

Resonance 191

Chapter 0191: Underground Palace

Ox Biaobiao's words hung in the air, and Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e looked at him with a mixture of confusion and surprise.

They had no idea what he was talking about.

"What are they looking for at House Luolan?" Li Luo asked hoarsely.

"Something your parents left behind... and also if they are still alive."

A sharp intake of breath from the pair.

"Aren't the master and mistress at the Nobles' Battlefield? Why would they come to headquarters to ascertain their fate?" Jiang Qing'e pressed.

Ox Biaobiao smiled wryly. "That's why those two are awesome. Did you really think they would go to the Nobles' Battlefield without any backup?"

They stared at him. It felt like every new sentence Ox Biaobiao dropped unlocked a whole new world.

He smiled at their stunned expressions. "Come with me." He rose.

They hurried after him through the house, finally reaching... the kitchen.

Where Ox Biaobiao always was.

He walked towards a wall, flicking a jet of resonant power at it. Immediately after, it shone with bright lights that arranged themselves into a neat set of lines.

Clack, clack!

Strange whirring and clicking sounds filled the room, then the patterned lights formed a staircase leading underground.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e stared in wonder.

"This is the entrance. The key is my resonant power. Of course, both of yours work too—I just never told you about it before," Ox Biaobiao said as he led them downwards.

The pair were speechless as they followed him.

After they entered, the lines faded away, and the wall returned to normal behind them.

As they walked deeper onwards, the light eventually faded away, and they saw that they were in a spacious, underground palace.

There were even more glowing runes here, arranged in some sort of pattern that eluded their grasp.

In the center of the underground palace was a stone dais. A dragon and phoenix had been carved into it, and there was a candle burning at the head of each mythical creature.

One flame was crimson, the other a deep blue.

Li Luo gasped. He could feel a blood connection with the aura from the candles.

"These... are?"

Jiang Qing'e seemed to be sensing the same thing, her eyes wide as she waited on Ox Biaobiao's answer.

"You guessed it," he smiled. "These are the natal fires of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan. They represent their current condition. If the flame burns bright, they are in no mortal danger."

Li Luo felt a great weight lift off his chest. He shivered with relief, feeling the goosebumps prickle across his skin.

All these years, it had been a worry that he had carried with him. Of course, he proclaimed his confidence that they were alive and well, but the Nobles' Battlefield was a great unknown. Over time, the seed of doubt had grown within him.

After all, the Nobles' Battlefield was fraught with enough danger to scare even Duke experts like Mentor Chi Chan. And it was so feared by Dukes that they had to choose fighters by lottery.

He had thought that there was no way to assuage his worries, but now these flames were burning brightly before him, warming his heart.

He felt a pure joy come to life within him, and he smiled.

"That's great..." Jiang Qing'e's voice broke, her golden eyes watery as well.

All these years, she had been just as worried as he was.

"Uncle Biao, why didn't you tell us earlier?" Li Luo asked with no resentment. There had to be a good reason.

"Because there are people in the Xia Kingdom even more interested in their condition than the two of you."

His words had a sinister ring to them.

Could it be that the mysterious Duke intruder last night had been trying to find the underground palace?

"Do you think this underground palace is just a simple house for the two natal fires?" Ox Biaobiao gestured to the complicated light runes that covered the walls in a dizzying scrawl.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e looked around them. Their meager abilities were definitely not going to be able to understand the mysteries of this place.

"Actually, throughout all these years, Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan's natal fires have been severely weakened time and again. In the worst cases, they were barely flickering. After all, the Nobles' Battlefield is one of the most dangerous places in the world, and even Dukes can only try and defend themselves."

Both children shuddered as they imagined the terrors that ran wild out there.

"But eventually, they were able to make it through because of this underground palace... It was a secret they left behind. I really have to hand it to those two, they're extremely resourceful."

"See the dragon and phoenix carvings? They were handcrafted by Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan. If they're in serious danger on the battlefield, these two carvings can transmit an emergency burst of power. Their trump card for survival.

"This trump card has saved them more than once in these years.

"You might not fully appreciate just how miraculous this is. The Nobles' Battlefield is special, and not even Kings can easily channel energy within. Yet Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan pulled it off."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e nodded humbly.

"They're really wise," Li Luo said with an approving nod.

"Is this what the Duke intruder was after?" Jiang Qing'e asked. "Did he break into this place to ascertain that they are alive?"

House Luolan had been beset by many misfortunes in the last few years, but the threat of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan returning had held their enemies at bay.

"Not just to ascertain... Once they break in, they can snuff out the natal fires. Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan would be severely injured.

"A severe injury in a place as dangerous as the Nobles' Battlefield could very well be fatal," Ox Biaobiao said.

Their eyes went flat. Who was this stranger, and why was he so vicious?

"But don't worry yourselves about it. The underground palace is divided into two parts. The external wards covers the entire House Luolan headquarters. No Duke intruder will be able to enter without seeing their strength severely compromised."

"Why have I never sensed its presence?" Jiang Qing'e asked doubtfully.

She had been at House Luolan's headquarters for many years.

"Because it isn't of much use to those below the Duke Stage. There is no way you would have felt it.

"Do you know what the source of the defensive ward's strength is?"

They shook their heads.

Ox Biaobiao grinned. "This one should shock you. It's..."

He pointed upwards.

"House Luolan."

Chapter 0192: Secrets

"House Luolan?" Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e repeated. They had no idea what Ox Biaobiao was talking about.

The defensive power over House Luolan that stopped other Dukes from entering... came from House Luolan?

How did House Luolan have such power?

Ox Biaobiao smiled at their confusion. "Well, more accurately, it comes from House Luolan's presence.

"It sounds fantastical, but the wards indeed have such a power. They were calibrated at the time that House Luolan was built. The stronger House Luolan is, the greater its presence, which in turn strengthens the defenses. It's quite a marvelous trick.

"But conversely, the weaker House Luolan is, the smaller its presence, which diminishes the strength of the defensive wards. When House Luolan ceases to exist, the defensive ward will vanish completely.

"The intruder was able to send an energy clone in precisely because House Luolan has been in trouble for the last two years. The Luolan presence must have weakened quite a lot.

"This is the main reason why I'm telling you all this now. The defensive wards need a stronger presence, and the only ones who can get it done are you two."

They sat up straight. So the fortune of House Luolan directly affected the protection of the House and its underground palace...

It sounded crazy, but Ox Biaobiao had no reason to lie to them. And they were not arrogant enough to think themselves the best judges of what was possible in the world.

Still, stabilizing and strengthening House Luolan had been their goal all the while.

Which meant that they had to get House Luolan more people, money, and reputation.

That was good. Both were pleased that their goals now had an additional purpose: they actively had to keep Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan safe, rather than just passively awaiting their return.

"Uncle Biao, since you could kill that Duke intruder, you must be a Duke yourself, right? If you could use that power, a lot of House Luolan's problems would be solved," Li Luo pointed out.

House Luolan was beset by hyenas because they lacked a strong Duke to stand up for them. If Ox Biaobiao could plug that gap, the situation would be much better.

He sighed. "You've overestimated this old ox..."

They cocked their heads curiously.

"Too much past history, and I won't tell you all of them one by one. Just know that I can't leave House Luolan's headquarters.

"My strength is limited in many ways as well. I won't act unless the situation is extremely dire," he said, a shadow of helplessness flitting across his face.

The two were a little afraid to hear this, but it was to be expected. If Ox Biaobiao could really intervene, he would not have watched House Luolan decline to its current state.

With a little flex of his powers, Pei Hao would be put in his place.

"One more question... Who did the intruder represent? House Duze? House Jiyan? Or another elite power?" Li Luo asked.

"Also, was the death lottery of both my parents a conspiracy?"

These were important questions. They had to figure out who was out to get House Luolan.

Ox Biaobiao smiled ruefully. "I have no idea who the intruder represents. It's all too easy for a Duke to hide their own signature. And there is quite a number of Dukes in the Xia Kingdom..."

"As for the death lottery, I have no idea either. But there is certainly a mysterious agent out to get House Luolan..."

"In recent years, they have been snooping around House Luolan, although the defensive wards had kept them at bay in the past. But after a few years, I'm afraid that they might have figured out the limits of the defensive wards. The attacks have been more frequent and forceful lately..."

"A few months ago, when Pei Hao threw House Luolan into confusion... Perhaps it was calculated to weaken the defensive wards further."

Jiang Qing'e was quiet for a while. "Uncle Biao, I have another big question..."

"Why would this unknown agent be after House Luolan and the natal fires?"

Li Luo's heart raced. There had to be some bigger plot afoot.

Ox Biaobiao sighed.

"Firstly, I have something important to tell you... Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan are not from the Xia Kingdom. They came from beyond."

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e froze.

"Outside the Xia Kingdom? You mean, other kingdoms?" Li Luo asked.

Ox Biaobiao smiled but did not reply.

"As for this dark organization..."

He walked forward and tapped lightly on a spot near the dragon and phoenix carvings. A black stone compartment opened silently, revealing a sharp stone needle. There was a rhombus crystal on its point.

It sparkled with an otherworldly light, pulsing with a rhythm that seemed to reflect the breath of the world around them, worldly natural energy passing in and out at a measured pace.

Ox Biaobiao stared at the rhombus crystal with admiration.

"This is the core of the underground palace. When Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan are in trouble, it is this thing that transmits energy to them..."

"I think the dark organization is after this thing."

"It's called 'divine matter.' You guys might not have heard of it before, but all Dukes in the world dream of it. They would give anything for it. The legends say it allows them access to the secret of Kings..."

Chapter 0193: The Goal Is To Strengthen House Luolan

"Secret of Kings?"

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e had never heard of it before.

Of course, it was not just them. The King Stage was a realm that seemed beyond everyone from the Xia Kingdom.

The number of Kings since the Xia Kingdom's founding could be counted all too easily.

And right now, perhaps only the very seldom seen principal of the Astral Sage College was one...

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e could imagine how hard the path to King was, and why Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan would attract a lot of attention if it was known that they had such a secret.

Maybe the intruder was after that.

Things were getting interesting now. His parents were not from the Xia Kingdom, and they had such a wondrous treasure.

Li Luo suddenly felt like they had kept a lot of secrets from him.

"Uncle Biao, is there a reason you decided to share all this information now?" Jiang Qing'e asked quietly.

"Sharp," he said with a sober smile. "I'm afraid our enemies have clearly mapped out the limits of House Luolan's defensive wards. I think the defensive wards will reach their weakest state in about half a year's time.

"Our enemy might make good use of that... They might come in swarms to invade headquarters, seek out the underground palace, extinguish Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan's natal fires, and take away the divine matter.

"If things get to that point, I'm afraid I will not be able to stop them."

They were dismayed. A mere half a year? If that was true, then House Luolan was in great danger!

"So in this half a year, I hope that you can make House Luolan strong, or at least stable. Then we can deal with them better."

They knew the gravity of the task laid upon them. They thought they had time, but things were urgent.

Half a year...

No breathing room at all.

Still, there was no choice but to get it done. The alternative was invasion, extinguished natal fires, and no more divine matter. That was an unacceptable outcome.

"Uncle Biao, don't be too worried. The intruder's background might be unknown, but they must have their own fears, considering how stealthily they've been moving so far. I think that any drastic move they make will definitely catch the attention of the Astral Sage College, the Golden Dragon Bank, the royal court, and other great powers..."

"They may or may not know about the divine matter, but I think a little chaos and confusion might be to our advantage," she pointed out.

Ox Biaobiao nodded. Their enemy had moved very cautiously, perhaps to keep House Luolan's secret from others as well.

"Of course, we cannot pin our hopes on others. We have to work hard to make House Luolan strong," Jiang Qing'e asserted.

The other two nodded.

Ox Biaobiao was relieved now that Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were up to speed.

"Uncle Biao, you should have told us earlier." Li Luo smiled.

He chuckled. "And what were you going to do about it, Young Lord?"

The remark chafed. Did he see Li Luo as too weak before?

Ox Biaobiao suddenly stared at Li Luo.

"House Luolan's situation is pressing, but you should spare some attention for your own lifespan, Young Lord."

Li Luo stared at him, astonished. He knew?!

Back when Ox Biaobiao had said he was hollow, he had guessed that the old man knew. But now he was making it plain as could be.

"Lifespan??" Jiang Qing'e whirled around, horror-struck. Her eyes pinned him. "What's this about lifespan, Li Luo!?!?" she demanded in a trembling voice.

"You don't know? He didn't tell you?" Ox Biaobiao rubbed his head and smiled apologetically at Li Luo.

"My big, fat mouth..."

"Uncle Biao, please shut it immediately."

Li Luo seriously suspected that he had done it on purpose!

"Li Luo, explain. Now!" Jiang Qing'e shouted.

"Er, it's nothing much..." Li Luo said in a small voice. "Back when I solved the problem of the blank palaces, I paid a small price... leaving me with five years left to live."

Boom!

Light resonant energy exploded out of Jiang Qing'e's body, oozing and flowing from her. It was undirected, a loss of emotional control. Her power pooled around her, lighting up the shock and hurt on her face.

She could not believe it.

Five years of life?!

Li Luo only had five years left to live?!

He hurriedly calmed her down. "Don't worry, it's temporary. As long as I can reach the Duke Stage within the five years, all of my lifespan will come back!"

That worked a little. Her light resonant energy faded away, but her anger did not. "Duke in five years?"

In five years, he would be 23 years old. It was unheard of to become a Duke by then. Perhaps not even Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had pulled it off.

Jiang Qing'e might be on track to breaking that record, but she had a ninth-grade light resonance.

Li Luo might have dual resonances, but to get that far...

He nodded eagerly. "Don't worry, I'll definitely do it in five years! Not like there was a choice. I had to, if I wanted to solve the problem of my blank palaces."

Jiang Qing'e fell silent, then she sighed. The matter was already decided, and it could not be changed. Accept it and move on. Still, she was not ready to deal with Li Luo yet.

Angry.

She was angry that he had kept such an important fact from her.

Li Luo could only smile apologetically at her and throw resentful looks Ox Biaobiao's way. "Damn, Uncle Biao, we had no beef! Why did you have to do me like that!?"

Ox Biaobiao grinned and left.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e followed, then they emerged in a deserted corridor rather than the back kitchen.

"Keep the secrets I've shown you today close. Let no one else know. And just focus on how to make House Luolan strong.

"Good luck." Ox Biaobiao waved them off, then he turned and left.

Li Luo turned back to the still-silent Jiang Qing'e. "Sister Qing'e, don't be angry, okay?" he said in his best innocent voice.

"Come with me to the practice room." She stalked off.

Li Luo gulped, his legs turning to jelly. But eventually, he squared his shoulders and followed.

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Practice room.

Li Luo strapped on his protective gear, wooden sword in hand as he looked painfully across the room. Jiang Qing'e cut a sexy figure in her own gear.

Although her face right now was not at all appealing.

She looked ready to beat the stuffing out of him... Oh well. If that was what it took to appease her anger, then he would take it.

Swish!

Her wooden sword hissed through the air, and Li Luo's vision seemed to glitch as she suddenly appeared before him.

The wooden sword sliced down!

It was too quick to block!

Li Luo gave it up, closing his eyes. He was salted fish, hanging on the rack.

Ting!

He felt the breeze of the sword passing and clenched his jaw, but the sword landed lightly on his shoulder.

He opened his eyes cautiously.

Close up, he could feel her trembling, her always-steady eyes now trembling with great fear.

His heart melted.

"Sister Qing'e, I've made you worry." He sighed.

She came even closer, pressing her forehead to his. Their eyes were close enough to reflect each other's faces.

She closed hers. "You must do it, Li Luo," she whispered. "Promise me."

He nodded with a tender smile.

"I will.

"I promise."

Chapter 0194: Progression Plan

The next day, a freshly washed Li Luo heard a knock on the door.

He opened it to see Jiang Qing'e standing outside.

She handed him a box.

"These are the spirit liquids and purifying lights that Cai Wei prepared for you."

Li Luo received it eagerly. His spirit liquid stock in school had been exhausted, and going a few days without had been agony.

This fresh batch would sate him for a while.

"Perfect. Thanks, Qing'e."

"Thank Cai Wei. She's gone to great pains to squeeze out spare cash to get you these spirit liquids even though House Luolan is barely tottering along."

Li Luo nodded solemnly. House Luolan needed a lot of cash to get back to its feet, and his liquid cravings were costing them hundreds of thousands of skygold. She must be troubled.

Perhaps Cai Wei had never imagined she would one day be forced to live such a frugal life.

The two walked side by side. "You only have four and a half years left. I think it's best if you make some concrete plans. No more leaving it up to fate."

She said this so seriously that Li Luo could only nod obediently.

"By my calculations last night, you have to reach the Second Changing of the Evolving Resonance tier by the end of One Star Hall."

The Resonant Master stage was divided into the Sprouting Seed tier, Pattern Genesis tier, and Evolving Resonance tier.

The Evolving Resonance tier was further divided into four Changings.

"Evolving Resonance tier, Second Changing..."

Li Luo mused. He was only an Upper Flowering for now. Next was the Pattern Genesis tier, in which there were five patterns... It was going to be a long, long climb, and many of his peers spent a long time there.

He knew that most of the decently skilled students managed to reach Second or Third Pattern by the end of One Star Hall. The very diligent and talented might make it to Fifth Pattern. To reach the Evolving Resonance tier, and Second Changing at that... wow.

Not many students reached that level even by the end of Two Star Hall.

"I was a Second Changing when I finished my first year. And an Earth Fiend by the end of my second year."

"Your lifespan is limited. Time is running out. You can't afford to be slower than me."

She glared at him fiercely. "So you must reach the Evolving Resonance tier by the end of the year. And Second Changing!"

"If you lag behind at this first step, what chance do you stand? Cultivation is only going to get harder from there on!" "Focus on your cultivation for the rest of the year. I will convert all of my points into energy liquid for you. Outside of school, House Luolan will finance all the cultivation resources you need."

Li Luo stopped walking. "Qing'e, you need to cultivate as well. If you give me all your points, how are you going to compete against the Seven Astral Pillars at the end of the year?"

"I have a 9th-grade light resonance. No one can compete in terms of cultivation speed. Don't worry about me."

"Yeah, yeah. A 9th-grade light resonance isn't invincible you know. The Seven Astral Pillars aren't exactly easy either." He argued.

Astral Sage College's Seven Astral Pillars were all poised to be Dukes themselves. Jiang Qing'e's 9th-grade light resonance was rarer indeed, but they had an additional year of experience on her. Besides, their special status gave them access to far more resources than others. While Jiang Qing'e was improving, so were they. What they lacked in natural cultivation speed, they could make up for with their copious amount of resources.

Jiang Qing'e was too clever not to know this.

Li Luo was very touched by her gesture, but he had to reject it.

She stared at him.

He stared back. Then suddenly he smiled disarmingly. "Qing'e, I'm very touched by your concern, but trust me, okay? It's just the Evolving Resonance tier right? I'll breakthrough and show you at the end of the year." She held his gaze for a few moments, then looked away.

"We don't have that time. Do you think you can take it easy? I'll give you two months to reach Fourth Pattern. If you can't, we do it my way." Jiang Qing'e compromised.

"Two months to reach Fourth Pattern..."

Li Luo considered it. It would be very difficult, but he didn't bargain further. It was a reasonable pace if he was going to reach Duke in five years.

"Alright."

He nodded. Still, Jiang Qing'e's sense of urgency was making him anxious too. True, the five year limit had hung over his head before, but he had just sort of worked towards it without a concrete plan like what Jiang Qing'e was laying out.

With her supervision, there would be no more slacking off for him now. Perhaps that was a good thing?

Was he a masochist to accept the whippings so readily?

She nodded back. She was twisting his arm on this one, but it couldn't be helped. She couldn't let him relax one bit.

Otherwise on the day that he died, she could not bear it.

Her master and mistress had left Li Luo in her care. If she let them down, it would haunt her for life... Although that might not be for very long. Given her personality, if Li Luo's doomsday came, Death would probably get a buy-one-get-one-free deal.

Their negotiations over, both were left without any sign of relaxedness. They turned down the corridor together and came to the hall.

Cai Wei was already waiting.

"We need to go to Sunreek Villa today. Some resonance artificers that Pang Qianchi mobilized are already causing trouble there." She said with a concerned face.

"All the resonance artificer circles in Xia City are watching us. If we don't handle this well, we might never be able to recruit another artificer again..."

Although that branch of Suncreek Villa had rebelled under Pei Hao's control, but it was still formally under the name of Suncreek Villa. If others saw it as an internal coup, it would damage Suncreek Villa and House Luolan's reputation.

Before, Jiang Qing'e might not have cared so much, but now she knew the defensive wards of House Luolan were at stake. The presence of House Luolan lent it strength...

Suncreek Villa was a part of House Luolan. It would compromise the wards.

Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo looked at each other. They knew that much was at stake today.

"Let's go. We have to deal with it, no matter how troublesome it is."

Li Luo said with a smile, leading the way out towards the trouble.

Chapter 0195: At The Headquarters' Doors

Front doors, Suncreek Villa headquarters.

Elder Zheng Ping was looking glumly at the broad path where a throng of people were dressed in resonance artificer robes with the Suncreek Villa badge pinned prominently.

Many people were gathered around outside, watching the altercation with interest.

Whether engineered or otherwise, news of the Suncreek Villa's internal coup was spreading fast and far across Xia City, and many powers had sent listening ears out.

"Tang Yun, Lu Xiaofeng, you two are veterans of the Suncreek Villa. Back when the House Lord sent you to develop the Suncreek Villa's branch, you colluded with Pei Hao instead. How dare you show your face here now!" Elder Zheng Ping shouted.

The two middle-aged men in front of the group shook with barely suppressed mirth.

"Hey, hey, Zheng Ping, Old Zheng, that's not a nice thing to say. Pei Hao is a disciple of the House Lord. They went missing, and Pei Hao works for House Luolan—what's wrong with them helping Pei Hao?" a mocking voice called out.

Elder Zheng Ping looked over. "Pang Qianchi, didn't the Young Lord remove you? How dare you come out." It was the former vice president of the Suncreek Villa's headquarters, who had lost to Li Luo in the running for president. He had been confined to his house.

Pang Qianchi sneered. He had spent all these long years at the Suncreek Villa gathering allies, so he was not at all worried. That was why he had dared to challenge for the post of president.

The way he saw it, the Suncreek Villa would crumble without him, and Li Luo would eventually come begging for him to help restore things.

But in the last month, the Suncreek Villa had not crumbled as he had predicted. Instead, its profits were steadily rising, and he couldn't sit still any longer.

He had invited a few former associates for a chat to understand the situation at the Suncreek Villa. But the refusals to even meet him came one after another.

Li Luo had exerted speedy and firm control over the Suncreek Villa.

Pang Qianchi knew that it was because of Li Luo's secret watersource... The purity was a great draw for many resonance artificers.

Besides, he had also increased their pay. What more could they possibly want?

Pang Qianchi couldn't let things continue as they were, so he had gathered Tang Yun and the other resonance artificers for another clash.

"Elder Zheng Ping, I might have been removed from the position, but I'm not a criminal. Am I supposed to be on house arrest or something?" Pang Qianchi snickered, gesturing at Tang Yun and the others. "I'm just here to speak out on the side of justice for these brothers. They worked so hard to develop the Suncreek Villa, but now they're being neglected. The Young Lord has a secret watersource but is unwilling to share it with the branch; that's a little cold-hearted, isn't it?"

Elder Zheng Ping sputtered, so angry that he almost laughed. This damned bunch was really trying to play both sides. Siding with Pei Hao, but still demand the Young Lord's secret watersource?

But he couldn't say this out loud without exposing the internal fracture of the Suncreek Villa. Their reputation was on the line. Besides, not all of the branch's resonance artificers were on board with Pei Hao—they were just sandwiched in between.

If they took too hard of a stance, they might push those people to the other side.

He sniffed coldly. "We can discuss the rest inside. What's the point of blocking the whole street like that?"

The man called Tang Yun was sitting at ease in front of the resonance artificers. "As long as the Young Lord is willing to give the secret watersource to the Xiling branch, we'll go."

Zheng Ping was huffing through his beard, showing how worked up he was. But there was nothing else he could do. It was up to the Young Lord and Miss Jiang.

At a stalemate, they continued the silent standoff.

More and more people were gathering around.

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A nearby inn.

Beside the window, Duze Beixuan was looking down with a satisfied smile. "I want to see how Li Luo gets out of this one. I've even helped him spread the word."

Beside him was the fiesty, fiery Duze Honglian. "He's got some wits, that one. I thought Hanzhi was enough to topple the Suncreek Villa, but it seems like he's shored them up once again."

Duze Beixuan frowned. "I heard that Li Luo managed to produce a secret watersource with an upper seventh-grade purity. That turned things around."

"Upper seventh-grade secret watersource..." Duze Honglian's eyes narrowed. It was a rare find. Even their illustrious Bigswamp Villa had only managed to produce one after years of constant research and upkeep.

With such a powerful tool on hand, it wouldn't be hard for the Suncreek Villa to stabilize their situation. With enough time, they could even turn things around. But their disadvantage was their lack of foundation. In terms of formula research, they were years behind the Bigswamp Villa...

"The Suncreek Villa is desperately short on resonance artificers. If they can't handle this one, let's help them air their dirty laundry. See how many resonance artificers remain there after that," Duze Honglian said snidely.

Duze Beixuan nodded with malicious pleasure. He desperately wanted to vent his frustration after losing at the ranking battle.

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Another seat, some distance away from the Duze siblings.

Pei Hao was sitting in a private room, sipping his tea contentedly.

He was not looking out the window, but instead examining his own reflection in the cup.

His return to Xia City this time had been quite hasty.

He had not expected Li Luo to bring such great changes in just a mere few months.

Not only had he gotten first at the Tianshu examinations, but word was that he had revealed dual resonances in the Astral Sage College...

Pei Hao felt like he had just blinked, and things were already slipping out of control.

The young lord he had written off as a cripple, now out of the wheelchair.

"Li Luo..."

He suddenly crushed the teacup in his hand, looking out at an approaching carriage.

"Seems like our duel has to be brought forward.

"Enjoy the appetizer I've sent you."

Chapter 0196: Have It All

Clack, clack!

The carriage ground to a halt before the Suncreek Villa's headquarters. Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and Cai Wei alighted.

All eyes turned their way.

"Wow, having a party?" Li Luo remarked cheerfully, looking at the resonance artificers sitting in silent protest at the doors.

Elder Zheng Ping hurried forward and quickly told them everything. "Young Lord, Miss Jiang, this is no easy matter to deal with. Some of the resonance artificers here are just caught in the crossfire. I'm afraid the mastermind behind this is Pei Hao."

Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes surveyed the scene calmly. "Li Luo is president of the Sunreek Villa. He knows how to deal with this. I won't interfere."

Elder Zheng Ping gritted his teeth. "Young Lord, shall we be a little more decisive? Expel the Xiling branch from the Sunreek Villa entirely. Before they ruin our name—and the name of House Luolan—any further."

Privately, Jiang Qing'e agreed. She was a no-nonsense type that liked to cut the fat. The Xiling branch was tainted, controlled by Pei Hao. Amputate and cauterize. Sure, a few innocent resonance artificers might be caught up, but that was the price to pay. Besides, they were probably all too aware of Pei Hao's agenda, he was simply claiming to be helpless.

Li Luo regarded the protesters for a few long moments. He did not acknowledge Elder Zheng Ping's suggestion, instead strolling forward to the two middle-aged men sitting at the front. "Are you two Branch Presidents Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng?"

The two hesitated for a moment, suddenly reminded of the overwhelming presence of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan. Deep down, they recalled respect.

Those two had a reputation so strong that they were still feared years after they had disappeared.

"Young- Young Lord..."

"Let's speak standing up, shall we?"

Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng looked at each other and scrambled to their feet. Li Luo had spoken politely but with a charisma that they found hard to deny.

When Pang Qianchi saw their deferent stance before Li Luo, he sensed that things were starting to go sour. Plus, he had tasted the Young Lord's sneaky methods firsthand. He quickly stood up himself. "Young Lord, since you're finally here, please give an explanation to all of these brothers from the branch.

"Everyone is from the Sunreek Villa, so why can headquarters and Tianshu branch get the secret watersource but not the Xiling branch? Are you showing favoritism here?" Zheng Ping glared at him angrily. As if you didn't know why the Xiling branch wasn't getting anything!

"Pang Qianchi, you've already been removed. You don't have the right to speak!" Zheng Ping shouted.

Pang Qianchi turned up his nose. "I might have been removed, but I'm still a loyal and old hand here at the Sunreek Villa. I've contributed my blood and sweat to building up the Sunreek Villa. These brothers from the Xiling branch worked with me as well. Of course I will speak out against unfair treatment!"

"If the Young Lord thinks I'm out of line, you can expel me from the Sun creek Villa immediately."

Pang Qianchi's move was clever. He was playing the moral card here. If Li Luo really threw him out, it would unsettle the resonance artificers at the Xiling branch.

Li Luo looked over the resonance artificers, gaging their mood. Many of them were fired up and were looking at Pang Qianchi with respect.

The old dough fritter was oily and puffed up as ever.

"And what is it that you think we should do?" Li Luo asked him amiably.

"The Young Lord should provide the Xiling branch with his secret watersource," Pang Qianchi immediately answered. "If supplies are insufficient, the formula of the secret watersource can be handed over to the Xiling branch, and that will save transport costs."

Elder Zheng Ping dearly wanted to slap him across the face. A dog yapping before a lion. Hand over the secret watersource formula?

Go to hell.

"This guy is just here for trouble," Cai Wei muttered to Jiang Qing'e.

Jiang Qing'e remained calm. "He's just trying to goad Li Luo. One wrong word in anger, and it will spark even more resentment and rebellion among the Xiling artificers."

She looked up towards the inn nearby. She could not see him, but she sensed that Pei Hao was nearby, watching.

Was he trying to see how much trouble he had brought them?

Jiang Qing'e's eyes flashed dangerously.

Pang Qianchi waited for Li Luo's response. He was disappointed to see the young man completely unfazed or angered. His expression was thoughtful instead.

Li Luo looked at them. "You want the secret watersource?"

Tang Yun nodded. "Young Lord, the secret watersource is very beneficial for us resonance artificers. If we refine with it over a long period of time, our artificing skills will improve."

Li Luo gave him a faint smile. "I seem to recall that the Xiling branch hasn't contributed any money to the headquarters for the past few years."

Lu Xiaofeng faltered. "Ah, Young Lord, we wouldn't know about such things. We give our due contribution to the branch, but... We don't know whether it reaches headquarters."

That was a little sneaky. They would hand over the contributions to Pei Hao. As if he would pass it on to headquarters.

Li Luo continued to smile at them until they looked away guiltily.

He had spoken nicely to them, but they had not responded with honesty.

Still, he did not scold them. After another deliberate pause, he turned to the resonance artificers. "I can provide you with the secret watersource."

A collective gasp. Li Luo was giving in!

Li Luo waved off Elder Zheng Ping before he could protest. "But there are conditions. I will extend a month-long probation period to all of you. In this period, you will do your refining at headquarters. There will be all the secret watersource you can use."

"Your pay will be exactly the same as the resonance artificers here at headquarters. I trust all of you know that it's far higher than before..."

"If you perform well in this month, I will supply the Xiling branch with secret watersource after the probation period."

"What do you say?" He swung on the gaping Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng.

The resonance artificers took up muttering among themselves. Clearly, they were inclined to take up the offer.

They had come to protest the favoritism with the distribution of the secret watersource, and Li Luo had agreed to answer their demands. A month's probation period should be no problem at all.

The mood was clear enough to Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng.

"The Young Lord has made many concessions. We would be unreasonable to accept," they said begrudgingly.

Pang Qianchi's expression was sour. Where was the fighting? Where was the rebellion?

But Li Luo had given so much ground. How could he fight on?

Especially when all these resonance artificers were looking so satisfied.

Cai Wei was quite surprised by Li Luo's approach. "When did the Young Lord become such a smooth talker?"

Jiang Qing'e smiled. "That boy has a big appetite."

Cai Wei's penciled eyebrows rose. "He means to have them all? There must be many of Pei Hao's agents among them."

"Of course. But weren't there a lot of Pei Hao's agents at headquarters before as well? Where are they now?"

Cai Wei nodded. It was a battle of persuasion, and currently the Young Lord was winning.

By far.

Li Luo gestured, and the seated resonance artificers got to their feet and started to briskly move into headquarters.

The crowd that had gathered started to disperse as well.

Li Luo stood at the door, smiling broadly in the direction of the inn. He clapped loudly, looking all around him.

"A small gift, but delivered with great feeling. I accept it with thanks."

Chapter 0197: Destroy

"The balls on that guy, taking in all the Xiling artificers..." Duze Beixuan frowned.

"He wants them all at the Suncreek headquarters."

Duze Honglian smirked. "Thanks to our manipulation, they haven't been able to get the resonance artificers they want. With such a big influx of them right before him, of course he's tempted."

"Ambitious and charismatic."

"Pei Hao has held Xiling under his independent rule all these years. If headquarters can absorb them back, it'll be a welcome relief for them."

Duze Beixuan nodded. "Pei Hao's a smart guy with a plan. I don't believe he's here to give Li Luo a care package."

"Me neither."

Duze Honglian's eyes narrowed in pleasure. "No matter what he's planning, we can just sit back and watch. The more chaos at House Luolan, the better for House Duze."

"Send people to watch the Suncreek Villa and inform us about any news. We'll definitely help them spread it." Duze Beixuan nodded eagerly.

...

Suite of the inn.

Pei Hao watched emotionlessly as Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e ushered the artificers into the Suncreek Villa. Although he was some distance away, he could make out the conversation that had just transpired.

"Cocky after getting your dual resonances, eh?" Pei Hao said to himself with a mirthless chuckle.

He recalled how important Li Luo had been while Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan were around. Each time he visited the house lords, he would prepare precious gifts for the young Li Luo.

Especially in the first few years of his birth. Everyone had rejoiced at the heir of House Luolan, who would definitely lead the house to many more years of continued greatness.

Li Luo had been the center of attention back then.

Li Luo, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. The destined heir of House Luolan. While he, Pei Hao, had been treated like a slave, sent wherever he could be used best.

He had not shown these emotions back then, but the fires of jealousy had been lit in his heart, and they burned at him every day.

So what if Li Luo was higher-born!?

Why should he become the master of House Luolan?! Moreover, Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan had even arranged his marriage to Jiang Qing'e while he was just a child, the perfect bride that many sought.

How they loved him!

But karma worked in strange ways. Soon after, the house lords were sent to the Nobles' Battlefield, and nothing was heard of them again. As for Li Luo, his blank palaces had surfaced, and the weight of everyone's hopes had crushed him into oblivion.

Pei Hao usually stayed away from alcohol, but when he heard that news, he drank three jugs of wine that night.

His ambitions started to whisper in his ear again. He started to pull others to his side. Li Luo's blank palaces were his strongest weapon. No one wished for the future house lord to be weak.

Who wouldn't want a brighter future, a better life?

With a bit more time, he could well have had House Luolan under his thumb.

But...

Jiang Qing'e had intervened.

She stood at the fore of the house, running it with deft skill and charm. She justified her position as the personal disciple of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan, a more authentic position than an honorary disciple like he was.

Her ninth-grade light resonance dazzled and impressed, and she drew supporters like moths to her brilliance.

Soon enough, Jiang Qing'e had stabilized the situation at House Luolan, and pitted herself against him.

If not for his iron grip over a few of the Pavilion Masters, he would probably have been ousted directly by Jiang Qing'e then.

Too brilliant.

She might well be on track to break the speed record of making Duke, set by Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan previously.

A few months ago, Pei Hao had moved decisively, marshaling all of his supporters in a decisive split against Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo.

But the bad news did not stop.

Li Luo had solved his blank palaces problem!

He was the champion in the Tianshu Province and was headed for the Astral Sage College. He had even revealed dual resonances!

The useless cripple had now risen to glory.

Pei Hao felt like a fool.

If Li Luo had just revealed his dual resonances earlier, Pei Hao would have hidden his ambitions... Was the guy just toying with him?

In that case... Let's go at it!

A violent streak flashed across his face. He might not have Li Luo's dual resonances or Jiang Qing'e's ninth-grade light resonance, but at least he still had some power to call upon.

House Luolan swayed with each breeze the world's changes brought. How could it stand on such broken foundations?

Besides, did they really think that he, Pei Hao, was working alone?

His struggle against Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e had only just begun, and the resolution was far in the distance.

Suddenly, the lights in his room dimmed, and a crack slowly opened in the wall nearby.

He rose and entered the crack, stepping carefully along the gloomy staircase until he emerged in another brightly lit room.

The room was clean and empty, save for a figure sitting at the window where the light fell.

The person's back was turned to him, while the view of the window was framed such that the Sunreek Villa was just out of sight.

Pei Hao stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Your work?" The figure chuckled.

Pei Hao nodded. "A little appetizer for Li Luo."

"Li Luo is not the person he once was."

Pei Hao clenched his fists. "I don't know if he was faking the blank palaces," he said slowly, "but it's naive to think he can save House Luolan."

"Besides, Great One... your powers are great. If you had but consented to take a hand, House Luolan would not have stood for so many years."

"We have our own considerations. Focus on your own tasks. Since you've come to Xia City yourself, you must be prepared."

"Our goal is very simple. We simply need you to continue weakening House Luolan. I await your good news. Do this, and you shall have everything you want."

"Do not disappoint me."

Pei Hao looked at the figure, and his eyes drifted out to the window. Just out of sight, the Sunreek Villa was there. He lowered his head again.

"Rest assured, Great One. What I cannot have, I will destroy before I let Li Luo enjoy it."

The figure laughed. "Why the hate for Li Luo? Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan treated you well, I presume?"

Pei Hao fell silent. "I have nothing but love and respect for the two house lords."

"Keke, and so you hate Li Luo? Is this jealousy? To receive their unconditional love from birth, doting on him in a way that you would never receive, no matter how hard you tried."

"Should I not be jealous?

"All that affection, and then to be engaged to a world-class girl like Jiang Qing'e while he was still swaddled..."

The figure chuckled again. "Indeed, it would make one jealous.

"So... let us destroy him."

Chapter 0198: Testing 1, 2, 3

Suncreek Villa headquarters.

The halls were thronging with resonance artificers, but they were clearly divided into two halves. On the left, the Suncreek Villa headquarters' personnel. On the right, the Xiling artificers led by Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng.

The original members were looking at Tang Yun's bunch with anger.

They knew what had happened at the gates.

These were obviously Pei Hao's people. How dare they come here and shamelessly demand the secret watersource! This was daylight robbery!

In their righteous anger, they forgot that some among their own number had once been Pei Hao supporters as well.

At this time, they had already forgotten that.

Who was Pei Hao?

A poisonous, narrow-minded presence, leading them down into the darkness. Thankfully, the Young Lord had saved them.

There is only the Young Lord in our hearts!

And his secret watersource!

Tang Yun's group shifted uneasily under the glares, but there was nothing much they could say. They feigned nonchalance, their desire for the secret watersource keeping them there.

Li Luo stood on the stage in front, Jiang Qing'e and Cai Wei behind him.

He smiled at the resonance artificers who had been with him so far. "Everyone, please. Have no discrimination for our Xiling colleagues. In my eyes, they once contributed to the Suncreek Villa."

Tang Yun, Lu Xiaofeng, and the others were looking a little less sure of themselves now. Li Luo seemed like a very generous person. The Xiling branch had been branded with Pei Hao's mark and was more or less a slap to Li Luo's face.

Yet he seemed to bear them no ill will, no forceful treatment, and had not even expelled them from the Sunreek Villa. Instead, he had made concessions, inviting them into headquarters and promising to provide them with the secret watersource.

They... felt a little ashamed.

"Hmph, Tang Yun looks well. The Young Lord treats you with full respect and kindness. You had better repay it." Elder Zheng Ping scowled.

Tang Yun and the others smiled with uncertainty.

What else could be said at this time?

They were indeed grateful, but... they were still Pei Hao's people.

"In this month, the Sunreek Villa headquarters has performed extremely well. I have to thank everybody. We lost much after Hanzhi shook things up, but that's all water under the bridge now. I believe the Sunreek Villa will once again become great."

"My goal is to make the Sunreek Villa one of the top ten villas in the Xia Kingdom. At that time, all of you will be esteemed and famous resonance artificers!" Li Luo stated compellingly.

The headquarters' resonance artificers responded enthusiastically. They had all seen the changes at the Sunreek Villa in the last month with their own eyes. And they knew very well that Li Luo was the source of these changes.

Although the Sunreek Villa had a long way to go to reach that goal, they were sure that under the Young Lord's leadership, they would get there. After all, he had already worked miracles before their eyes.

And when the Sunreek Villa reached that glory, their own status and compensation would inflate beyond their dreams.

Definitely something anyone would work towards.

Tang Yun and the others felt a pang of envy for these resonance artificers. They did not know if Li Luo was speaking the truth, but they were words of hope.

As for them, from the Xiling Province, the progress there had been lukewarm. Pei Hao was merely treating the branch as a gold generator.

They knew that there was no chance of the Xiling branch having a bright future.

On stage, Cai Wei chuckled quietly to Jiang Qing'e. "The Young Lord is getting very experienced at playing people's hearts."

"He's starting to wear that role with confidence." Jiang Qing'e agreed contentedly.

Only a confident person could convince others. The belief that he could do it—it was a powerful magnet for hopes and dreams.

In the cheery atmosphere, Tang Yun and the others were feeling more and more uncomfortable by the moment. He coughed. "Er, Young Lord, I wonder, when we can start refining spirit liquids and purifying lights?"

Li Luo smiled. "No need to worry. Your refining time will not differ from the headquarters' resonance artificers. Elder Zheng Ping will assign you spaces."

"And... Will we have ample amounts of the secret watersource?" Lu Xiaofeng asked hesitantly.

Li Luo nodded. "The same supply as the other resonance artificers. No difference."

The branch artificers sighed in relief. That was all they wanted. If Li Luo simply wanted to use them as labor for this month, that was easy as could be.

"One more thing..."

Tang Yun bit the bullet. "Young Lord mentioned a test. How is that conducted?"

They were afraid that he had laid a trap there.

Jiang Qing'e and Cai Wei were curious as well. It was the most important point left unaddressed.

Once Tang Yun and the others passed the test, Li Luo would have to supply them with secret watersource in the future. If he made it too difficult, everyone would know he was just toying with them. He would not win them over.

All eyes on him, Li Luo smiled calmly. "I just mentioned the test off-hand..."

"But just to reassure everyone, perhaps I'd better explain clearly."

"The test is very simple. You all know that I'm a water resonance user, and also a second-grade resonance artificer myself. I'm trying to reach the third grade though..."

"In this one month, you may send any resonance artificers, including your branch leaders Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng, to compete against me. We will refine spirit liquids and purifying lights. But because of my grade, it's limited to third-grade spirit liquids and below."

"We will compete in three rounds, a first-grade, a second-grade, and a third-grade spirit liquid. Same ingredients, and, crucially, no secret watersource."

"As long as you can beat me in just one round, you will have passed the test."

Li Luo beamed at them with a confident and friendly smile.

"What do you guys think of that?"

Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng looked at each other. "We can join too?" they asked incredulously.

They were fourth-grade resonance artificers. Even though the product was limited to third-grade and below, their experience would definitely help improve the tempering strength of the more basic potions significantly.

And they only had to win once?

Whether Li Luo could even succeed in refining a third-grade spirit liquid was up in the air. How was he going to compete? Immediately declare them the winner?

Was Li Luo really just lying down and letting them walk over him?

Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng were very confused now. They looked at Li Luo's beaming face again. "Young Lord, perhaps we were wrong... are you actually very stupid?"

Chapter 0199: Invitation

The test was set to begin in two days' time, and there would be three days between each round. The total time of nine days would end just in time with Li Luo's holidays.

After all, he had to solve this problem before he could return to school.

The branch artificers were satisfied with the test's format. It seemed like Li Luo was truly making concessions to them. After all, it was unimaginable that they would fail the test.

Even if his refining arts were superb and gave him an advantage for first and second-grade spirit liquids, what about third-grade ones?

Could he even make them?

It would probably be a breeze for them. Plus, they had Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng, two qualified fourth-grade resonance artificers.

They were already congratulating themselves on a successful negotiation as Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e left headquarters.

.....

In the carriage.

"The artificers were looking at you like the idiot child of the family." Cai Wei giggled.

Li Luo smiled. "Indeed, it looks like a giveaway, doesn't it."

"And how will you solve the problem of the third-grade spirit liquid?" Jiang Qing'e asked.

She knew that his first and second-grade spirit liquids were excellent, surpassing even Yan Lingqing. But the problem was that he was only a second-grade resonance artificer...

"Well, it should only take a few days to become a third-grade resonance artificer," Li Luo said casually.

Cai Wei clapped enthusiastically. "Somebody give the Young Lord an acting award or something."

Jiang Qing'e laughed as well, but then her smile faded away. "Don't waste too much time on the refining arts. I ditched them in order to cultivate faster as well."

She was the true genius in the refining arts. A ninth-grade light resonance could create spirit liquids and purifying lights unique in the entire Xia Kingdom.

In the Astral Sage College, the Resonance Artificers Hall had courted her time and again, but to no avail... Jiang Qing'e was bent on setting the Duke record, and nothing would distract her from it.

So she would rather leave aside her potential in the refining arts.

Li Luo gave her a tentative nod. He also knew that the refining arts would detract from his time and energy, but he had no other choice if he wanted his resonances to improve.

Besides, the course was charted now. And the Sunreek Villa indeed needed Li Luo in his role as a resonance artificer.

"Pei Hao is cunning and evil. He would not give you such a beautiful present. I'm sure there's poison hidden in this somewhere," Jiang Qing'e reminded him.

Li Luo nodded. He could not overlook that point. He might loudly declare his thanks for the present, but deep down, he had to be on guard.

If not for the fact that they were so desperately short on resonance artificers, he might not have accepted Tang Yun and the others.

"I'll get Elder Zheng Ping to keep an eye on them. And also strengthen the security at the Sunreek Villa. We'll be notified immediately if anything untoward happens."

"Pei Hao is still lurking in the shadows. We don't know his plans yet, so we can only keep our guard up everywhere. React as we need to," Jiang Qing'e said. It was indeed a nervous time, waiting for the enemy to strike.

"I've also sent people to track Pei Hao. If given the chance, we can just finish him off and save us a whole load of trouble," she said with a quiet but deadly intent.

Cut off the problem at the source. That was an idea.

Li Luo nodded, but he was sure that someone as wily as Pei Hao would not give them such an opportunity.

"Oh, yes..."

Jiang Qing'e suddenly turned to Li Luo. "Familiarize yourself with optimizing the healing properties of water and wood resonances. In the next few days."

Li Luo was puzzled. For what?

"Remember the little emperor you met at the Golden Dragon Bank? He has a natural frailty. The First Princess asked me if you would try to help heal him."

Li Luo's jaw dropped. "That's a longshot! I heard even water resonance Dukes couldn't do a thing. What's a Resonant Master Stage cultivator like me going to do?"

Water and wood might both have healing properties, but he was far from even becoming a Duke. The First Princess might be prone to having her head in the clouds, but she didn't seem like an irrational person.

Or perhaps she had another goal?

Jiang Qing'e smiled. "Yes, she probably wants to befriend me, but I didn't reject. Most of the royal power currently lies with the Regent, but the First Princess is formidable in her own right. It's good for House Luolan to be well connected."

Li Luo considered that. Jiang Qing'e's potential was worth courting, and the First Princess had chosen to ask him to try healing the little emperor. Regardless of success, the two factions would be seen as closer.

The healing was probably just an excuse.

"Alright, I'll go back and read up a little." He agreed. The First Princess was still a powerful ally, one that House Luolan would do well to have. It might be a little early to call them formal allies, but friendly relations was a good start.

The First Princess was a deep and foresighted thinker. She was not the kind who was content to rest on her laurels. If she eventually moved to help bring the little emperor to power, it would definitely be a complex and thorough campaign conducted through every means possible.

Soon enough, they arrived back at House Luolan's headquarters.

The three alighted and were immediately greeted by a messenger. "Young Lord Li Luo and Miss Jiang Qing'e?"

This man was wearing the richly decorated badge of the Golden Dragon Bank. Li Luo nodded.

He respectfully handed over a gold-embossed invitation. "In five days' time, my young mistress will celebrate her birthday. The president would be pleased if your august selves could consent to attend."

"Qing'er's birthday?" Li Luo was startled. He took it with a smile. "Please let President Yu know that we will definitely be there."

Their relationship with Lu Qing'er aside, the Golden Dragon Bank was too important in the Xia Kingdom for them not to reciprocate such courtesies.

The messenger gave a pleased nod and then hurried away.

"President Yu Hongxi, inviting us?" Jiang Qing'e said with a cynical smile.

"What's wrong?"

"You might not know, but Yu Hongxi and the Mistress fought long and bitterly back in the day. She rarely speaks to House Luolan in her official capacity and definitely not often," Jiang Qing'e said mildly.

"Er, because of my dad?"

"Who else?"

"Wow, I didn't know dad was such a playboy. I despise him."

Jiang Qing'e rolled her eyes at him. "Yu Hongxi is a formidable woman. That was how the Mistress rated her back in the day. And being able to sit as the Golden Dragon Bank's president for so long demonstrates her skill in both fighting and strategy. She is not to be underestimated."

Li Luo grinned. "I'll have to see it firsthand."

Jiang Qing'e raised her eyebrows at him. "I think you just might," she said darkly.

Chapter 0200: Unyielding Form

The next two days kept Li Luo on his toes from morning to night. First was the refining arts revision, improving his third-grade spirit liquid completion rate. Once he could create it for the first time, he would be an honest-to-goodness third-grade resonance artificer.

Besides, he had to keep up his own cultivation. He didn't know if Jiang Qing'e even believed her own excuse of keeping him in shape, but she dragged him to the practice room for an hour each day... to beat him up.

"Stimulate the cultivation."

He was a quivering mess every time, his legs wobbling and groaning as he limped out.

Li Luo had no idea how effective it was, but he swore his ability to take beatings was getting better...

After his daily beatings, Li Luo also had to study up on the healing properties of water and wood resonances.

...

In a workshop.

Li Luo was hunched over an injured beast on the table. There was a visible trace of blood on it, which he put both hands over.

He called forth his resonant power, water and wood resonant powers merging in his palm to call forth powerful regenerative abilities.

After a few moments, the scar was already healing rapidly.

A decent result.

Li Luo wasn't surprised. They were the healing elements, after all. Plus, his water resonance even had light resonance supporting it.

Which was another healing element.

Still, the light resonance was secondary to his primary water resonance. It was not as strong, but the three healing elements gave Li Luo confidence that he could eventually recover from anything unless he was killed in one hit.

He let the animal go. He had already familiarized himself with the healing ability quite a bit, healing many injuries over the day.

In truth, he felt like he had neglected this aspect previously, tunnel-visioning on the strength and power that the elements could bring him. Healing was quite magical as well.

"Definitely worth exploring..."

...

Third day, practice room.

Jiang Qing'e hefted a long, wooden spear. "Ready for today's serving?"

"I feel like you've just been venting your anger on Punching Bag Li Luo for the last two days. Are you still angry about me hiding the lifespan thing from you?" he grumbled.

"Not at all." She smiled guilelessly. "I am really just training you. Your resonant power control will become more mature with this."

Beautiful women were always good at lying, and Jiang Qing'e was so beautiful that she could lie about needing organs, and people would probably rip them out for her gladly.

"Fine," he conceded. "I won't fight today, then..."

He threw down the weapon in his hand and walked to within ten meters of Jiang Qing'e. "Come at me with your close-combat resonance arts. Attack my body."

Li Luo put his palms together, channeling his blue and green energies. In it, he mixed a thread of light resonant energy.

All three healing powers were imbued into his body.

They appeared as a faint light on his skin, forming some vague patterns.

Jiang Qing'e was surprised at the amount of vitality teeming within his body.

"Healing powers?

"After two days, you're now using it on yourself?"

She raised a slender hand and summoned glowing power, bright as the sun.

Pushing out slightly, the light dissolved into shining needles that caged Li Luo.

Weng! Weng!

They began to prick away at his skin, drawing wells of blood. Li Luo did not flinch.

Through the pain, he did not make a sound.

Although he was repeatedly being injured, his flesh continued to respond as though it were alive, healing itself at great speed.

Li Luo was delighted. In this state, his regeneration was superhuman. In a life-or-death struggle, chances were that it would end being life for him.

The light needles faded away. Li Luo was covered in blood, but he was completely unharmed. "Water and wood—the healing is miraculous," Jiang Qing'e said. "You're just in the beginning stages, but already they help the body's recovery rate."

She was truly surprised by how strong it was. She had only used a fraction of her power, but then again, it should have been a decent attack against someone of Li Luo's level.

"I call this state Unyielding Form. It can increase my physical regeneration for a short while, but it costs a lot of resonant power, so I can't hold it for long," Li Luo said with some pride.

Jiang Qing'e smiled. "Many water and wood resonance users employ something similar to strengthen their bodies, so it's nothing too special. I hear that some can even enter an unkillable state."

"But..."

"For some reason, your healing powers feel a little different. Is this the advantage of dual resonances?"

Li Luo smiled. Of course it was the additional light resonance that was supporting his other two resonances. While it wasn't as strong, it was the perfect accent to enhance them.

"Let's leave it at that for today. Oh, isn't today the first test against the resonance artificers? How have they been performing these last two days? Elder Zheng Ping reports that they're diligently refining. No one's pulling anything."

Jiang Qing'e was not too happy about that. She would rather their enemy show their hand earlier.

"There's no point in overthinking it. We'll deal with whatever comes," Li Luo said calmly.

"First on the list: the first test at the Suncreek Villa headquarters."

Li Luo had prepared well for this. It would determine whether he could snag up the resonance artificers. For the first test, he would show some respect... and crush them.