal? To surpass the Suncreek Villa and dominate the spirit liquids and purifying lights market in the Tianshu Province.

Over at House Luolan's side, Cai Wei felt a tingle of excitement upon seeing Yan Lingqing rally herself. She knew of the grudge between the two. If she lost here, it would be a big mental blow.

Still, she was very anxious. She did not understand how Yan Lingqing could possibly turn this around.

Soon enough, another bell rang out, reminding participants that the time limit was approaching.

Song Qiuyu folded her arms across her chest, resting her head against the crystal wall at an angle. She cocked an eye towards a fully-focused Yan Lingqing, watching her struggle with pleasure. n0Ve.lB-1n

"Yan Lingqing, how helpless! It will not save you," she hissed.

Ding!

Another bell.

Yan Lingqing put down her hands. Her face was pouring with fragrant sweat, her chin tucked in. Close to 1,000 ingredients had been prepared, and the toil on her had been incredible.

However, the preparations were all done.

It had gone much more smoothly than she had ever done before.

But the final step was to refine the watersource and then fuse all of the prepared mixtures together to form the final spirit liquid.

It was an equally important step.

Yan Lingqing took a deep breath and picked up a polymerization crystal.

Li Luo put his hand on hers.

Yan Lingqing looked at him, puzzled. If not for the gravity of the situation, she would have thought he was hitting on her.

"Sister Lingqing, let's do this together." Li Luo gave her a sunny smile that dazzled her for a moment.

Recovering, she nodded. Although she did not really understand what he was doing, she trusted him.

Both used their resonant powers together, infusing the polymerization crystal.

A pure light settled within the crystal. Next, droplets of watersource began to condense and drip down into a crystal vial.

Li Luo's face was pale. He had used up virtually all of his resonant power. Although he was much weaker than she was, the purity of the watersource that he could produce was a cut above Yan Lingqing's.

With the two working together, the result would have to be better than a watersource that Yan Lingqing produced alone.

Holding the vial up, Yan Lingqing looked at the purest watersource she had ever produced.

It was all thanks to Li Luo.

She again turned to stare at him, and he grinned at her weakly, his face pale.

"Sister Lingqing, the show's yours."

With a slight incline of her head in acknowledgement, she started to bring the ingredients together, adding test tubes to the bottle of watersource.

When they injected the watersource, the test tube solutions glowed, filled with lifeforms fusing together and creating new possibilities.

The changes would take the better part of a minute before subsiding.

Within the crystal vial, the liquid bubbled and quietened, and its color gradually faded away. At the same time, beams of light danced merrily within.

"Hua!"

The crowd was getting excited now. The resonance artificers were even more astonished. From the dancing lights, they could tell that this was more than a fourth-grade spirit liquid. It had to be a fifth-grade spirit liquid!

Yan Lingqing stared at the crystal vial, lost in thought. Finally, she stretched out a trembling hand and inserted the tempering measurement needle.

It climbed to 58!

Her eyes lit up like the sun.

The crowd roared, led by the commentator.

"Suncreek Villa! Yan Lingqing! Fifth-grade Heavenward spirit liquid, SUCCESS! Tempering strength, FIFTTTYYYY EIGHT!"

ROAR!

After a stunned silence, the crowd exploded with excitement. The Suncreek Villa had barely finished in time, but they had managed to produce a fifth-grade spirit liquid!

And it was even higher than Song Qiuyu's!

Incredible!

Amidst the cheers, the smirk on Song Qiuyu's face was frozen in time.

Chapter 0086: The Momentum Turns Again

Wave after wave of crowd chatter echoed around the arena.

Everyone was amazed at the outcome. A comeback at the last moment by Suncreek Villa's Yan Lingqing. She too had made a 5th-grade spirit liquid!

"WHAT!" Song Shan and Mo Ling thundered, springing out of their chairs aghast. They were completely incredulous.

"Impossible! IMPOSSIBLE! There must be a trick!" Mo Ling snarled. Yan Lingqing was clearly only a 4th-grade resonance artificer. How could she have made a 5th-grade spirit liquid?

Anger clouded Song Shan's face, brewing like a storm.

The sudden turn of events had devastated his perfect plan. It was foiled completely.

Over at the Golden Dragon Bank side, President Lu's eyes were round as saucers as well. He rubbed his portly chin. "Too much of a coincidence, isn't it? When did Yan Lingqing become capable of refining 5th-grade spirit liquids too?"

"If Song Qiuyu can do it, why can't she?" Lu Qing'er laughed with relief.

President Lu fumbled for an answer. "Well normally speaking, neither should be able to. But both HAVE been able to. Could it be luck?"

"Who knows." Lu Qing'er said indifferently. All that mattered was that Suncreek Villa had won. Li Luo would be happy now.

President Lu looked at her and shook his head.

However, he too was happy that Suncreek Villa had won. After all, Song Yunfeng had betrayed Lu Qing'er during the exams, and he wasn't happy about it at all. He had dealt business with them with a grudging manner since. If not for the fact that she had turned out safe, he would not have let the matter rest so easily.

Over at House Luolan's side, Cai Wei sank down in relief. Her hand was thumping her chest repeatedly, trying to calm herself down. "How did Lingqing do it? Was she inspired by the young lord's good looks? But she's not that kind of superficial girl?"

Yan Lingqing was not like her. She didn't care about a person's looks at all. Still, who cared because Suncreek Villa had gotten the ideal result.

"Impossible!"

"How could she have created a 5th-grade with a higher tempering strength than me?!" Song Qiuyu was completely floored. When she recovered, she immediately objected.

Her attractive features were twisted in spite now.

"There must be a trick!" She yelled at the judge.

He ignored her. His only responsibility was to judge the outcome. After confirming that Yan Lingqing's product was indeed a 5th-grade spirit liquid with a 58% tempering strength, he immediately announced the winner. "Suncreek Villa's Yan Lingqing, no mistakes in tempering. 5th-grade spirit liquid, tempering strength 58%, first place!"

"I declare Suncreek Villa's Yan Lingqing the winner!"

Whao!

Loud gasps and cheers filled the arena after the decision. This was a spectacular comeback.

"Wow, we won!"

In the refining workshop, Yan Lingqing was stunned. Joy lit up her beautiful features, and she turned to hug Li Luo, cheering and jumping.

Li Luo hurriedly raised his hands, declaring his innocence. But feeling her slim, fragrant body pressed against him was a unique feeling that curvier bodies just could not give him.

She quickly got her emotions under control, a slight tinge of embarrassment in her eyes.

"That's not my fault though!" Li Luo protested his innocence. What an unreasonable woman. She had jumped him, and now she was angry?

Yan Lingqing sniffed, then waved a joking fist at him. She could not hide her overflowing joy at having made the comeback.

"Congratulations, you're the Tianshu Province's Artificer Prime," Li Luo said brightly.

She rolled her eyes at him. The title was worth exactly zero gold. She didn't really care about it. What mattered more was getting a win over her long-time rival, Song Qiuyu.

"It's not like you don't know how I won... But with this success, I feel like perhaps truly becoming a fifth-grade resonance artificer is not far away now." She gushed.

"Impressive." Li Luo gave her a thumbs up. If she could become a fifth-grade artificer, then she would truly be a respectable expert in the field on a wider scale.

She turned to regard him with her gorgeous eyes. She knew that he was essential to the win, and that was still a source of puzzlement for her. He was clearly only a second-grade artificer. His water resonance did not seem to have that high of a grade either. But the water resonance he had produced was brimming with vitality, even stronger than hers.

Li Luo was clearly hiding some secrets.

Still, she had the presence of mind not to ask it here. She was not an overly nosy person. Since he was not volunteering information, she wasn't going to pursue the issue.

She set this matter aside for now.

With the refining complete, Yan Lingqing and Li Luo walked out of the refining workshop. She looked over at the spiteful Song Qiuyu and said coolly, "Sorry to deny you the win."

Song Qiuyu snapped, "Yan Lingqing, I don't believe you can refine a fifth-grade spirit liquid!"

"I don't believe you can either," Yan Lingqing retorted. "If you have doubts, we can go get the results verified. See if we used any little tricks in our work."

This competition was just a part of the festival. It was not particularly major, and so many of the rules were a little iffy. But if Song Qiuyu truly wanted to push the issue, they could get the results verified by professionals.

Still, it was as she had said. She did not believe that Song Qiuyu could make a fifth-grade spirit liquid, because she understood her ability well. She must have pulled off something dirty.

Song Qiuyu bit her lip so hard that it left a bloody line. In the end, she did not dare to pursue the issue. She was unsure. Mo Ling had sworn that the Mo family's secrets could not be detected, but she did not dare risk it.

They had already lost.

Besides, the title of Artificer Prime would've just been the appetizer to their plan. Although it might not have gone as smoothly as they hoped, it did not actually affect their subsequent operations.

She turned a hateful eye on Yan Lingqing. "You think you've won? Dream on!" She swallowed her anger and turned to the crowd. In a clear voice, she declared, "Everyone, the Song family has big news to announce. From today onwards, the Song family will be working together with the Inkwater Villa to produce a new line of spirit liquids and purifying lights.

"First-grade Blackstar spirit liquid, 62%.

"Second-grade Blackmoon spirit liquid, 61%.

"Third-grade Blackglory purifying light, 60%."

This was greeted with astonishment and excitement from those present. The famous Inkwater Villa was, of course, a name that many in the Tianshu recognized. This was great news for the average consumer. Higher quality at the same price? Who would pass it up?

Presently, the best choices were the first-grade Azure Jade spirit liquid and the second-grade Ruby Slush spirit liquid from the Suncreek Villa. Both were about 60%. It seemed like the Song family's newest line would surpass that!

They now saw that this was the bigger goal of the Song family today.

The championship fight was merely a boost to their reputation.

Even though they had lost the title, the new line of products had quality that would speak for itself. The momentum was with the Song family now. It truly did not matter where the title went. The true winners here were the buyers.

Yan Lingqing's heart sank when she heard the news. So that could not be denied.

How would they deal with the Song family's move?

Yan Lingqing helplessly turned to Li Luo, but she found him with a cheerful grin on his face.

Somehow, it made her heartstrings tighten, then she felt the tension evaporate from her body.

Chapter 0087: Upgrades, Upgrades Everywhere

The excitement continued for a long time. The Song family's move had huge implications. Working together with the Inkwater Villa? The Inkwater Villa was famous throughout Xia. In terms of expertise and scale, they were far beyond any villa in the Tianshu Province.

It was like releasing a tiger into the sheep flock.

One could only imagine that most of the spirit liquids and purifying lights market would now fall into the Song family's hands. And the Suncreek Villa would fall just as quickly as they had risen.

Song Qiuyu's expression eased up. She looked loftily at Yan Lingqing. "You might have won the competition, but the Song family has beaten the Suncreek Villa."

However, bright laughter erupted from a nearby Li Luo. She looked over at him. "Is that amusing to you?"

Li Luo nodded, but didn't reply. Instead he turned to the crowd. "Everyone, the Suncreek Villa also has an announcement to make. From today onwards, we will upgrade our first-grade Azure Jade and second-grade Ruby Slush spirit liquids. By my calculations, the new spirit liquids will probably have a tempering strength of 64%"

Wow!

This announcement gobsmailed the entire crowd. Even the other resonance artificers stared at Li Luo, open-mouthed.

64% for first and second-grade spirit liquids?

If that could be mass-produced, it would be a quality that would rank in the top 10 even in the whole Xia Kingdom.

The other top 10 products were all the result of countless experiments and trials by the huge powers. These groups had invested a lot of time and effort to stabilize their formulas.

And now the Suncreek Villa was saying they could achieve it?

"You're talking out your ass, boy!" Mo Ling shouted from the Song family spectator stands. Li Luo's mouth was too big. How dare he have the cheek to say he could reach 64% with the Azure Jade and the Ruby Slush? That was a tall order even for the Inkwater Villa.

Song Shan looked as though he had swallowed something slimy. He wanted to dismiss Li Luo's words as nonsense, and yet there was a slight unease he could not shake off. This Li Luo was always an enigma.

Over at the Golden Dragon side, President Lu turned to Lu Qing'er in surprise. "Another upgrade to the Suncreek Villa's spirit liquids? So soon?"

She blinked back at him innocently, indicating that she did not know.

Song Qiuyu was equally stunned at the announcement. "What are you blabbing about? Not even the headquarters of your Suncreek Villa could achieve that. You? A small branch? What do you think spirit liquids and purifying lights are, kid? You think they'll leap and dance at your command? Other major villas have gone through countless trials and experiments and done a ton of research to gain experience. Only then could they inch up their quality by a fraction."

The Suncreek Villa's spirit liquids and purifying lights could barely touch the fifties a mere two months ago. They had barely been able to hold ground against other villas in the Tianshu Province, let alone compete against the Pine Nut Villa.

They had suddenly managed to muster a drastic improvement, but surely they couldn't pull it off a second time so soon, right?

Yan Lingqing remained silent. There was doubt in her eyes. She did not know if even she could do it.

But after what had just happened, her confidence in Li Luo had deepened significantly. And since he had dared to announce this publicly, he had to be prepared.

Li Luo waved to someone behind him and immediately a servant of House Luolan hurried forward with a black box. He opened the box to reveal dozens of spirit liquids and purifying lights within. They were Ruby Slush and Azure Jade from the Suncreek Villa.

Li Luo took one out casually and then tested it. To everyone's shock, the tempering strength was actually at 64%.

The crowd went wild.

Still beaming, Li Luo continued, "From today onwards, both Azure Jade and Ruby Slush will be at 64%. If any fall below that, the Suncreek Villa guarantees a full refund. No questions asked."

It was a bold declaration that made his commitment clear.

Song Qiuyu's sour face was back. She wanted to accuse Li Luo of hiring expert artificers to produce them, but with that proclamation, it signified that he was confident in producing them long-term, and ensuring quality.

She shook with rage and frustration.

She had worked so hard for today to be successful. She had snared the Inkwater Villa and engineered the alliance, all in order to destroy Yan Lingqing and the Suncreek Villa. And now it was all in the water.

She had lost to Yan Lingqing, and now their new products had been soundly beaten by the Suncreek Villa as well.

They were well and truly a laughing stock.

"No way! No way!!" Mo Ling howled, having broken down completely.

He refused to believe that the Suncreek Villa could produce such quality liquids and lights in the long term.

"Li Luo must be lying!"

Song Shan stood up, his face expressionless. Ignoring the raving Mo Ling, he turned and left.

There was nothing that could be changed about today's outcome. The Song family's moves had all been easily swept aside and negated. No, they had been turned fully to their opponent's advantage.

64% tempering strength. It would forever be a mountain that crushed the Song family. There was no coming back from this one.

Again, the Song family had been crushed and rolled over.

He remembered that it was not always this way. Before, the Song family had devoured all of House Luolan's assets in the Tianshu Province. They were flying high. How had it become like this?

In his mind's eye, Li Luo's face appeared.

Everyone knew that House Luolan's Jiang Qing'e was to be envied. But had they been sleeping on this young lord? Still waters run deep, but he struck with the deadliness and unexpectedness of a viper.

"Let's go. Show's over." n.)0vεl01n

President Lu stood up as well, smiling at Lu Qing'er. "Although I don't have much proof, my years of business instinct is telling me that the Young Lord is something special.

"He might not have the same sharpness that his parents and Jiang Qing'e have, but he knows how to pick his moments. That is a strength uncommon for those his age. I think he will be a match for Jiang Qing'e in the future."

He turned to leave.

Lu Qing'er tilted her head to look at Li Luo and smiled faintly as well. "I think so too," she said softly.

Thinking about how they would soon head to the Astral Sage College together to begin a new chapter of their lives, she felt an inexplicable tingle of anticipation.

Chapter 0088: Preparing to Leave

After the festival, on the carriage taking them back.

Li Luo, Cai Wei, and Yan Lingqing were riding together, and the two were looking wide-eyed at Li Luo.

"Look, I know that I have a really pretty face, and we've spent so much time together that you must be having some thoughts. But in order to keep your relationship with Sister Qing'e intact, I suggest you control yourselves. If you can't, I suggest you discuss this with her," Li Luo sincerely warned them after the staring was getting out of hand.

"Tsk."

They both tsked him. This guy was getting bolder by the day.

"Young Lord, you're a man of many secrets indeed. But it's time to spill. How are we going to maintain 64% strength in the future?" Cai Wei asked.

"Easy. I've improved the watersource's purity. So the tempering strength has increased accordingly."

Both were speechless. Yan Lingqing had guessed at least that much. After all, the only factor in spirit liquid quality that Li Luo could influence was the watersource.

Still, even Yan Lingqing was amazed by how much he had purified the watersource before. Had he managed to do so again?

"The Songs went to great lengths to secure all that external aid. They must have gone through an endless series of negotiations and talks. After all that, they lost to a simple watersource purification... I almost feel sorry for Song Qiuyu now." Cai Wei shook her head, smiling.

Li Luo matched her smile. Luckily, the Suncreek Villa had not yet pushed out any third-grade spirit liquids. As a Ninth Seal, he was not strong enough to output so much watersource. Otherwise, he would have raised it as well and totally shut the Songs out of the market.

"But you're heading to the Astral Sage College soon, right? What will we do about the watersource then?" Yan Lingqing asked suddenly.

It went without saying that the Suncreek Villa's spirit liquids were only where they were thanks to Li Luo. When the enabler left, how could they ensure quality?

He had already guaranteed refunds for anything less than 64%.

Li Luo had already thought of this. "When I go to Xia City, I'll send back a batch of watersource every month to ensure quality."

And as Li Luo's resonant power rose, the amount of watersource he could produce would increase as well. It should be able to meet the needs back here at the Tianshu Province.

Both women nodded in approval.

"But if you go to Xia City, Lingqing and I should go with you," Cai Wei said. "After all, I came to the Tianshu Province to stabilize the businesses here. I've finished all of my tasks. I should be returning to Xia City as well."

Yan Lingqing nodded as well. "The Suncreek Villa is doing well. The other day, headquarters sent over a fourth-grade resonance artificer as the vice-president, appointed by Jiang Qing'e. He must be trustworthy; I can leave matters here to him."

She gave him a sly smile. "Actually I'm still a student at the Astral Sage College. When you get in, you will have to call me 'senior sister.'"

"Indeed, it would be a waste for talents like yourselves to remain at the Tianshu Province." Li Luo replied with a laugh.

Cai Wei was the administrator of House Luolan. Because of their troubles here, Jiang Qing'e had sent Cai Wei to hold down the fort at the Tianshu Province. As for Yan Lingqing, she was a gifted student at the Resonance Tempering Hall in the Astral Sage College. She had agreed to come to the Tianshu Province at the behest of Jiang Qing'e mainly to improve her skills.

Now that he was leaving the Tianshu Province, the two of them would not linger either.

"When do you plan to move?" Cai Wei asked.

"I probably need another half a month or so," Li Luo replied.

There was still a little over a month left in his holidays. And he needed to fill as many holes on the Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel as he could, to build his second acquired resonance.

"Just about right, timewise. We'll make arrangements, tie things down, and be ready to leave around that time as well," Cai Wei said cheerfully.

"I haven't seen my babe Qing'e in a while now. I miss her," Yan Lingqing said eagerly.

Li Luo nodded emphatically. "I miss my babe Qing'e too. I wish I could give her a big, lovey-dovey hug."

Yan Lingqing suddenly turned serious. "I suggest you be more circumspect at the Astral Sage College. If you really make a move, I suspect you will be clubbed to death."

Li Luo started. "Is it illegal to hug my fiance?" He grumbled. "Are the Astral Sage College people so barbaric?"

Yan Lingqing rolled her eyes at him.

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The days after the festival passed peacefully, reverting to a state of calm.

The Suncreek Villa was doing better and better by the day, steadily dominating the spirit liquids and purifying lights market. This was the highest annual profit that they had ever turned. n-Overb1n

When there were just two weeks left until the end of the holidays, Li Luo's resonant power finally managed to reach the threshold, and he broke into the Tenth Seal.

At this level, it was time to prepare for the next step, the Resonant Master Stage, and consolidate his resonance seed. Still, it was going to take time. As for his Acquired Resonance Godly Forging Wheel, Li Luo had worked on it steadily, and now only two holes were left.

Still, these two holes eluded his every attempt. He could not find suitable ingredients that the wheel would accept. His guess was that the wood and earth elements in the ingredients were insufficient.

Which meant that these last two holes needed to be filled with something really rare.

He had specially gone to visit the Golden Dragon Bank, but the ingredients there did not meet his standards either. Finally, President Lu mentioned that if he wanted even better ingredients, he would probably have to visit the Golden Dragon Bank's headquarters in Xia City.

There, he would probably find something that would meet his needs.

With that, Li Luo took it as a sign that it was really time to leave for a bigger pond.

Chapter 0089: The Luolan Situation

City of Southwind, east gate.

Li Luo stood before the carriage, looking out at the city with a complex expression. For as long as he could remember, most of his life had been spent here. And now he was leaving.

He let those memories play through his mind now. Finally, he turned and lifted the curtain, entering the carriage.

"Let's go."

At his order, the convoy started to move. The road to Xia City was a long one. Even at full speed, they would take close to ten days. And since Li Luo was the young lord of House Luolan, safety was a priority. He had brought many bodyguards with him.

The convoy thundered on, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

Although they were moving swiftly, the wide, spacious carriage was quite stable. Li Luo sat cross-legged on one side. Opposite him, Cai Wei was sitting with one leg elegantly draped over the other, reading a book with great interest.

Deep in the carriage, there was a little space where Yan Lingqing was currently working on her spirit liquids and purifying lights to kill time.

The two women were accompanying him to Xia City, having completed the tasks that they had set out to do in the Tianshu Province.

"Sister Cai Wei, how is House Luolan looking right now?" Li Luo suddenly asked, turning from the scenery flying by.

She lifted her eyes from her book and considered his question. "Not too good. You should know that House Luolan has tempted many. It has many lucrative businesses all over the Xia Kingdom. Each year it turns millions of skygold in profits. It's enough to turn any eye.

"And now House Luolan is besieged with problems inside and outside. Its invited vultures, swooping around. If not for the remnants of House Luolan's strength and the potential that Jiang Qing'e demonstrates, I'm sure someone would have made a move on House Luolan long ago."

Li Luo was silent for a while and then shook his head. "If there was truly a power eyeing House Luolan, those paltry deterrents would not be enough."

Jiang Qing'e indeed had shocking potential, but potential was not strength. Besides, if not for the fact that she was protected by her status as an Astral Sage College student, there would probably be many who would attempt to kill her off.

Cai Wei looked at him with surprise. "What are you thinking?"

Li Luo responded slowly, "I think it's the threat of my parents... Or rather those powers cannot be sure that my parents are truly gone. They are worried that if they overstep, one day my parents will return... and they won't be able to save themselves."

The wrath of two Duke Stage experts was enough to give anyone pause here in the Xia Kingdom.

Cai Wei thought it over, then nodded in agreement. "The Young Lord's thinking is sound."

"Still, this threat will only weaken as time passes. We are fat cattle, too tempting for the hungry tigers." Li Luo sighed softly.

Even he did not know how long the threat of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan could hold the scavengers at bay. Perhaps one day, any day, those other houses would gain intelligence confirming things, then it would only be a matter of time before House Luolan was finished off.

When would that time be?

Li Luo scowled. Very likely, next year's House Luolan Housemeet. Pei Hao would be the first to cause trouble and incite damaging moves against House Luolan.

Which meant that time was of the essence. He was but a Tenth Seal kid. These enemies were savage tigers and wolves. How he wished he had a few more years!

In a few years, he and Jiang Qing'e would both be at the Duke stage. At that time, they would rule this place!

Li Luo sighed deeply. Unfortunately, those people were not going to give him that much time.

"How are the elite powers in the Xia Kingdom treating House Luolan? On the surface," Li Luo asked.

"If you take away the Astral Sage College and the Golden Dragon Bank because of their unusual positions, the Xia Kingdom's royal court is the strongest among the elite powers. Although in recent years, the royal court has been in turmoil. The ruler is young, and a steward is governing in lieu. Below the royal court, there are various illustrious houses and the five Great Houses.

"Among the five Great Houses, Houses Duze and Jiyan have the strongest enmity with House Luolan. House Lanling sits neutral, while House Jinque has passable relations with us. Or rather... they have plans to use House Luolan to chip away at the other stronger houses," Cai Wei explained.

"These factions all have their headquarters in Xia City. While you were at the City of Southwind, you might not have felt affected. But once you step into Xia City, I'm afraid trouble will always be knocking at the door."

Li Luo nodded. He was prepared. Although Jiang Qing'e was handling matters on behalf of House Luolan, ultimately he was the rightful owner.

He had been left unmolested at the City of Southwind, ensconced away from the politics. Plus, his blank palaces meant that they had all ignored him as an invalid.

But now he was one step closer to the whirlwind of politics. It was unavoidable.

Still, this was his responsibility as the young lord. He could not leave Jiang Qing'e to shoulder all the burden. He might have been helpless and unqualified before, but now he had his own strength, and it was his duty to lend it.

"Understood..."

Li Luo nodded thoughtfully. "My parents really left behind a mess, huh."

They were in a mess partly because he was not strong enough. He had to grow stronger, as quickly as possible. And in the Xia Kingdom, there was no better place for that than the Astral Sage College.

Therefore, he was very happy to have secured admission there.

...

The trip was not at all tedious, not with beauties to accompany him. It passed in leisurely fashion.

A few days passed in the blink of an eye.

Their convoy had reached the capital of the Xia Kingdom.

Li Luo stood on the carriage, looking far ahead. He could see the silhouette of a large metropolitan area. It was still some distance away, but already he could see how intimidating it was.

It took one's breath away.

The City of Southwind was not even a fraction of this.

"Well, as expected of the capital," Li Luo said.

Cai Wei and Yan Lingqing were smiling with pleasure. They were finally back.

"That was a smooth journey. Better than I expected," he said to them.

But just as he spoke, they spotted some people on a high slope nearby. They were raising a banner hurriedly.

Li Luo could see a golden sparrow on the flag, wings outstretched. It glittered in the sun.

"Is that House Jinque?" Cai Wei asked, surprised.

Li Luo was surprised too. He had made no effort to keep move to Xia City a secret, so it was not difficult for others to find out. He had imagined that his first encounter would be with unfriendly forces trying to stop or toy with him. However, he didn't expect it to be with House Jinque, who was supposedly on decent terms with House Loulan, who had made first contact.

What did they want?

The question was answered soon enough. A messenger galloped over on a crimson horse-like creature, announcing loudly as he came, "The young mistress of my house invites the young lord of House Luolan to meet."

"The young mistress of House Jinque?"

Li Luo looked over at Cai Wei. "The young mistress is called Si Qiuying. She's the same age as you. She should be heading to the Astral Sage College as well," she answered. "I guess you two haven't met before?"

Li Luo pondered this. "Perhaps another one infatuated by my dashing looks?"

The two women rolled their eyes.

Li Luo chuckled. "Overthinking helps no one. I'll know when I meet her."

He leaped out of the carriage, landing lightly on the back of a sturdy crimson beast.

"No need for bodyguards?" Cai Wei called.

Li Luo waved her off. No one would be foolish enough to actually do anything to him in Xia City. No matter how much House Luolan had fallen, it still had some power.

The red creature brayed and then galloped back up the steep slope.

At the top of the slope, expensive fur rugs had been laid out on the grass. On it was a long table, behind which a green-haired girl sat in a kneeling position, her quiet eyes watching Li Luo's approach.

1. Jinque literally means golden sparrow.

Chapter 0090: Si Qiuying

Li Luo looked at the green-haired girl behind the table as he got off the horse.

She was wearing a form-fitting but casual dress that accentuated her curves. She was kneeling behind the long table, her legs bare.

Her eyebrows were artfully drawn, an artist's touch on porcelain skin. Her silky, green hair cascaded down and swayed in the breeze. She was indeed quite a beauty.

Li Luo followed her lead, kneeling at the long table. He threw a smile her way. "Si Qiuying?"

"Li Luo?" She smiled back, her voice lilting as a nightingale's call.

He nodded. "I guess I recognized you right."

"In terms of looks, you've perfectly inherited the best of the two House Lords," she said lightly.

"Reading between the lines, it means I've not inherited much else?" Li Luo countered.

"I didn't say that. Not to the face of the champion of the Tianshu Province's exams." She smiled.

"Are you from Xia Academy?" Li Luo asked.

Like Southwind Academy, Xia Academy was also a high school-level institution. However, it was much more famous, being in Xia City itself.

She gave a graceful nod. "However, just second place."

"Impressive, from a school in the top 3." Li Luo praised her. Although she had not revealed her resonant power, he could sense that she was probably at the Resonant Master stage.

Through their short exchange, Li Luo was starting to build an impression of her. Warm on the exterior, and a cool pride running deep in her bones. Still, that was understandable for the young mistress of House Jinque. Plus, they were much more powerful than House Luolan currently was.

"Miss Si, you wouldn't be here to welcome me, would you? I don't think the likes of me would justify such respect," Li Luo suddenly stated.

Si Qiuying did not immediately reply. Instead, she pointed a slim finger towards Xia City. "There are people from Xia Academy intending to give you trouble today. The one behind this is Duze Beixuan."

Li Luo was taken aback. "I haven't even offended him before."

"House Duze has been at odds with House Luolan for a long time," she said wryly. "He dares not make trouble for Sister Qing'e, so he can only turn on you."

"Well, thanks for that." He nodded, cupping his hands in respect towards her.

She eyed him. "Li Luo, you do know the position House Luolan is in, dont you?"

He sighed. "Spit it out please. All this prevarication is tiring. You're not even that old, there's no need to speak like you're all old and stuffy."

Her brows drew together slightly. "I'm asking you if you want to protect House Luolan," she said sternly.

"Well, of course. But I'm hounded by wolves on all sides. It's not going to be easy," he replied.

"I have a method that can protect House Luolan," she said serenely.

Not waiting for his response, she pressed on. "An alliance by marriage between House Luolan and House Jinque. Together, we will be a force to be feared."

Li Luo started, eying her with hesitation. "Eh, sorry. I'm already engaged. I can't get engaged to you."

Now it was Si Qiuying whose composure slipped. "I didn't mean you and ME!" she snapped at him, her pale skin flushing slightly.

"I meant my elder brother and Sister Qing'e!"

"Well, that's even more out of the question," Li Luo said apologetically.

Si Qiuying glared at him. "Li Luo, don't play the fool with me. You know the implications of what I propose. If you want to protect House Luolan, you need to pay a price. If you are willing to initiate the cancellation of the engagement with Sister Qing'e, and consent to the marriage between my brother and her, then we will all be a family. We will stick together and protect House Luolan to the end."

"Is this your will? Or do you speak for House Jinque?" he asked.

"As long as you agree, it is House Jinque's will. A marriage between my brother and Sister Qing'e will bring many benefits and little harm," she replied.

"Well, in that case I don't agree."

She stared at him with irritation. "Are you giving up on House Luolan?"

"Of course I want to protect House Luolan. But I also want the person in question." He grinned.

"You are too greedy. Greedy people never end up well, and the friendship of House Jinque is not extended to avaricious people," she said coldly.

He shook his head and smiled. "Miss Si, you are naive. Do you think this is friendship? Between factions, there is only the weighing of benefits."

"House Jinque and House Luolan are still friendly. Do you think this is some fairy-tale friendship? Wrong. House Jinque is simply worried that House Luolan will fall too fast and feed the other houses. Even in its miserable state, House Luolan can still take the burden off House Jinque."

"So, Miss Si, if you are representing House Jinque, then do not speak to me of friendship. n..0Vellbn

"House Luolan may look to be on shaky ground, but still it stands. And not because of any friendship with House Jinque. If you still do not understand, go ask your parents. I am in no mood to educate the illiterate."

He had spoken in a neutral tone, but there was an undertone of abrasiveness intended to anger Si Qiuying.

"Pa!"

Her small hands slammed the table, and her resonant power pulsed forth.

He looked at her mildly. "Miss Si's behavior has not left me with a good first impression of House Jinque."

"Li Luo, you go too far!" she hissed.

"Best take a look at yourself first," Li Luo said calmly. "I might be from the City of Southwind, but you can't just treat me like an ignorant bumpkin."

"I was just giving you a suggestion," she said coolly.

Li Luo rose. "I have never thought that House Luolan needed to rely on others, because I know no one can be trusted. Anyone who wishes to target House Luolan will have to go through me."

"I guess I'll ask Sister Qing'e," Si Qiuying said coldly.

"Oh yes, they would have to go through my fiance as well."

She stared at him angrily. "You talk a lot. If not for Sister Qing'e, House Luolan would have been plundered long ago."

"Which backs my point. A reliable fiance is a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

The gnashing of her teeth was clearly audible now. She took a few deep breaths, realizing that she had underestimated Li Luo's brazenness. He didn't seem to feel embarrassed in the presence of women. Instead, he seemed to relish it.

Li Luo ignored her. He looked far across the land and saw another group. One among them bore a banner with House Luolan's emblem.

Leading them, Li Luo could spot a beautiful and familiar figure.

He whistled to them, then cocked his head back for another brutal parting shot.

"Oh look, my fiance is here to pick me up."