

Resonance 201

Chapter 0201: Crushed

Suncreek Villa headquarters.

The Xiling artificers were in a great mood, with happy, confident laughter punctuating their pleasant conversation. Most of them had never even seen an upper seventh-grade watersource in their lives, let alone had the opportunity to work with one.

They were drunk on the sublime feeling of power it gave them. It truly helped them find profound revelations.

The Suncreek Villa headquarters was a good place.

Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng sighed with contentment. They had never seen their artificers so enthusiastic before. It came from being in an environment that was alive with hope.

If they could, they would want to stay at the Suncreek Villa's headquarters. But the matter was not that simple as they had already been branded with Pei Hao's mark.

Although headquarters had given them the secret watersource as agreed, they could still feel that they were being watched closely for signs of trouble.

Neither side resented it. If the Young Lord had any brains at all, he should indeed be wary of them. And his wariness was well warranted...

Pei Hao had not intended this to be a gift.

But as for what Pei Hao's plan was, even they were not sure. His only command to them had been to go to the Suncreek Villa headquarters.

Tang Yun sighed. It didn't feel good to be in the middle of the sandwich.

He swept those feelings aside. "Today's the first test. What do you say?"

"I heard the Young Lord's first-grade spirit liquid is superb, with 64% tempering strength. That's quite high, but probably because of the secret watersource. If neither of us are given secret watersource, I guess he'll score 61%, maybe 62%," Lu Xiaofeng predicted.

Tang Yun nodded. "He said that we can participate too, but I don't think there's a need. He's been very generous so far, but if we take advantage of it, that could look ugly."

Lu Xiaofeng considered it. "We can't send anyone too bad either," he warned. "I mean... you know our position."

Tang Yun scratched an itch with irritation. "Let's send Liu Fu, how about that? He's a third-grade resonance artificer, a full grade higher than Li Luo."

"He can produce a first-grade spirit liquid with about 60% tempering strength. That should be roughly equivalent to the Young Lord. Give the man some face."

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "We'll be the baddies, then. Headquarters is going to dislike us even more after this."

Tang Yun pulled a face. The Young Lord had indeed treated them with graciousness befitting his power. It was a pity that he was labeled as a blank palace cultivator when he was young. Otherwise, perhaps House Luolan would not have fallen to its current state.

While they were mulling over their decisions, Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and the others appeared in front of the resonance artificers.

"How have the last few days been, gentlemen? Hopefully no one is treating you badly?" Li Luo asked warmly.

The branch artificers nodded with full agreement.

Li Luo cut straight to it. "Today's the first test," he said to Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng. "Let's begin. I've already ordered the ingredients to be prepared. They're exactly the same. You can send people to check them."

Both shook their heads quickly, expressing their trust in the Young Lord.

"Who are you sending today?" Li Luo asked.

Tang Yun smiled sheepishly. "We're sending Liu Fu today. He's a third-grade resonance artificer."

Oof.

A collective grunt of sympathy from the resonance artificers.

"Truly shameless and thick-skinned," Elder Zheng Ping growled. "The Young Lord's only a second-grade, and you send a third? Might as well go yourselves!" The branch artificers were looking a little embarrassed. Tang Yun and Lu Xiaofeng could only smile sheepishly and play it cool.

"No need for admonishment, Elder Zheng Ping, it's all within the rules. I did say that they could send anyone." Li Luo waved it off generously.

The branch artificers felt even worse now.

The Young Lord was practically a saint...

Li Luo turned and led the way to the refining workshops, which were full of ingredients.

To ensure absolute fairness, Li Luo had even implemented a lottery. He had the third-grade artificer Liu Fu draw a lot at random and choose his refining workshop.

The refining began.

Li Luo was a second-going-on-third-grade artificer, while Liu Fu was a third-grade artificer. A first-grade spirit liquid should be easy peasy for both of them, and so there was nothing too exciting about the refining process.

Still, in terms of attitude, Li Luo seemed a little calmer, while Liu Fu was stiff with tension, afraid of making a mistake.

The refining only took a quarter of an hour or so.

Liu Fu finished first, immediately testing his spirit liquid. 61%!

Liu Fu's face showed a glimmer of pride. He had outdone himself.

The branch artificers whispered excitedly among themselves, pleased with his result.

Elder Zheng Ping frowned. He knew what Li Luo was capable of usually, but they did not know how he would fare without the boost from the secret watersource...

While they were worrying, Li Luo finished up quickly enough. He dusted off his hands and admired Liu Fu's work.

"Well, test's over," Li Luo said to elder Zheng Ping. "We'll be off, then, much to do."

He turned and left with Jiang Qing'e and the others.

Elder Zheng Ping was a little startled by Li Luo's abrupt departure. Was he so unconfident in the result that he had to leave immediately?

Tang Yun and the others were of the same mind, but they showed some politeness and waited for him to leave before swarming up.

"Elder Zheng Ping, please test the tempering strength of the Young Lord's work," Tang Yun said.

He gave a surly grunt of acknowledgement. Taking up the tempering measurement needle, he stuck it into Li Luo's spirit liquid.

The needle rose... and rose. 68%.

Elder Zheng Ping rubbed his eyes, sure that he was hallucinating. A 68% first-grade spirit liquid? Truth be told, he had never seen one before.

Still, 68%.

He wordlessly handed the needle over to Tang Yun and the others.

They stared at it for a long time, then stuck it back into the spirit liquid. And again. And again. Eventually, they put it down.

They looked in the direction that Li Luo had gone in.

Now they understood why he had left so quickly. He was not unconfident, but was rather sparing them the humiliation...

Just how scary was this Young Lord?!

Chapter 0202: Golden Dragon Secret Key

"Young Lord, leaving without even waiting for the result looks cool and all, but aren't you afraid of rocking the boat a little too much?" Cai Wei teased him.

"If it were Tang Yun or Lu Xiaofeng competing, maybe I would've stayed. But a third-grade resonance artificer? No need, I think," Li Luo replied.

He was only one step away from the third-grade resonance artificer, and he had a waterlight resonance. Although both had the same ingredients, he could make the secret watersource himself... How could they hope to compete?

If Li Luo managed to lose this, he might as well give up on refining spirit liquids and purifying lights forever.

Yan Lingqing regarded him thoughtfully. "Are you trying to crush them into submission with the first round?"

Li Luo smiled. "I'm just showing them what I'm capable of, and also the future and potential of the Suncreek Villa. All of this, Pei Hao cannot give them. I believe that the upcoming tests will definitely sway some hearts and spark a chain reaction.

"And once they start to waver, I'll promise them a clean slate. I don't believe that Pei Hao has more sway than me over them."

"An arduous process," Jiang Qing'e noted.

Li Luo shrugged. "No choice, given how much House Duze is pressuring us. This is the only way to get resonance artificers. If we gain this batch, the Suncreek Villa will develop much more quickly and will eventually be able to stand up against their Bigswamp Villa."

"But news of the test result will probably reach Pei Hao very soon. He will know what you're planning. I think he's prepared this time," Jiang Qing'e warned.

Li Luo nodded. Of course he had thought of that as well. However, he was openly appealing to the resonance artificers, with no hidden plans or motives. To stop him, Pei Hao would have to play dirty.

And so he would be extra vigilant over the next few days.

"Oh, right, tomorrow is Lu Qing'er's birthday party. Yu Hongxi dotes on her so much. She's not only inviting many handsome young men, but also preparing a generous gift," Jiang Qing'e said.

"What's this generous gift?" Li Luo asked, interest piqued by those two words.

"The Golden Dragon Secret Key."

"Golden Dragon Secret Key?" Li Luo had never heard of it before.

"It's said that the Golden Dragon Bank developed a secret cultivation space called the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. It's for the important people of the Golden Dragon Bank and their children to cultivate at. It has special connections between heaven and earth and is very beneficial to cultivation. It's one of the bases of the Golden Dragon Bank."

Li Luo was suitably impressed. The Golden Dragon Bank was not just what existed at the Xia Kingdom; the real headquarters was a titanic entity in the wider world, far beyond what his imagination could muster.

The Xia Kingdom Golden Dragon Bank that they were familiar with was but a teeny, tiny branch.

Even so, it was still one of the greatest powers in the Xia Kingdom.

"It's said that every year, the Golden Dragon Dao Fields open for a month, and the Golden Dragon Secret Key allows access to cultivate inside.

"The Golden Dragon Secret Key is normally gifted to those in power, and their children. However, they're occasionally given to partners as a present.

"Because Yu Hongxi has offered a few secret keys on the occasion of Lu Qing'er's birthday, many factions in Xia City are very interested," Jiang Qing'e said with a smile.

"Sister Qing'e is interested?" Li Luo asked.

"I'm interested, but the Golden Dragon Dao Fields are vast and divided into many levels. The keys given out this time are for those at the Resonant Master Stage. I think her objective is to find a suitable partner for Lu Qing'er, and for them to enter the Dao Fields together," Jiang Qing'e said.

"Those at the Resonant Master stage, huh..." Li Luo nodded. Jiang Qing'e's guesses were probably correct. It was to find a partner for Lu Qing'er.

"Such is the power of money." Li Luo sighed. Such keys were beyond the power of the great houses to even offer, and yet the Golden Dragon Bank could dish them out freely.

The ability to create rifts to a sacred cultivation space—that was an ability far beyond them.

Probably only King experts could do so.

"I hope you can acquire a Golden Dragon Secret Key. Cultivating inside will be very beneficial for you."

Li Luo was fighting against time right now, and he could not afford to pass up any opportunity. Which was why Jiang Qing'e had immediately taken an interest in this information.

Li Luo smiled sheepishly. "Of course it would be great to get, but I suspect it won't be so easy."

"Why ever not? Just go ask Lu Qing'er, she would love to give it to you," Yan Lingqing teased. Jiang Qing'e shook her head. "Yu Hongxi runs this. I don't think Lu Qing'er can help."

Li Luo laughed it off. How could the young lord of House Luolan use underhanded means like that? Besides, it was as Jiang Qing'e had said. Yu Hongxi was running this, and it would be naive to think that Lu Qing'er could do anything to influence the outcome.

"Since Yu Hongxi has invited so many young braves, she must have prepared a test of some sort. Just acquit yourself well," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo nodded. It would be great if he could really get one of the Golden Dragon Secret Keys. But if he didn't, he wouldn't beat himself up over it.

His cultivation was urgent, but he shouldn't lose his head chasing down every last opportunity in desperation.

Ultimately, he was still quite confident he would get it done.

...

A quiet place in Xia City.

Pei Hao was sitting in a stone pavilion, facing a scowling Pang Qianchi, who had just told him everything that had happened at the Suncreek Villa headquarters.

"Li Luo's trying to sway them with his own refining talents and the advantageous conditions at the Suncreek Villa headquarters," Pang Qianchi complained.

Pei Hao poured Pang Qianchi a cup of tea. "All as planned, isn't it?"

"Pei Hao, Sir, Tang Yun and the others are not yours through and through. If Li Luo eats away at their loyalty, they might change sides... After all, he IS the rightful young lord," Pang Qianchi said.

"I know." Pei Hao nodded.

Pang Qianchi was puzzled by Pei Hao's calmness. "Does Sir Pei Hao have something else planned?"

Pei Hao did not reply, instead lifting his teacup to salute Pang Qianchi.

"There's no rush.

"Let Li Luo have his moment."

Chapter 0203: Celebration

The celebration was located at a villa connected to the Golden Dragon Bank premises. As the embodiment of wealth and fortune in the Xia Kingdom, Yu Hongxi was definitely pulling out all the stops for her beloved daughter's birthday. It was going to be a real blast.

Grand carriages trimmed and gilded with precious metals slowly trundled up the driveway, sending off their finely bedecked passengers.

Much of the upper class of the Xia Kingdom was gathered here. The great houses and families all had dealings with the Golden Dragon Bank, which was famed for their neutral position on any affair. No one had more friends than they did.

Perhaps the Astral Sage College could compete in power and status, but the school never made friends or alliances. Education remained an aloof pursuit where money changed hands with smiles.

Of course, there was also the Xia royal court, the traditional seat of power that would always command respect.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e attracted many looks from the moment they alighted, most of them directed at the significantly more famous Jiang Qing'e.

Still, many well-dressed girls eyed Li Luo with a gleam of interest. He had inherited his parents' devastatingly good looks, even though this version still looked a little raw. What he lacked in maturity he made up for with the glowing vitality only youth could grant.

His head of silver hair marked him, a pale moon that enchanted many a lass.

Neither of them paid much attention to the gazes. Instead, they looked to the main entrance, where two people were welcoming the guests.

Lu Qing'er and Yu Hongxi.

Today, Lu Qing'er was dressed in a flattering, pastel dress that gave her figure every last emphasis it could want for. From beneath, her legs peeked out, clad in her signature, white-lace socks.

Green silk fell modestly around her waist, fluttering shyly with the wind.

Her winsome face was lit up with a constant smile as she greeted her guests and blushed appropriately at the praise they slipped her in their congratulations.

Beside her was Yu Hongxi, clad in her usual red. Her mature beauty was a clear contrast to her daughter's, but her status was naturally intimidating.

Side by side, the two looked more like a pair of sisters than mother and daughter.

Lu Qing'er smile was cordial enough, until she spotted Li Luo.

And then her smile was syrup-sweet.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e moved forward and handed their invitations to the waiting ushers, then they bowed slightly to Yu Hongxi. "Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e of House Luolan offer our congratulations."

Yu Hongxi's smile never wavered as she flashed it on the pair, although her calculating eyes did linger on Li Luo for a brief moment more.

He was very much like Li Taixuan.

And also like Tan Tailan.

Thinking of the two brought complex feelings to the fore. She laughed lightly. "We are graced by your presence. Please, head on inside."

Her attitude was neither too warm nor cold.

"I'll show you in," Lu Qing'er said happily.

Yu Hongxi immediately turned her sharp disapproval on her daughter. "You are the main host tonight. There are still guests to be seen. You intend to leave and ignore them? Churlish."

"I'm not even doing anything here." Lu Qing'er protested irritably.

Li Luo cut in with a smile. "Hey, see to your guests. We'll catch up later inside."

He turned and ascended the stairs with Jiang Qing'e.

Lu Qing'er tore her eyes away wistfully, only to find her mother's fixed on her. "More guests, Mother," she said emotionlessly.

In a flash, Yu Hongxi's smile was back in place, greeting her guests as she put her daughter's troubles aside for the moment.

Inside, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e had walked into the villa, which was lit with a tasteful arrangement of lamps and chandeliers. They blended into the cosy chatter of the lively crowd.

"Well? What do you think of Yu Hongxi?" Jiang Qing'e asked.

"Somehow, I have a bad feeling. I feel the pressure from her," Li Luo admitted. Yu Hongxi might have a flawless smile, but Li Luo was, nevertheless, uneasy.

"Well, she's a Duke after all. One of the stronger ones here in the Xia Kingdom. Not to mention her control of the Golden Dragon Bank. Wealth itself is power. Even the First Princess has to show her respect—don't be fooled by her beauty," Jiang Qing'e pointed out.

"Still, she feels a little... cold, to me. Or rather, disinclined?" Li Luo mused.

The corner of her mouth twitched. "It's your fault for looking like your parents. If there's someone who could break Yu Hongxi's heart, it would be those two."

Of course, she had sensed another reason, which she wasn't about to mention to Li Luo.

He felt like wringing his hands helplessly. Putting the last generation's troubles on the next? Yu Hongxi might be a real female empowerment role model, but she still had some pettiness in her...

...is what he would only say in his mind, but never out loud.

"Lu Qing'er's changed a little as well," Jiang Qing'e said, changing the subject. "Her frost aura is much purer than before. If I'm not wrong, her resonance has risen to an eighth-grade now."

Li Luo halted mid-step. "Eighth-grade ice resonance?"

It was his first time hearing of someone close to him raising their resonance from the seventh to the eighth-grade. It was a huge gap to close.

Those without his talents could only consume a limited amount of spirit liquids and purifying lights. If Lu Qing'er had reached the eighth-grade, that meant that she must have consumed seventh-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights from the moment her resonant palace opened.

"Well, it's no surprise. Seventh-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights are expensive, but probably not to the president of the Golden Dragon Bank."

"If she wills it, Lu Qing'er could have a waterfall of seventh-grade spirit liquid if she so wishes."

Li Luo sighed. There was no other way to describe Yu Hongxi but "filthy rich."

If only he could command the Golden Dragon Bank. His dual resonances would probably already be at the seventh-grade.

As they talked, their feet had carried them to one of the most brightly lit pavilions, where a familiar figure stepped out.

"I saw you two earlier already. What are you talking about?" a pleasant voice asked.

Li Luo looked up to see a willowy figure with a royal bearing. Who else but the First Princess?

Chapter 0204: Among the Princes

The First Princess was clad in an imperial gown of rich brocade, her hair done up with dangling, golden ornaments that flashed and tinkled with each movement of her head.

Her voluptuous chest was the only exception to her otherwise slender figure, although her royal bearing was enough to discourage too blatant an interest in it.

Li Luo had to admit that the First Princess was one of the few in the Astral Sage College who could compete with Jiang Qing'e in looks.

Right now, she was regarding the two of them with a warm smile.

"Greetings to the First Princess."

They bowed.

She exchanged a few pleasantries with Jiang Qing'e, then turned to him with a small smile. "Li Luo's informed about that, I trust?"

He assumed it was about healing the little emperor, and nodded. "I'll do my best, but I hope Your Highness will not get your hopes up too high."

"Have no fear," she said softly, a shadow crossing her face. "That is something I've gotten used to after all these years."

She merely aimed to pull relations with Jiang Qing'e closer, an unspoken understanding that both parties were inclined to.

Li Luo nodded. He knew well enough too, but it was always better to clarify.

"Shall we go in?" The First Princess ushered the two into the building with a smile.

The inside of the building was as bright as day, and the closed walls amplified voices and sounds to create an even livelier atmosphere.

People were scattered in twos and threes across the spacious hall. Each of them represented powerful interests.

"Jiang Qing'e, I didn't expect you two to be in the mood for a celebration, considering the sad state of affairs House Luolan is in." A hostile voice greeted them.

It was none other than the fiery Duze Honglian, with her brother by her side.

"I didn't expect you to be in the mood for a celebration either, considering the one-sided bloodbath in our last fight," Jiang Qing'e replied blandly.

Duze Honglian's jaw muscle twitched.

"Honglian, watch yourself carefully, lest you make a farce of the place we are in," the First Princess said with a small smile.

Even Duze Honglian was respectful to the First Princess. She sheathed her anger and raised her glass. "As wise as you always are, Your Highness."

With a parting look of spite at Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo, she turned and left.

"Duze Honglian has continued to nurse her anger for all these years after you crushed her," the First Princess noted.

"If she loses in strength, then words are all she can fight with. The next time we face off, I will crush her even harder. Perhaps it will register in her memory longer," Jiang Qing'e said quietly.

Well, it looked like the enmity ran fast and free both ways.

She changed the topic. "Many braves are here to win the Golden Dragon Secret Keys. Li Luo, you fit the criteria, and can definitely give it a try."

Li Luo smiled. "It looks like I have stiff competition. I'll give it a crack and see if I'm lucky, I guess."

As he spoke, he suddenly spotted a familiar figure standing in the harsh light up ahead.

A body built like a brute, and as mute as the pillar he stood beside. He spoke to no one, and no one dared to go near him either.

Qin Zhulu.

That guy was invited too? It made sense, given that Qin Zhulu's father was a great general in the Xia Kingdom's royal court.

Once he spotted Qin Zhulu, Li Luo suddenly realized that familiar faces were everywhere. Schoolmates like Wang Hejiu were also present, and there were also Two Star Hall students.

Like the guy he had met with Jiang Qing'e previously, Ye Qiuding. And another figure scowling at him.

It was none other than the guy who had helped Song Qiuyu back at the Tianshu Province. Mo Ling, was it? From the Inkwater Villa.

Li Luo ignored him.

The crowd parted, and a man walked out, turning heads as he passed.

The man was an impressive figure—none other than Gong Shenjun.

He raised his glass in greeting. "Junior Jiang and Junior Li Luo, greetings."

Both dipped their heads towards him.

"Luanyu, you seem closer and closer with Junior Jiang every time I see you two," he laughed.

"Surely there's no need to envy a relationship between girls?" the First Princess replied sweetly.

Gong Shenjun laughed, then lowered his voice. "There were movements with the royal guards today. Have you brought His Majesty out?"

"Royal Brother, well-informed as always."

"For something so big..." He looked at Li Luo. "Are you planning to let Junior Li Luo give it a try? You could have just invited him to the palace, you know? Well, I won't say too much, since you've already gone and done it. Just be more careful of His Majesty's safety next time," Gong Shenjun reminded.

"As you say, Royal Brother."

Gong Shenjun smiled at Li Luo. "We are in your debt. But no pressure, just do what you can." He smiled at Jiang Qing'e and left.

"Senior Gong Shenjun is truly a shining beacon," Jiang Qing'e said. "The royal court is lucky to have him."

The First Princess did not comment, but smiled lightly as she touched her glass to Jiang Qing'e's.

Li Luo kept his thoughts to himself. Too much greatness was not necessarily always a good thing.

An excited cheer came from the crowd as Yu Hongxi and Lu Qing'er walked in.

Yu Hongxi was leading the way, a middle-aged man by her side. He looked ferocious as a lion, especially with his mane of red hair.

"That's the lord of House Jiyan, Zhu Qinghuo," Jiang Qing'e said in a low voice to Li Luo. He saw that there was another youth by Lu Qing'er's side.

He had a head of red hair too and was a handsome devil as well.

"That's Zhu Xuan, his son. He's a Two Star Hall student, and he leads the Fire Fairy Squad, which is first in the Two Star Hall."

Li Luo's eyes widened. Ah, so this was the leader of the famous Fire Fairy Squad?

Chapter 0205: Zhu Xuan

The celebration officially began with the arrival of the birthday girl, declared by an orchestra that serenaded her arrival.

Yu Hongxi watched the festivities proceed with an approving eye, then she turned to look at Lu Qing'er. She was currently surrounded by many eligible young men. Zhu Xuan, Ning Zhao, Wang Hejiu—they were all excellent prospects of her age.

"Keke, President Yu, what do you think of my boy?" The house lord of Jiyan, Zhu Qinghuo, walked up to her.

"Zhu Xuan has exceptional potential." Yu Hongxi smiled.

"Ahh haha! I think he's a fine match for Qing'er."

"Let's not meddle in their affairs," Yu Hongxi said, shaking her head. "If they are really interested, we can always support them later."

Zhu Qinghuo gave a nod of understanding. Yu Hongxi's reply was vague but not a direct refusal. Which meant that if Zhu Xuan was interested in Lu Qing'er, she would not object.

That was enough.

Zhu Qinghuo raised his glass smilingly. The power of gold and status that the Golden Dragon Bank commanded was immense. Closer ties would naturally be welcome for House Jiyan.

Of course, the grand prize would be courting Yu Hongxi herself. A pity that this matron was a deadly and shrewd mind that even he did not dare to cross casually.

She touched her glass to his. "The Golden Dragon Secret Keys being given out this time are also to select some fine youngsters to accompany Qing'er into the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. Going through tough experiences brings youngsters closer together." n-)O\VeI\BIn

As a House Lord, Zhu Qinghuo naturally understood her meaning. "Yes, indeed! Don't worry, President Yu. I've already told my son to do his best."

Yu Hongxi smiled and nodded. In truth, she had had the same exact conversation with many other excited parents already.

She had noticed her daughter's soft spot for Li Luo, which was only getting mushier by the day.

Of course, she was against it. Her own enmity against Li Luo's parents aside, the simple fact that Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e were already engaged was enough to get a firm no from her.

Whether the engagement was merely in name or otherwise.

However, her parenting wasn't that unsubtle either. She knew that an ultimatum to stay away from Li Luo would only stoke rebelliousness.

The way she saw it, Lu Qing'er liked Li Luo because there hadn't been much competition in the Tianshu Province.

Here at Xia City, the heart of the Xia Kingdom, talents teemed like carp in a river.

With some nudging on her part, Lu Qing'er would soon be exposed to many great talents of her age, and her feelings for Li Luo would be diluted accordingly.

Such was her subtlety.

For example, the Golden Dragon Secret Keys...

If young men like Zhu Xuan and Ning Zhao could get the keys and accompany Lu Qing'er, they would definitely become much closer. Who knows? Perhaps Lu Qing'er's feelings for Li Luo would eventually fade away.

Trouble saved for her, and for Lu Qing'er's future.

An ideal outcome.

As for Li Luo getting the Golden Dragon Secret Key... The kid was just a first-tier Resonant Master. Whereas Zhu Xuan, Ye Qiuding, Ning Zhao, and many others were already at the third tier.

The kid couldn't be that strong, could he?

...

"Qing'er, happy birthday."

Wang Hejiu was all charm and sincerity before her. "I hope we can separate matters of school from outside life."

She did not like him very much, but Lu Qing'er would not show it here and now. She gave him the minimum effort smile-and-nod and then turned away.

After exchanging some inane pleasantries with Zhu Xuan, Ning Zhao, and the others, her eyes flicked up. "Excuse me, I'll go greet other guests."

Zhu Xuan and the others nodded courteously, and she moved with a spring in her step towards Li Luo.

Wang Hejiu watched her go and sighed. "She's gone to Li Luo again, hasn't she? They're very close in school."

Ning Zhao frowned. "Qing'er and him must be just normal friends. They came from Southwind Academy together. It's understandable that they're close."

Wang Hejiu fanned himself lightly. "Perhaps. But I hear Qing'er sometimes buys Li Luo breakfast in school."

Ning Zhao was looking less sure now.

"She must be clinging on to familiar things from the Tianshu Province. Once she's used to life here at Xia City, her thinking will change," Zhu Xuan said.

"Getting a Golden Dragon Secret Key and accompanying her into the Dao Fields will definitely be an opportunity to help that change along," he declared confidently.

Ning Zhao eyed Zhu Xuan with new wariness. As Two Star Hall peers, he knew Zhu Xuan's qualities well. If Zhu Xuan got his chance with Lu Qing'er, his own chances would slip.

"That President Yu. Why would she do this key thing..." he grumbled to himself. His own father was highly placed in the Golden Dragon Bank, just below Yu Hongxi. Like Lu Qing'er, he too had direct access to Golden Dragon Secret Keys whenever he wanted. Without this contest, he would naturally go in with her to train, and perhaps open the door to her heart.

But Yu Hongxi had made it an open competition, and now the solitary oak had many other trees to compete with.

Still, no amount of resentment was going to change Yu Hongxi's decision. Soldier on.

...

While each was plotting his courtship, Lu Qing'er had reached Li Luo's side, glass in hand.

"Greetings, Your Highness, Senior Jiang." Lu Qing'er smiled at the two girls, raising her glass in welcome.

"Junior Qing'er."

Both turned to the birthday girl with warm smiles.

Li Luo raised his glass as well.

"There are too many guests today. I'm sorry I cannot be a more attentive host," Lu Qing'er said politely to the two girls. "I also invited Yu Lang, Zhao Kuo, and the others," she said to Li Luo. "They declined."

"They would feel a little uncomfortable in such a situation," Li Luo explained.

These were the aristocrats of the Xia Kingdom, practically nobility. Commoners like Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo would feel like fish out of water here.

Lu Qing'er inclined her head. "I understand."

"After the holidays, I'll get them to celebrate with you again." Li Luo smiled.

Her eyes lit up briefly, but she hid it quickly. "Let's talk again then."

She looked around. "Are you interested in the Golden Dragon Secret Key?"

"Would anyone at the Resonant Master Stage not be?" he answered honestly.

She nodded. She had tried to wheedle one out of her mother, but her mother had flipped it on her by making it a birthday highlight instead.

"Good luck, then," she managed.

Li Luo nodded lightly.

While they were talking, the First Princess was regarding the calm Jiang Qing'e with some amusement.

This Li Luo was truly a ladies' man like his father.

Chapter 0206: The Fight for the Keys

As the evening wore on, bellies warmed with wine mellowed the conversation into a pleasant murmur.

The orchestra's music died down, and Yu Hongxi walked up to the stage.

Anticipation rose as all eyes turned to the woman in red.

"Thank you, all of you, for coming to my daughter's birthday celebration."

"Let me get straight to it. As you all know, I've put up several Golden Dragon Secret Keys as the highlight of the celebrations today..."

"They are limited to those at the Resonant Master Stage, and all who are eligible are welcome. I dare not call our Golden Dragon Dao Fields peerless... but I think they are quite good," she said with dry wit. She then produced a golden key shaped like a dragon, its scales glittering with a mystical power.

Many eyes were on that golden key between her fingers, and even some Dukes showed interest.

The Golden Dragon Dao Fields were vast, their own world with many different levels. These secret keys might only allow access to the outer level, but the Dukes were interested in the depths.

It was a pity that the Golden Dragon Dao Fields was a closely guarded property, the fruit of countless hours and fortunes poured into the project. Only the Golden Dragon Bank's people could cultivate inside, while others had to be invited. Not even Dukes were allowed entry freely.

"That's the Golden Dragon Secret Key?"

Li Luo squinted curiously. He didn't know much about the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, but it was probably pretty incredible to open a new space out of nowhere.

"Golden Dragon Dao Fields... Creating something so incredible just speaks of the Golden Dragon Bank's power," the First Princess said with some awe.

Jiang Qing'e looked at her. The First Princess had always been attracted to power. She herself was one of the most influential people in the royal court, which was the foremost power in the Xia Kingdom. And yet an anomaly like the Golden Dragon Bank was enough to make even her feel powerless.

Still, it was a comment that did not require a comment.

"It seems we have strong competition," Jiang Qing'e remarked to Li Luo.

He nodded glumly. Yu Hongxi had said that any Resonant Master could participate, which made the odds suck for a first-tier like himself. No matter how strong he was, the odds of him beating third-tiers like Zhu Xuan or Ye Qiuding were very low.

An unfair competition!

"Take heart. I doubt the keys will be decided in a straight-up brawl," Jiang Qing'e said.

"Mm. Today is Lu Qing'er's birthday after all. It would be quite unsightly to fight here. The method of the contest must be something else." The First Princess agreed.

Li Luo nodded. He would see how it went. If there was a chance, he could give it a shot. Otherwise, no point in forcing it.

"This contest for the Golden Dragon Secret Keys will not be a fight of steel and fist," Yu Hongxi continued. "We will use another method."

She raised a hand, and her resonant power flowed through the crowd, parting it gently until a wide area was cleared.

Around the area, her resonant power formed a screen of light.

"The Golden Dragon Dao Fields are not without their perils. Inside, one may occasionally encounter the Green Alioth, a savage manifestation of wind-based energy. The Golden Dragon Secret Key will shield you, but it is still a great threat.

"The test will be a simulation of the Green Alioth. All who wish to compete only need to step within the area in front. The one who lasts the longest against the Green Alioth I summon shall win the Golden Dragon Secret Key," Yu Hongxi said, pointing at the area she had demarcated with resonant power.

There was a loud muttering of surprise at this.

After some deliberation, Zhu Xuan was the first to confidently stride in.

Following which, Ye Qiuding, Mo Ling, Wang Hejiu, Duze Beixuan, and a few others followed.

Soon enough, there were a dozen people in the middle, all the elite seeds of the Astral Sage College.

"So that's how it is..."

Li Luo smiled to himself. In a straight fight, he would have slim odds of beating third-tier Resonant Masters like Zhu Xuan and the others. But in endurance...

He had created his Unyielding Form after being beaten up by Jiang Qing'e in the last few days! He could use it!

"No need to thank me," Jiang Qing'e said with a kind smile.

Li Luo scowled at her. This plump swan was getting ahead of herself. After all the pecking of the last few days, she expected thanks?

Black-hearted!

He ignored her, walking up into the space.

Lu Qing'er clenched her fists tightly when she saw him move forward. Her face was emotionless, but inside, she rooted for him.

Yu Hongxi's eyes did not miss Lu Qing'er's excitement. She knew her daughter too well.

Her daughter was excited and nervous.

But skilled as Li Luo was, he was only a first-tier. It would be an uphill climb to best out the third-tier competitors.

Li Luo noticed a reticent Qin Zhulu right beside him. "You're interested in such celebrations too? Interested in the secret key?"

Qin Zhulu looked at him. "My dad made me come," he grunted. "He said it was this, or accompany him to the brothel."

Li Luo swallowed. "Damn, your father's a real madman. Are you sure you're really his son?"

He threw Qin Zhulu a look of sympathy, but he was not sure of what else to say.

The competitors assembled, Yu Hongxi took out a jade bottle that was carved with intricate runes of light. The sound of howling began.

"Prepare yourselves."

With a smile, she flicked a bead of resonant power at the jade bottle's opening, then a powerful, green gale blasted towards Li Luo and the others.

Chapter 0207: Green Alioth

Whoo! Whoo!

The green gale built up to a howling frenzy, and even those behind the screen of light could not suppress an involuntary shudder.

All eyes were on the youngsters in front as they were swallowed up in the tempest.

Zhu Xuan's own fiery-red resonant power flared to life, flickering against the impact of the wind.

Lower eighth-grade fire resonance.

The captain of the strongest Two Star Hall team. Zhu Xuan's strength and potential were beyond doubt.

Indeed, he stood tall with confidence.

Behind him, Ye Qiuding, Mo Ling, Duze Beixuan, Wang Hejiu, and the others followed suit, their own resonant powers braced and ready for the onslaught of the Green Alioth.

Shoosh!

In the instant that the Green Alioth swept over them, they cringed in fear. The Green Alioth had some sort of penetrating power, breezing past their defenses to attack their bodies directly.

Shing!

Soon, all of their flesh was ripped and tattered, glistening with gashes that dripped with blood.

The Green Alioth was much stronger than they had anticipated.

But no one budged an inch. Everyone here was strong, and not the kind who would give up at the first sign of trouble.

Li Luo looked at the wounds barely covered by his tattered clothing with mild interest.

"Quite a stiff breeze," he mumbled to himself.

Yu Hongxi's Green Alioth was many levels weaker than the real deal, but it was still enough to shred their resonant power defenses.

And this was just the beginning.

Whoo!

The green wind came at them relentlessly, blowing through every crack in their defenses to eat at their flesh.

At the start, everyone held on fine, but as time wore on, more and more pained faces could be seen.

Everyone was bleeding freely now, flecks of blood vanishing into the winds.

Some feet were wavering, steadily being forced back by the Green Alioth.

If they were pushed out of the light screen, they would be considered eliminated.

The stronger ones, like Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding, stood at the front, their strength advantage allowing them to anchor themselves firmly.

The second-tier Resonant Masters were slipping backwards.

Li Luo as well.

He saw that Duze Beixuan and Wang Hejiu were a step ahead of him, both bleeding freely and slipping backwards as well.

"Li Luo! Looks like you're going to be eliminated first!" Duze Beixuan shouted through gritted teeth.

Li Luo was speechless. "Damn, you're getting wrecked yourself. Do you have no shame?"

He ignored them, looking ahead to where Qin Zhulu was still standing his ground. However, his wounds were fairly horrendous.

His upper eighth-grade Snarling Golden Demon Tiger resonance had the notable resilience of all beast resonances, which was the main reason why he could hold on.

There were not more than five people who could still hold their ground here.

Outside the light screen, Jiang Qing'e was watching Li Luo intently as he was forced back step by step. "The disadvantage in cultivation level is clear," the First Princess said softly.

This might not be a head-to-head fight, but Zhu Xuan and the others had a clear advantage still.

"It's still too early to say," Jiang Qing'e replied.

The First Princess laughed softly, her red phoenix-eyes on Li Luo. "What trump card does he have now? You make me curious..."

Jiang Qing'e smiled. The First Princess was an astute woman, to glean so much from her simple reply.

On stage, Lu Qing'er was watching Li Luo with her heart in her throat as well. Each time he was forced back a step, she trembled in fear. And seeing his skin torn to shreds, she could not help but worry even though she knew they were just superficial wounds.

At the same time, she was thinking that if Li Luo really couldn't get a Golden Dragon Secret Key here, she would think of another way to secure him one...

Only high-level associates at the Golden Dragon Bank could get the keys. She was already assessing which would be easiest to target...

Li Luo was starting to feel his limit approaching. He took a deep breath and waited no more.

"Unyielding Form!"

With a low but firm growl, he activated both resonance seeds within him, and his resonant power kicked in, blue and green mixing within him.

Warm healing power bubbled out of him, washing across his entire body in a flush of power that faded away with his wounds. He began to heal at a supernatural pace.

By the time the Green Alioth left the finishing taper of a scar on his skin, the opening end had already begun to heal.

Li Luo's backwards movement stopped. And incredibly, he took a step forward.

"Eh?"

The crowd noticed it immediately, the only salmon moving upriver against the raging rapids. Moreover, it was the first-tier Resonant Master Li Luo.

Some of the second-tier challengers had already been forced out.

Li Luo brushed aside the droplets of blood forming on his cheeks as he braved the wind, taking step after steady step forward. He moved past a dumbstruck Duze Beixuan and Wang Hejiu.

"Impossible!" they whispered hoarsely. Li Luo was weaker than them. Surely dual resonances were not enough to overcome the Green Alioth, right?

Li Luo had no attention to spare them. He plodded on, step after step, until he passed Qin Zhulu.

Qin Zhulu followed his advance with a hungry look. He licked his lips... This Li Luo was always a surprise.

He wanted to go some hard and heavy rounds with him, to test the power of the dual resonances for himself.

Qin Zhulu gritted his teeth, and dug deeper. The roar of a tiger rumbled from his throat, and a golden tiger shimmered into view superimposed on his body.

Green Alioth fought Golden Tiger in a shower of sparks.

Qin Zhulu stood firm.

Li Luo halted right beside him, no longer moving forward. He could sense that the green light from Yu Hongxi's bottle was intensifying, charging up for an even more savage attack.

The outcome of the Golden Dragon Secret Key would depend on this next wave...

Chapter 0208: Go With the Wind

As Yu Hongxi's jade bottle shone even brighter, the crowd watched, enthralled.

They could feel that the upcoming wave was going to be something huge.

With it, the final result would be decided.

At the head of the pack was Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding.

Both were third-tier Resonant Masters, and their resonant power could hold out the longest.

Slightly behind them were two or three other bright stars, slightly older than the leaders, but extremely promising in talent. They had failed to enter the Astral Sage College for various reasons, but they had applied themselves with great diligence and were still extremely skilled.

Behind them, Li Luo and Qin Zhulu.

They were definitely the weakest ones left, cultivation-wise. But still, just making it this far was already a surprise. Many in the crowd shook their heads in amazement and accepted it as the power of the Astral Sage College's elites.

Wang Hejiu, Duze Beixuan, and the others were the last in the pack. They were in trouble, steadily being forced back by the Green Alioth.

Weng!

Following a loud screech, a green wall of wind shot forth with a new intensity, intent on smashing everything in its way against the light screen.

This blast was enough to force Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding back several steps, their defenses crumbling rapidly under the onslaught.

Streaks of blood appeared on their bodies.

If even these two were in trouble, there was no need to mention those behind them. The second-tier Resonant Masters were out of the game.

Li Luo and Qin Zhulu were again sliding back several steps. With a defiant roar, Qin Zhulu's skin glowed with a faint, golden sheen that did not hide the redness of his face.

His defenses strengthened by another tier.

Even so, the Green Alioth continued to mercilessly lay into him. His eyes had a wildness in them that matched the wind. He stood his ground, seemingly oblivious to the pain he had to be feeling.

Li Luo's resonant power was not as strong, so he was now behind Qin Zhulu again. Still, Unyielding Form was helping him to stay in roughly the same spot.

However, he could feel his resonant power being depleted at a frightening pace, fueling his healing.

Such was the cost of Unyielding Form.

At this rate, Li Luo feared he might not make it to the end of this wave of the Green Alioth.

While Li Luo held strong with Unyielding Form, Wang Hejiu, Duze Beixuan, and the others had been swept out past the barrier.

Eliminated.

Duze Beixuan's foot slipped for the last time, and he was propelled out of the arena. His flight was calmed by the steady hand of his elder sister, Duze Honglian.

Duze Beixuan let his dismay show. "How can Li Luo possibly last so long?!" he demanded.

Both he and Wang Hejiu were clearly stronger than Li Luo.

Duze Honglian stared at the silver-haired youth with a deep frown. "The Green Alioth is scarring him badly, but if you look closely, you'll see that he's healing at a rapid rate..."

"If I'm not wrong, it's the regenerative powers of the water and wood resonances combined. He's accelerated his healing greatly."

Dual resonances were looking more and more nasty to deal with by the day.

Individually, neither resonance was considered high-grade. And yet put together, they achieved unusual results time and again.

"But his resonant power is depleting rapidly, which means this accelerated healing costs him greatly. Given his resonant power tier, he won't make it until the end of this wave," Duze Honglian predicted confidently.

"After this wave, probably only Zhu Xuan, Ye Qiuding, and Qin Zhulu will be left."

Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan nodded. This was an outcome they could accept. Qin Zhulu, the undisputed first of their year that they acknowledged.

As for Li Luo, his elimination would go a long way to soothing their wounded prides.

Just as Duze Honglian predicted, more and more people caved before the wind, flying out like uprooted trees.

Only four were left now: Zhu Xuan, Ye Qiuding, Qin Zhulu, and Li Luo.

Zhu Xuan and Ye Qiuding's clothing were badly tattered and bloodstained, but their resonant powers were holding strong.

As for Qin Zhulu, he was just using the power of his Snarling Golden Demon Tiger resonance to fight on.

All eyes were on Li Luo.

Even Duze Honglian could sense his resonant power dwindling away rapidly. How could the stronger people present not sense it?

The prediction was 30 breaths' time. After that, Li Luo would be shriveled and spent.

Which meant that the secret keys would probably go to Zhu Xuan, Ye Qiuding, and Qin Zhulu.

On stage, Lu Qing'er's knuckles were white from anxiety.

Jiang Qing'e's gaze was steady. She also refused to give up.

Yu Hongxi was watching Li Luo too. He had surprised them all to make it this far, but it was about time.

Water and wood might have boosted his recovery by a lot, but he was still a first-tier Resonant Master. The lack of resonant power should undo him.

Li Luo stood unflinchingly against the wind, but he could feel the resonance seeds dry up within him. The searing pain was getting backed by an increasing pressure, but all of this only made him calmer.

Calm as a lake in winter.

"It's almost time..."

In these last few days, he had suppressed the feeling of an oncoming breakthrough, and now he let it go. His resonance seeds trembled within.

Resonant power patterns began to bloom across his resonance seeds, becoming more and more numerous until they joined together to faintly resemble a flower.

Weng!

A curious keening started to sound from within his body.

The worldly natural energies were bending around him.

Bottling up within him.

He absorbed them all, as if he were a forest and all the bits of energy were birds here to roost. They settled onto the branches, coming home to their rightful place, his resonance seeds.

The parched seeds shone with a renewed luster.

Li Luo's resonant power kicked back into gear, a higher gear. His healing powers were enhanced, and Unyielding Form was now even stronger than before.

Loud gasps broke the tense silence, and even those like Yu Hongxi and the First Princess were staring with eyes wide.

Of course they knew...

Li Luo had made the breakthrough to the second-tier, the Pattern Genesis Tier.

He had made clever and risky use of the Green Alioth's pressure...

Chapter 0209: Zhu Xuan's Request

Li Luo finished his breakthrough to collective surprise.

"That bastard! Not again!" Duze Beixuan shouted in disbelief. Li Luo had done the same damn thing during the ranking battles to stop their ultimate move.

"Not exactly. His last breakthrough was probably a clutch, but this one... Seems like he's been holding it back for a while," Wang Hejiu said.

Duze Honglian nodded. "It was too smooth a breakthrough. He must have been holding it in reserve for a while..."

"Sly dog. Did he know Yu Hongxi was going to call the Green Alioth?"

"Or perhaps Lu Qing'er told him beforehand," Duze Beixuan said.

"We can't rule that out," Wang Hejiu said, irritated.

...

"Did Li Luo get inside information on this?" the First Princess asked Jiang Qing'e half jokingly.

"If I said no, you would believe me?"

The First Princess bit her lip. Jiang Qing'e was impossible to rile.

"If others said no, I might not believe them, but if you said it, I'd believe it." She smiled.

Jiang Qing'e was too proud a character to lie.

Which meant that Li Luo had come well prepared.

Blind to the requirements of this challenge, he had simply kept a trump card for the advantage of surprise.

The First Princess smiled to herself. Li Luo was quite different from his parents and Jiang Qing'e...

The other three were all straightforward brilliance, shining brightly as the sun, proudly and without the need to hide. But Li Luo was like wheat in the field, soaking up light and looking unremarkable. Until suddenly he wasn't.

...

Yu Hongxi's jade bottle fizzled, the Green Alioth receding. She looked at the still-standing Li Luo, and did not miss the joy in her daughter's eyes.

Yu Hongxi sighed. To think that Li Luo would still hide something like that... Plus, she had not even told Lu Qing'er about the test format, worried that she might tell Li Luo beforehand.

The Green Alioth that she had summoned should have disadvantaged Li Luo in every way.

Was he on guard against her? Or was it a coincidence?

The boy might look harmless, but he was as deep as an iceberg. How had Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan raised a boy so different from themselves?

In terms of personality, it was clearly their disciple Jiang Qing'e who took after them more.

When the wind faded, Yu Hongxi walked up to the four survivors. "Congratulations for making it to the end."

She flicked a finger, and four golden beams of light shot out towards them.

The four received the golden, dragon-shaped keys gratefully. They felt cool in their hands, gleaming with a mystic energy.

"The Golden Dragon Dao Fields will open in a month's time. Bring that key to the Golden Dragon Bank, and we will send you in."

The four nodded.

"Now go rest," she said with a kind smile. Golden Dragon Bank experts moved forward to treat their wounds and offer a change of clothes.

Li Luo refused medical attention, having already healed all of his wounds.

He went to a side room to get changed, and he found someone waiting when he came back out.

A head of fire-red hair. Zhu Xuan.

Li Luo planned to walk right past him, but Zhu Xuan deliberately stepped in his way.

"Yes?"

Zhu Xuan could not be considered typically handsome, but there was an appealing confidence and swagger to his manner. His iron grip on the top rank of the Two Star Hall probably added to that confidence.

"Junior Li Luo," he said with a thin smile. "I've heard much about you, and today I see that your dual resonances live up to their reputation."

"Ah, you're very kind. I presume you didn't wait for me here just to offer these kind words?"

"Indeed. There is something I hope you agree to."

"Go on."

"It's nothing much," Zhu Xuan said frankly. "Four of us have Golden Dragon Secret Keys. I hear that when we enter the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, it will be in teams. I hope that if Lu Qing'er comes to find you inside, you can turn her down. I want to be in her group."

"This is President Yu's wish too. She hinted this, and my father approves fully as well. I know that Junior Li Luo and Lu Qing'er have a good relationship, so I would be very grateful if you refused her."

He smiled broadly. "House Jiyan would also be very grateful."

Li Luo showed no surprise at this request. "Heh, maybe you misunderstood President Yu's intentions?"

"Junior Li Luo, that is beside the point. Consider my request. House Luolan is in a poor state, harrowed badly by House Duze. If House Jiyan moves against you at this time, I fear that House Luolan might just crack," he said with no pretense.

"Wow. A threat?"

"I just hope Junior Li Luo can consider my suggestion. I don't think you would refuse a new friend."

"Or do you have plans for Lu Qing'er?"

Li Luo shook his head and stuck out two fingers. "Two points. Firstly, Jiyan and Luolan have always been on bad terms. Do you think I believe House Jiyan doesn't wish to kick House Luolan while it's down? You very badly wish to. But House Jinque is holding you back. So don't come pretending you're some kind soul in front of me. Second, Lu Qing'er is my friend. If she needs my help, I will offer it. You want me to turn away a friend... Sorry, but just how deluded are you?"

Li Luo looked right at Zhu Xuan's rapidly souring face. "Besides, you should be talking to Lu Qing'er about this. If you're sincere enough, she just might consider it. Your brain must have overheated from your fire resonance to come to me with these petty calculations."

Zhu Xuan's smile was completely gone now. He nodded. "Junior Li Luo, you're a lot more stubborn than I imagined. Very well, words are wasted on you, but I hope the day doesn't come where you wish they had not been."

He left, waving over his shoulder.

Well, that was that.

Li Luo ignored the threats. There had never been bridges between House Jiyan and House Luolan to burn anyway. They got on like oil and water.

Still, House Luolan was in a difficult state.

He turned and hadn't gone two steps when he saw two stars shining brightly at him. They were not in the darkening sky, but instead in the sockets of Lu Qing'er's face, right above her bright smile.

Chapter 0210: Tool

Lu Qing'er was hiding in the pillar's shadow, her pale skin glowing like a crystal. She was even more enchanting with the contrast, her long, dark hair cascading down to her waist.

Li Luo jumped a little. "You heard the guy?"

Lu Qing'er's smile was filled with delight. She nodded. "I thought the Young Lord would sell me out."

Had Zhu Xuan approached him knowing that Lu Qing'er was nearby? If he had shown any signs of wavering in his reply, Lu Qing'er would've been sad.

If so, that guy was more canny than he had thought.

"Zhu Xuan is quite low, although he's the young lord of House Jiyan. Childish requests. I don't think he's very sincere about you. Might want to be careful." Li Luo sighed.

Sneaky or otherwise, Li Luo wasted no time in painting him as black as he could.

Lu Qing'er rolled her eyes at him. "I don't care whether he's sincere or not. I wouldn't get on the same team as him in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields."

"He will be heartbroken. He's so eager," Li Luo said.

"He's just after my mother's hold on the Golden Dragon Bank." She sniffed.

"You can't make him out to be so bad... What if he wants both the girl and the gold?" Li Luo suggested.

"In his sweet dreams!" Lu Qing'er's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Li Luo, you wouldn't sell me out because others tempted you, right?

"I'm not too familiar with the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, but I hear that other countries' branches also send people. Competition is intense. I need a reliable teammate," she said winsomely.

Li Luo thumped his chest. "Don't worry. Given how close we are, Zhu Xuan could offer to dismantle House Jiyan into wooden planks and I wouldn't bat an eyelid."

Lu Qing'er was over the moon.

"Now can you sheath that dagger?" Li Luo asked plaintively.

He pointed to her other hand, where she held a gleaming, icy dagger.

"Oh this? Hehe, don't misunderstand. I'm just using it to peel fruits. Here."

She handed over a beautifully peeled fruit.

Li Luo stared at her.

Still, he and Lu Qing'er went way back. If she needed help in the Dao Fields, he wasn't going to turn her away.

He took a big bite. "Your ice resonance reached the eighth-grade?"

Lu Qing'er nodded happily.

"I'm jealous," he said, sighing. He could just imagine the amount of spirit liquids and purifying lights needed to make that leap.

Yu Hongxi was really a wealthy woman. Who wouldn't want her daughter?

"Perhaps the Young Lord blessed with dual resonances should not envy my little lower eighth-grade ice resonance. After all, you've already beaten two lower eighth-grades," she stated with a laugh.

Duze Beixuan and Wang Hejiu.

Li Luo grinned as well. He was happy enough to pass time in pleasant conversation with her, but soon enough, a servant came to inform her that President Yu was calling.

Lu Qing'er had no choice but to go. Today was her birthday after all. She waved wistfully to him and turned to leave.

Li Luo headed back to the main room to find Jiang Qing'e.

She was with the First Princess, who smiled at Li Luo's return. "After the reception ends, we'll trouble Junior Li Luo for a bit of your time."

Li Luo nodded. This was clearly a hopeless task, but he had to go through the motions of it.

After all, it was their chance to firm up a connection with the First Princess. Both parties were happy to do this.

The candles wore down with the night, and people began to take their leave.

The First Princess smiled at Yu Hongxi. "President Yu, we thank you for lending us your space."

Yu Hongxi nodded. "Think nothing of it. After so long, His Majesty must be bored."

The First Princess laughed. "Out of the palace, everything is interesting to him."

Yu Hongxi laughed at that. "This way, please." She led them into an inner villa and stopped outside a room.

Li Luo felt many presences lurking in the shadows.

Bodyguards.

Yu Hongxi pushed open the door, and the First Princess led Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo in.

"Mom, what are they doing?" Lu Qing'er asked in a hushed voice.

"The First Princess wants Li Luo to try and treat the Emperor."

"Really? I heard that many Dukes could do nothing about the Emperor's natural frailty... why would she have Li Luo try?"

Yu Hongxi smiled. "Another ax to grind."

A jolt of understanding. So they were just using Li Luo as a tool...