

Resonance 301

Chapter 0301: Transport's Arrived

Li Luo was just venting, really.

After all, the Holy Grail Meet was right before House Luolan's own troubles. The three-tailed heavenly wolf's power would be perfect to tip the scales in his favor.

Li Luo wondered if Pang Qianyuan was aware of House Luolan's situation, and that Li Luo would definitely accept his deal.

But, but, but. What were the chances that the Astral Sage College would win the Dragon Bone Holy Grail?

He turned to Jiang Qing'e, face screwed up with thought. "Do you think the Astral Sage College stands a chance to win this year?"

She inclined her head. "It's possible. Perhaps more possible than the other years."

"Why?"

There was a twinkle in her eyes. "Because this time round, the Astral Sage College has me."

Li Luo stared at her. What an arrogant lady. Do you think you can carry the Astral Sage College's chances on your shoulders alone?

Maybe she just could.

Jiang Qing'e had strolled through her time at the Astral Sage College breaking records left and right. She was on track to becoming the most outstanding student that the school had seen in the last century, and representing them at the Holy Grail Meet would indeed inch their chances a little higher.

Damn, Li Luo had been out-swagged.

"But..."

"The Holy Grail Meet's system is complicated. It's not something that an individual can win alone. Even with me, the chances aren't that much higher," Jiang Qing'e clarified.

She regarded him thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be a little higher with you."

"Me?" Li Luo said, surprised.

She laughed. "Did you think that you wouldn't be of help? When did you start thinking so little of yourself?"

"I don't," Li Luo protested. "But I'm just a One Star Hall newbie. The gap between me and you veterans is huge. What help could I be?"

He was a Third Pattern, and Jiang Qing'e was an Earth Fiend. The First Princess and Gong Shenjun were already at the Heavenly Dipper General Stage.

There was an insurmountable gap.

"The Holy Grail Meet is not that straightforward, like I said. There is a place for students of every hall in the competition. After all, the Holy Grail Meet is a test of student quality. Are the One and Two Star Hall students not students too? They are the freshest blood circulating in the system," Jiang Qing'e patiently explained.

"From what I know, the past Holy Grail Meets have been divided into two phases. The first phase is a fight by hall.

"This means that you'll be pitted against your peers. The last ones standing will be the strongest, and called the ace students. These students are granted championship points. The school with the highest points wins the Dragon Bone Holy Grail.

"So if you win the One Star Hall ace student title, we get points too." Jiang Qing'e smiled at him.

Against other peers? Perhaps he did stand a chance after all.

After all, only Qin Zhulu could contest him for first place in their school now. Unless the other schools had many students as strong as Qin Zhulu,

Surely they did. Otherwise, the Astral Sage College would not have been denied the Dragon Bone Holy Grail these last three decades.

There was still some time before the Holy Grail Meet as well. Li Luo would use it to improve himself.

Just like that, Li Luo started to process the Holy Grail Meet in his mind.

A loud outburst of cheering from the purified spot interrupted his thoughts. The pair turned back as one to see a large energy rift in the middle of the purified spot.

Jiang Qing'e got to her feet. "Seems like the transport design is activated again."

Li Luo slouched down further in relief. "Finally. Out of this ghastly place."

They had been in the Umbra Cave for about a month now. It had taken a heavy mental toll on them, especially his final heroic spurt.

If he had screwed up, all of them would have been corpses.

With such a huge crisis averted, surely the school would cut purified spot 13 a break and send them back now.

Finally some reprieve.

"I wonder if the principal granted my wish..." Li Luo thought to himself. 100,000 points. Although it was possible that their combined haul this time might well reach 100,000 points, he didn't want to squander Jiang Qing'e's points. She needed a lot of cultivation resources too.

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On a high tower at the purified spot.

Twin purple flashes announced the arrival of two powerful mentors.

"Mentor Chi Chan! Mentor Shen Jinxiao!" they cheered.

The gauze over Chi Chan's face did not hide the deep frown on her brow as she hurried over.

Her squad was here. If anything had happened to them, she would be devastated.

As for Shen Jinxiao, he had fortuitously returned to school at the same time, and the two had rushed over.

Her frown eased up a little when she saw the tower still standing. If the purified spot still stood, then perhaps not all was lost.

Her frown eased up even more when she saw Gong Shenjun and the First Princess.

Her mood lifted. If they were here, even a Heavenly Disaster Class enemy could be dealt with.

"Shenjun. Luanyu. Has the Heavenly Disaster Class been taken care of?" Shen Jinxiao asked lightly.

They nodded.

"Casualties?" Shen Jinxiao asked more seriously.

"Some," the First Princess answered. "But everything is under control."

"We were lucky you made it in time," Shen Jinxiao said. "You have averted a huge disaster, and the school will surely reward you."

Strange expressions greeted him.

"Mentor Shen, I wouldn't dare to steal credit. Actually, Li Luo had already taken care of it all by the time I arrived."

Chi Chan and Shen Jinxiao looked at the First Princess, stunned.

Chapter 0302: The Mentors Arrive

"Li Luo?!" Chi Chan and Shen Jinxiao exclaimed together incredulously. If not for the fact that those words had come out of the very sane-looking First Princess, they would probably have dismissed it as a joke.

They gaped at her for a moment.

Seeing the two Violet Vibrance mentors in shock, the First Princess's heart stirred with a little self-interest. But she inclined her head. "Yes, Mentors. Strictly speaking, it was Li Luo who did it all."

"When I arrived, he already had the situation under control. He was the one who did the most, while all we did was get here."

Chi Chan looked at Gong Shenjun for confirmation. "I arrived later than Luanyu." He shrugged. "The great spirit beast was already sealed by the time I arrived."

"Great spirit beast?!" Chi Chan and Shen Jinxiao surfaced from their shock only to be thrown back down again. Especially the latter. What the hell had happened here? Wasn't it a Heavenly Disaster Class? What was this about a great spirit beast? What was going on?

The First Princess explained the situation, including Li Luo's luring of the three-tailed beast from the forbidden zone over to fight the Heavenly Disaster Class Other. In the end, he had sealed the three-tailed beast away with the help of the principal's seal.

All the mentors were dumbfounded, including the two Violet Vibrance mentors.

You could do that?

What on earth had possessed Li Luo to make him provoke another monster?

Wasn't he afraid they would both turn on him?

He had to have guts for brains.

Also, he had some incredible luck. With the support of the principal's seal? The thought had never occurred to them before.

Most scarily of all, he had actually pulled it off.

He had single-handedly solved this entire crisis. If not for his mad plan, they would probably have arrived at a scene overrun with Others... and no survivors.

An approving murmur broke out among the mentors.

Chi Chan was smiling quite broadly now. Things had gone way better than expected.

That kid Li Luo had puffed her chest up with pride.

"Li Luo has done great work this time," Shen Jinxiao said. "Bring us to see the sealed great spirit beast. Even though we're at a purified spot, it's best to be prudent."

The First Princess and Gong Shenjun bowed, leading them out to general cheers and applause as they went to the statue.

Shen Jinxiao and Chi Chan looked at the statue.

"Indeed, that's the three-tailed heavenly wolf from the forbidden zone."

"I heard that it was already close to Duke. If it had succeeded, the school would probably have chosen to give up on purified spot 13 entirely. It's good that it was sealed away before that," Chi Chan remarked.

Shen Jinxiao was looking at the inscriptions closely. It was indeed a powerful ward, and the power had a familiar flavor to it—that of the principal.

Shen Jinxiao stepped suddenly forward, his resonant power crackling forth. "The three-tailed heavenly wolf is a wily beast. For safety's sake, we should let it out now, and then you and I should destroy it."

Shen Jinxiao's sudden movement had the students scattering backwards in alarm.

Although there were two Violet Vibrance mentors present, the three-tailed heavenly wolf would go on a rampage once let out. There might be casualties if it ran wild.

Chi Chan was surprised. She was about to object, but Shen Jinxiao had a point. It felt unsafe to leave such a beast alive here at the purified spot.

She did not object.

"Wait!" They turned to the direction of the yell, and saw Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e pushing their way out of the crowd.

It was Li Luo who had shouted.

"Li Luo, we are about to finish the wolf off for good. Do you have an objection?" Shen Jinxiao said.

Li Luo first bowed courteously to Chi Chan, then turned back to Shen Jinxiao with a smile. "Don't be so hasty, Mentor Shen. The seal cannot be touched."

"Oh, and why not?" Shen Jinxiao said with a smile.

"Li Luo, I know you've done great work, and the seal is also your handiwork. But leaving the beast here is a time bomb. Destroying it is the best way."

The other students nodded. A seal was a temporary solution. If the beast could be killed once and for all, that would be a greater relief.

Li Luo swore inwardly. There was no three-tailed heavenly wolf in that piece of rock though. How would he explain it if Shen Jinxiao broke it open?

His entire situation could be rumpled, just like that.

Damn, this Jinxiao was really a pain in the butt, even when he wasn't trying. "When I grow stronger, I'm going to crush you like a bug!"

Li Luo spoke calmly. "We can't destroy it because the principal said so. As to why, I don't know either. You can go ask the principal yourself."

He was happy enough to pass the burden of proof on. Shen Jinxiao probably wouldn't run off and verify things. Even if he did, the principal would probably cover for him.

The principal. It was a handy name to use indeed, and a very powerful one. The students accepted his words straight away, as the principal was like a god to them. Since he had chosen to work through Li Luo and his seal, it made sense that he would also leave Li Luo any warnings or advice regarding the seal.

Shen Jinxiao frowned. Li Luo had played a strong card indeed, one that he could not contend with.

Still, he found it fishy. There was no reason why the principal would give such an instruction.

"If that's what the principal said," Chi Chan commented neutrally, "then let's leave it be for now."

She found it odd as well, but when Shen Jinxiao and Li Luo clashed, she always preferred to side with the latter. He was her own student. The former was a scumbag.

Shen Jinxiao shot her a withering look of profound distaste, but he finally conceded. "As you wish."

He hadn't thought too much about it, dismissing it as Li Luo wanting to leave some memento of his crowning glory here for the students to idolize.

"And the body of the Heavenly Disaster Class?" Shen Jinxiao asked.

"What about it now?" Li Luo said irritably.

It was Chi Chan who answered. "For Others of that class, they leave behind corruption even when they die. The remnants need to be properly purged. Especially since this one died close to the purified spot."

"Well then..." Li Luo pointed it out. Somehow, he was always paranoid whenever Shen Jinxiao was involved.

Perhaps he was just too sensitive.

Shen Jinxiao ignored Li Luo, sweeping past him to the area he had indicated. With a powerful wave of resonant power, he evaporated all the lingering black mist and scoured the land of all traces of corruption.

Behind him, Li Luo looked on with deep suspicion. Somehow it looked like a criminal clearing up the scene of the crime. Shen Jinxiao turned back to them.

"Mentor Shen, doesn't it seem a bit strange that a Heavenly Disaster Class Other would appear here?" Li Luo suddenly asked.

"I wonder if there was potential for investigation. Somebody working in the shadows to bring it out, for example?"

Shen Jinxiao's face was neutral as he waved a hand lazily. "Youngsters shouldn't get lost in their flights of fancy. The number of Heavenly Disaster Class Others appearing in the outskirts of Umbra Cave is low, but not zero.

"There are bigger problems to deal with in the deeper parts of the Umbra Cave, and no one has the time or patience to conduct such a baseless investigation.

"All of you should prepare to leave," he said, addressing the students in general. "Your purging mission is complete, and you can return to school to recover."

He turned, striding away to the center of the purified spot.

The students cheered at his announcement.

Among their cheers were frequent mentions of Li Luo's name.

Shen Jinxiao's eyelid twitched with irritation. Not only had he failed to accomplish his objective, he had even brought Li Luo's reputation to new heights.

What a bother.

Chapter 0303: Funeral

Only the brutal and dark experience of the Umbra Cave could make them crave peace so much. All they wanted at this point was a time without the threat of death hanging over their heads at every moment, with their nightmares coming to life all around them.

It wasn't just Li Luo. All the other students were enjoying the peace with their eyes closed, just sitting happily and luxuriating in it.

Li Luo swiveled his head around to remark to Jiang Qing'e, "All of humankind should be grateful to the Astral Sage College for their peaceful life here in the Xia Kingdom."

He had not known about it before, the lives they paid each year to keep the Others at bay.

It seemed like the Astral Sage College was the Xia Kingdom's great protector, while the royal court was just the ruler.

Privately, he felt like the Astral Sage College was the most noble in the Xia Kingdom as well.

Jiang Qing'e agreed on this point. Regardless of whether the Astral Sage College had another agenda, their willingness to sacrifice so many resources, student lives, and even teacher lives to keep the Umbra Cave at bay deserved its place in the good books of history.

Nearby, an endless stream of students continued to file out of a wooden door, including many who had been at the same purified spot as Li Luo and the others.

Students at other purified spots had also finished their purging missions, and were starting to exfiltrate from the Umbra Cave.

The courtyard was loud with happy voices of relief.

For now, no one was allowed to leave. The students were tightly enclosed by many mentors. After leaving the Umbra Cave each time, there had to be a check. For corruption.

Some students might have been unknowingly corrupted after fighting the Others for extended periods of time. If it was not detected early, the corruption would seed itself deeper, leading to disastrous consequences.

That was why the corruption check was crucial each time.

Two Violet Vibrance mentors took to the air above them, and suddenly there was a spray of light that separated into individual threads of energy, reaching down to them.

The energy threads were icy cool, and at the same time they made them all feel very relaxed.

When the body relaxed, hidden things would be exposed.

"Argh!"

There was a startled cry as a student started to buck and thrash. Black mist started to appear around her face, twisting her expression.

She had been corrupted.

From the first hint of black, mentors were converging on her, quickly holding her down and then taking her out of the courtyard.

Corruption at this test was usually not very serious. After some purification time, they would be fine. That student would probably spend the next few weeks in the purification chamber. After the first find, there were a few more students who were revealed as corrupted, but they were all subdued and escorted away in good time.

Finally the two Violet Vibrance mentors landed back on the ground, wiping away the energy threads. The check was over.

Many of the students felt relief wash over them.

Li Luo was relieved as well, but when he turned to Jiang Qing'e, he saw that her face was still rather solemn.

"Isn't it over yet?"

"Wait and see."

The two Violet Vibrance mentors walked to the front of the crowd. "Congratulations on surviving this purging mission.

"All of us are very happy to see each of you make it back. Except... not all of you are here. Some students will forever languish in the Umbra Cave."

The crowd fell silent immediately, grave expressions on young faces. Each of them let their sorrow come to the fore. Many of the deceased students had been familiar to them.

Perhaps a month ago, they had been drinking and making merry together.

Now they would never see them again.

Some sobbed quietly to themselves.

The two Violet Vibrance mentors started to speak again, this time calling out the names of those who had fallen.

"Two Star Hall, Chen Zhen."

"Two Star Hall, Liu Ming'er."

"Three Star Hall, Meng Qi."

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As each name was read out, a bit of light flew out from the two mentors' sleeves. It was actually a shining leaf, on which the name was written.

The leaves floated along to the Tree of Resonant Power and fastened themselves to an open branch firmly.

Li Luo understood in a flash. Each leaf on the tree represented a student who had died in the fight against the Umbra Cave...

Throughout all these years, the Astral Sage College had built its grand yet macabre symbol in the resistance against the Umbra Cave.

Finally, the last leaf was attached to the Tree of Resonant Power, and the two mentors bowed their heads, speaking solemnly together in quiet prayer.

"May fear be gone."

"May we live long."

The students echoed along obediently after them.

"May fear be gone!"

"May we live long!"

Li Luo looked up to the tree. It was nothing but a gravestone to him now.

"Why doesn't the school invite other experts from the Xia Kingdom to deal with the Umbra Cave? Surely the losses would be less that way."

"Firstly, the students that enter the Astral Sage College are the best, and the rest of the Xia Kingdom might not match their standards," Jiang Qing'e replied. "Besides, students might be younger, but their hearts are usually a bit purer. We are not impervious to corruption, but compared to the experts outside, who have darkened their personalities in the gritty world, students stand a lower chance of getting corrupted."

"Privately, my mentors told me that the Astral Sage College once reached out to these other experts in times of need. They were indeed stronger than the students, but they were much more easily corrupted and turned. Overall, they caused more harm than good."

"That's why the school has always been very cautious about inviting external experts to help."

No wonder the school would continue to pay this gruesome price each year. It had no choice.

Of course, while things were largely under control, there was no need for the school to call for aid.

As for the deaths... They were regrettable but also inevitable.

Li Luo felt sympathetic for the mourners all around him.

"Suddenly, I really want to get the Dragon Bone Holy Grail for the Astral Sage College."

With the Holy Grail, they would face no deaths for at least four years. Although this meant that some other school would then have to go without the panacea, Li Luo was not enough of a saint to care that far. All he could manage was contributing to the improvement of the Astral Sage College.

Chapter 0304: Stoking the Fires

After the funerals were complete, the Violet Vibrance mentors took their leave, and the poignant mood gradually lifted.

Besides the first years like Li Luo, the other students had been through this at least once, so they could bounce back with resilience.

Many of them left already looking forward to their futures, discussing news and hauls from their Umbra Cave trip.

News about purified spot 13 spread to the others, with the names of Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e loud in the mix. n)-0velb1n

Everyone heard that they had been targeted by a Heavenly Disaster Class Other.

It was quite sensational news.

All the students knew how terrifying a Heavenly Disaster Class Other was. Being targeted by one could spell doom for the entire purified spot.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e hadn't even made it out of the courtyard before a figure broke in a run over to them.

"Li Luo, are you alright?"

Lu Qing'er had come looking for him the moment she heard the news.

Seeing her beautiful features tight with anxiety, Li Luo gave her a reassuring smile. "Healthy as can be, as you can see."

"Junior Qing'er is very concerned about Li Luo, I see," Jiang Qing'e stated.

Lu Qing'er met her eyes squarely. "I am always very concerned about my friends."

"And I am pleased to express gratitude for your concern on Li Luo's behalf."

"It's nothing," Lu Qing'er said with a thin smile.

Li Luo was getting the sense that there was something odd going on between the two, but Lu Qing'er strode away huffily before he could say anything.

Some Two Star Hall students watched the exchange.

"Li Luo, you're so much stronger now!" a loud, roaring voice called.

Qin Zhulu.

Li Luo smiled and nodded. "I've grown a little, I guess."

His eyes widened as he looked at Qin Zhulu properly. "You're... at Third Pattern too?"

He could sense that Qin Zhulu's resonant power was much stronger than before as well.

In fact, he felt that this guy was already at the limit of the Third Pattern, ready to break through to the Fourth Pattern at any time.

But that was not surprising. He was a Second Pattern back when Li Luo was still an Upper Flowering. Li Luo had managed to shorten the gap thanks to the onyx lake, but he hadn't fully closed it yet.

"He went to hunt white eroders by himself all the time in the Umbra Cave. He almost died a few times," Lu Qing'er explained. She had lingered around when she saw her leader make his way over.

Li Luo bit his tongue. This guy was a lunatic. Even when Others were concerned.

"Li Luo, when can we fight? You're the only worthy opponent in One Star Hall now," Qin Zhulu said, his eyes burning bright with excitement.

Although Li Luo was strong before, the cultivation stage disparity had left him behind. But now Li Luo was also a Third Pattern. Their battle would be legendary.

He had long wanted to face dual resonances in battle.

Li Luo felt a little uneasy being stared at so hungrily by this beast of a man. "Er, some day, I'm sure."

Qin Zhulu was about to press him, but suddenly a loud wail came from behind.

"Li Luo! Oh, Li Luo! My goodest brother!"

Li Luo scowled as he turned to the familiar voice. "Are you crying?" he asked a sniveling Yu Lang.

Yu Lang wiped away his tears as he staggered towards Li Luo in relief. "My brother, I was worried to death when I heard you met a Heavenly Disaster Class Other."

He clapped Li Luo on the shoulder and then turned to Bai Mengmeng beside him. "Mengmeng, are you alright? Are you hurt? Do you need me to check your body?"

"..."

"Horny mongrel, are you even concerned about me at all?!"

Bai Mengmeng took one look at Yu Lang, then sidled away until Li Luo shielded her from him.

Yu Lang started to swing Li Luo around when another sharp voice cut in. "Out of the way."

He turned furiously, but then he shrank back when he saw Bai Doudou stomping over.

"So, er, you guys really met a Heavenly Disaster Class?"

Li Luo nodded.

"Since you're alive, then you must have been tenderly treated by Senior Jiang, eh?" he said with a knowing wink and nudge.

Li Luo ignored him.

"And I hear that you extorted a lot of Royal Sap. Are you short on it? Want me to lend you a bottle? But I have to say it first—you have to return it eventually. It's hard for me to get points as well," Yu Lang said.

Li Luo was surprised that word of his Royal Sap payments at the onyx lake had traveled so far. And how the hell had it become extortion?! He smiled and shook his head.

"Keep it for yourself. I have what I need." Yu Lang might be a loose sort of guy, but he was very loyal to his friends. A bottle of Royal Sap was 5,000 points. It might not be much to Li Luo, but it was probably Yu Lang's total savings so far in the last half a year.

Although the purification towers at purified spot 13 had all gone dark again because of the Heavenly Disaster Class Other, the school had not treated it as a failure, but awarded points according to the map records. Which meant that even without any additional rewards, Li Luo was flush with points.

Meanwhile, Bai Mengmeng had taken her little sister's hand, fussing over her. Her stomach dropped from fear when she initially heard that a Heavenly Disaster Class Other had appeared where her beloved sister was.

"Senior Jiang, many thanks to you," Bai Doudou said with deep feeling. Surely she was the reason that Bai Mengmeng and the others had returned safely.

Bai Mengmeng giggled. "Sis, Senior Jiang did a lot, but it was my leader who did the most. It was he who sealed the Heavenly Dipper General Class great spirit beast at the end as well."

Bai Doudou and Yu Lang almost fainted, while Lu Qing'er and Qin Zhulu looked at Li Luo with identical expressions.

Bai Mengmeng proudly told them the whole story. The reaction was predictable.

Li Luo had been the one to solve purified spot 13's crisis...?

Li Luo waved it away modestly. "I just did as I should. I might have risked my life, but for the lives of my peers, I was willing to do it."

"Besides, I think the school will acknowledge my contributions."

He gave Yu Lang a humongous elbow dig to the ribs. "Understood?"

"Understood fully, Boss," Yu Lang said without missing a beat. "The school will definitely reward you richly, as you should be. And if they don't, even humble bystanders like myself will get very angry. We would start protests and other things of that sort."

"I think this should be worth at least 30,000 points."

Li Luo coughed. "Dream bigger, young man."

"Er, 50,000 points?"

"Very conservative you are, young man."

Yu Lang stared at him. How greedy was this guy? Aren't you afraid the school will expel you for daylight robbery?

"100,000?!"

Li Luo nodded smugly, giving Yu Lang an approving nod. I'll leave this matter to you. Since he didn't know if the principal had passed on his request, he had to stoke the fires on his side as well.

Still, it was best that it wasn't him to do it personally. Which was where Yu Lang came in.

"My goodest brother, do this for me, and I'll treat you right in the future as well."

After a quick, covert discussion with Yu Lang about the details, Li Luo looked up to see someone else calling out to him again.

This time it was Yan Lingqing.

Jiang Qing'e drew his attention. "Go to Lingqing first, there's news."

"What is it?"

"Aren't you concerned about how to expand the Sun creek Villa? Some of the higher grade resonance artificers are graduating this year..." She smiled.

Li Luo's eyes lit up.

The Astral Sage College's Resonance Artificers Hall had the best and brightest talents. Those that graduated each year would become prime targets. He had dreamed of snatching them up for a long time now.

With high-quality resonance artificers, the Sun creek Villa would be firmly set on the right track to fortune.

A stronger Sun creek Villa would mean a stronger House Luolan. Of course, this meant stronger defensive wards... which would be crucial when turbulence came to House Luolan in half a year's time.

This was an opportunity that could not be passed up.

Chapter 0305: Li Bi

A cool breeze waltzed lazily through the peaceful night air at the Astral Sage College.

In an inn on campus.

This inn only opened for business for a time after the Umbra Cave opened. It was there for students to let loose after a highly stressful experience. The inn sold a special drink called Aphid's Brew, made from a peculiar insect found on the Tree of Resonant Power. Its secretions were processed into a drink that had a powerful calming effect.

Near a window sat Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and Yan Lingqing.

Li Luo lifted the kettle to pour more green liquid into the two girls' cups before filling his own. He held the brew in his mouth for a moment to savor its unique effects, then swallowed.

A knot of tension that he didn't know he had unraveled itself.

"I heard you two faced a Heavenly Disaster Class Other at purified spot 13. I was worried to death," Yan Lingqing said, her hand still tight on Jiang Qing'e's own.

Jiang Qing'e smiled.

"Sister Lingqing, which talent have you invited tonight?" Li Luo cut straight to the chase.

"Senior Li Bi. She's one of the rare fifth-grade artificers in the Resonance Artificers Hall, and she has quite a reputation as well. If you can bring her into the Sun creek Villa, many people will follow," Yan Lingqing said with a satisfied tone.

"Fifth-grade resonance artificer..."

Li Luo almost drooled, and the relaxing brew before him was not the reason. Only the Resonance Artificers Hall could attract a talent like a fifth-grade artificer, which would be a huge boon to any of the top villas in the Xia Kingdom.

"If she's willing to come to the Suncreek Villa, I'd even give her the position of president," Li Luo said with undisguised greed.

After all, the previous president, Hanzhi, who had been poached away by the Bigswamp Villa, was a fifth-grade artificer as well.

An artificer of that tier was considered highly placed even in the top ten villas.

"Assuming she even wants the position," Jiang Qing'e said, sipping her brew with relish.

"That's true. A small scale operation like the Suncreek Villa doesn't hold much attraction," Yan Lingqing admitted. "Senior Li Bi only agreed to hear me out, but I think the only thing that might pique her interest is our upper seventh-grade secret watersource."

"It's the only thing we have to offer, and it isn't even unheard of among the top villas, so..." She trailed off without much hope. Li Luo understood. It was hard to persuade a great buddha to settle in a small universe like theirs.

She wasn't even a friend or family member of theirs, so there was no reason for her to take such a risk in her future and remain with them.

At the top-tier of villas, she could mingle with even more skillful artificers and improve herself. There would also be higher quality formulas for her to practice with.

The Suncreek Villa was a barren wasteland compared to that lush cornucopia of opportunity.

"We'll do our best," Jiang Qing'e said calmly. If their guest was completely uninterested, it wasn't like they could hold her at knifepoint and make her join.

"It's all your fault," Yan Lingqing said with a petulant slap to Jiang Qing'e's wrist.

"My- pardon?" Jiang Qing'e laughed.

"With a ninth-grade light resonance, you'd be a sixth-grade artificer by now. You'd be the number one resonance artificer in the Xia Kingdom, and then the Suncreek Villa would have no more troubles. What a waste of talent," Yan Lingqing grumbled.

Jiang Qing'e smiled but did not reply. What could a sixth-grade resonance artificer accomplish? Could she refine the crisis that House Luolan was in? Resonance artificers had status, but it was only enough to make powers court them. She preferred to wield that power for herself.

She wanted to be a true mistress with her own strength, not purchase it with spirit liquids and purifying lights. That was not like her.

Which was why she had brought her ninth-grade light resonance onto the path of cultivation. nDve-LB.In

Li Luo didn't comment. He understood that choice well. Perhaps if his parents were still well and healthy at House Luolan, Jiang Qing'e might have become a resonance artificer. But since their disappearance, Jiang Qing'e had shouldered the house's burdens, a burden that Li Luo had not been able to carry with his blank palaces.

She had the luxury of neither time nor energy to spare on artificing.

He himself had only chosen artificing because of the way his acquired resonances had developed. Otherwise, he would have given the discipline a wide berth as well.

As they spoke, a tall, slender figure paused in his visual periphery. She was wearing a blue shift, simple attire that did not distract from her fresh beauty. Her hair was cropped short in a practical fashion.

Yan Lingqing jumped up to wave her over.

She approached, and Yan Lingqing took her hand with an eager smile, escorting her to a seat.

"This is Senior Li Bi."

"I'm sure Jiang Qing'e needs no introduction. And that is Li Luo," Yan Lingqing said, gesturing to the other two.

Li Bi smiled at Jiang Qing'e. "Junior Jiang's name rings in every ear. Your talent is thunderous."

"Senior Li is too kind," Jiang Qing'e said with a gracious smile towards her Four Star Hall senior.

Li Bi nodded slightly in Li Luo's direction. "Junior Li Luo."

Neutral, with neither coolness nor warmth.

"Senior Li Bi." Li Luo responded in kind with a winsome smile. Since they were here to win her over, he had to do some manly dazzling of his own.

Whether it worked or not, he was prepared to use everything he had.

They all settled down, Yan Lingqing lively and cheerful.

After chatting for a while, Li Bi finally brought up the topic herself. "I hear that the Sunreek Villa has an upper seventh-grade secret watersource," she said, looking directly at Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo.

Jiang Qing'e glanced over at Li Luo and then nodded, retrieving a vial from the folds of her clothing. She offered it to Li Bi with a smile. "You've heard right. This is no secret."

Li Bi examined it carefully, then opened it and extracted a single drop with a delicate manipulation of her resonant power. Dipping a thread of power in, she wrapped it carefully around a sample of the watersource. Her eyes widened slightly. "This is indeed an upper seventh-grade. It must be the secret behind the Sunreek Villa's rise in the last half a year."

She set the bottle down and turned to face Li Luo squarely. "But the Sunreek Villa is riddled with weaknesses. There is no grand artificer to hold it down. It lacks high star formulas. A strong watersource is a good start, but it is a strong spark with no kindling. The Sunreek Villa cannot compete with the elite villas."

"They themselves do not lack strong watersources. I do not think the Sunreek Villa will go too far. Neither do I think that I am in the position to help you go far." She spoke candidly with them and dropped a small, apologetic smile in Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing's direction.

"I know your intentions for inviting me out tonight, Junior Lingqing. I'm sorry I could not be of more help," she said with a shake of her head.

"I cannot join the Sunreek Villa."

Chapter 0306: High Grade Faces

Neither Li Luo nor Jiang Qing'e were particularly saddened by the rejection. It was to be expected. It was just business between schoolmates, not something worth sacrificing one's future over.

"Senior Li Bi, the Sunreek Villa is full of potential. We'll definitely become one of the top villas in the Xia Kingdom!" Yan Lingqing said with a final rally.

"Perhaps what you say is true," Li Bi said with an impatient smile. "But how long will you take? In that time, I could already be training at the top."

Yan Lingqing fell silent. Li Bi had spoken the stinging truth. Why bet on a rising star when you could already be shining with the best? Potential was a risk that she did not have to bet on.

Neither was she that close with Jiang Qing'e to do her a favor.

"I am sorry," Li Bi said to soften the blow. "I understand that the Resonance Artificers Hall has invited the headquarters of the best villas to meet in five days' time. They intend to let them meet the graduating artificers for networks to be established.

"Villas who are invited will not pass up on this chance to recruit the best. They will bring their top game to attract the best talents.

"If you want to make the Sunreek Villa great, it is an opportunity you should not pass up on. Every person you can recruit will be a strong boost to your ranks," Li Bi suggested kindly.

Li Luo flinched. "Unfortunately," he said sourly, "it seems like we haven't been invited."

"Cai Wei has brought no news." Jiang Qing'e nodded.

Li Luo was a little resentful. A chance would be a fine thing, but they weren't even going to give him one.

Li Bi paused for a moment. "Well, it's not impossible for you to be invited."

Li Luo perked up, smelling an opportunity. "Senior Li Bi, what do you know?"

"The invitations are decided by the high-grade artificing mentors," Li Bi said with a knowing smile. "I understand that Mentor Chi Chan is one of them."

"She is your mentor, is she not? Go to her and beg for a favor. The Sunreek Villa should be allowed to be present, I think."

Li Luo's mouth was a little dry. The veiled tigress was always a difficult tackle. Especially because she was especially good at reading his mind and turning up whenever he was in a strangely compromising situation. But for the sake of the Sunreek Villa's future... he could take a crack at it.

"I thank Senior Li Bi for your advice," Li Luo said with a grateful smile.

"It's nothing..." She seemed to be on the verge of adding another comment but then thought better of it.

Li Luo knew anyway. Whether they were present or not, they would recruit nobody without the ability to attract the artificers.

Still, Li Luo had a plan.

"Oh, Yan Lingqing, here to fawn and grovel for talent again?"

An unpleasant, sneering voice cut into their conversation.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e turned with angry faces to see a girl in green walk over with a disdainful leer on her face. Behind her, a table of students sniggered softly, evidently in the same party as her.

"Here's a tip, Mei Xuan'er: if you keep your mouth shut, no one's going to assume you were born without a tongue," Yan Lingqing retorted with some acid in her tone.

The rare vehemence in her usually gentle voice made Li Luo sit up and pay attention to the girl called Mei Xuan'er. She was not bad looking, although not as pretty as Yan Lingqing. The clearest difference was her thin lips that gave her a mean look.

"Mei Xuan'er is also a member of the Resonance Artificers Hall," Jiang Qing'e murmured to Li Luo on the side. "She graduates this year, like Li Bi. She is a fifth-grade artificer too."

"I heard from Lingqing that the two of them don't get along. Apparently, Mei Xuan'er fancied a senior who spurned her and ended up trying to woo Lingqing... who Lingqing rejected."

"After that, Mei Xuan'er started loathing her out of jealousy and pit herself against Lingqing."

Li Luo shook his head. That was petty.

"Keke, Yan Lingqing, stop trying to pull everyone you come across to the Sunreek Villa. I mean, it's more of a fiery crater than anything."

"And you, Li Bi," she continued with a facetious tone, "don't let Yan Lingqing's air-headed nonsense addle you. Someone of your talent has the top villas lining up around the block for you."

Li Bi frowned slightly. "My business. Not yours."

She was too proud to be used for such a cheap jibe. Besides, she had already made her decision.

Mei Xuan'er wasn't fazed by this. Li Bi was just a convenient tool for her to get her taunt out against Yan Lingqing.

Indeed, her words were affecting the slim girl, who was glowering behind her silver rims.

"And this must be the young lord of House Luolan, Li Luo," she said, turning next to him.

Li Luo barely blinked in her direction.

"Junior Li Luo, if the Sunreek Villa needs talent, you could always try asking me. If you kick Yan Lingqing out, I might even consent to go to the Sunreek Villa. How about that?"

Li Luo scratched his chin lazily. "Switching out a fourth-grade for a fifth-grade? Seems like a good trade."

"Of course it's a good trade," Mei Xuan'er said, eyes alive with spiteful pleasure.

"Sorry, the Sunreek Villa has a rather unique way of hiring, you see," Li Luo said, injecting just the right hint of apology into his tone. "For us, artificing grade is only the second most important qualification.

"For us, the most important thing is the grade of one's looks. For example, beauties like Senior Lingqing and Senior Li Bi here are very welcome. Senior Mei, you might be quite talented, but your face is too plain. I'm sorry to say that the Sunreek Villa cannot accept you."

"Pfft!"

A snorting laugh almost escaped Li Bi's lips, and Yan Lingqing's own twitched upwards as well.

Mei Xuan'er's face froze, and she stared hatefully at Li Luo. Her looks?! It was precisely her rawest nerve, given her history with Yan Lingqing!

"Don't worry, Senior Mei. I hear there's some medicine with beautifying properties somewhere in the world. Perhaps you can try them. The Sunreek Villa's doors are always open to applications," Li Luo said encouragingly.

"F*ck you!"

Mei Xuan'er screeched at him in a most unladylike manner. "Did you think a goddess like me would really go to your hovel of a villa?! I was just using your name to humiliate Yan Lingqing! You snobbish little prick!"

Jiang Qing'e, who had been silent all this while, stood up as suddenly as the insult had spilled from Mei Xuan'er's lips. She shot a sharp warning look at the hysterical girl, who felt a tremble of fear cut through her rage. Mei Xuan'er took a few steps backwards warily.

"Watch your words," Jiang Qing'e said with chilling softness, "or I will return your lack of courtesy with my own."

Mei Xuan'er seethed silently on the spot. Behind her, her companions had leaped to their feet at first, but they slowly shrank back down once they weighed their odds against Jiang Qing'e.

She was not somebody they could cross.

Mei Xuan'er knew the difference in strength as well. She swallowed her anger and stalked off, vowing to foil Yan Lingqing's recruiting plans forever.

After chasing Mei Xuan'er away, Yan Lingqing's face was still morose. She was not angry, but sad instead. Her efforts in recruiting all this while had not gone well, and she was feeling discouraged.

A warm hand took her own and gave it a gentle squeeze. Yan Lingqing looked up at Jiang Qing'e.

The girl of light warmed her heart, and they emptied their cups of Aphid's Brew.

Li Bi decided it was time to leave, and rose to her feet.

"Senior Li Bi, a moment more, if you please."

Li Bi turned back quizzically. Hadn't she made her stance clear enough? "Senior Li Bi, as you say, the Sunreek Villa holds little interest for you now..."

"But what if I told you that the Sunreek Villa's secret watersource will continue to grow in purity. An eighth-grade watersource. Does that catch your interest?"

Not just Li Bi, but even Yan Lingqing and Jiang Qing'e stared at him in shock.

Chapter 0307: Li Luo's Brag

"Eighth-grade secret watersource?!" They stared at him with tenth-grade surprise, including Li Bi, who was struck dumb.

Both Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing shared an uneasy look. What was happening?

They were privy to the true secret behind the watersource—Li Luo himself. How could that change?

Suspicion flashed in Jiang Qing'e's eyes.

Li Luo nodded slightly to reassure them, then turned back to Li Bi. "Senior Li Bi," he said with a wide smile, "you heard me right. Our secret watersource will continue to improve. The purity will rise to the eighth-grade."

Li Bi was not swayed by his affirmation. According to her knowledge, there couldn't be more than three villas in the Xia Kingdom with an eighth-grade secret watersource.

An amateur operation like the Sunreek Villa?

Impossible.

As a fifth-grade resonance artificer herself, she knew just how rare and precious a watersource was. If the Sunreek Villa truly had such an asset, they would already have risen to greatness. Their squalor was all the evidence she needed.

"Junior Li Luo, is this some sort of jest? I assure you I do not find it amusing. Even if you somehow contrive to trick me into the Sunreek Villa, losing public trust will be a nail in your coffin," Li Bi warned him gravely.

Each year, there were villas that used devious methods to lure talents from the Resonance Artificers Hall. Their aim was to get the artificers first and then think about making it after they had faked it.

Those were the most deeply hated villas.

If Li Luo planned on such an approach, the Sunreek Villa would be on the black books of every artificer in the Resonance Artificers Hall.

"Be assured that I intend to do no such foolish thing," Li Luo said. "I am just asking, hypothetically. If the Sunreek Villa had an eighth-grade secret watersource, would you be willing to come?"

Li Bi considered him for a long time before finally nodding.

An eighth-grade secret watersource was a powerfully rare asset to be working with. If she could work with something that pure, it would not only improve her skills, but also her grade.

Although the Sunreek Villa might be weak in other places, an eighth-grade watersource would be great enough to eclipse its other flaws.

If Li Luo's words were true, the Sunreek Villa would rise to glory very quickly with an eighth-grade secret watersource. They would shoot up to become a top villa in the blink of an eye.

Li Luo smiled with satisfaction. "In that case, I ask Senior Li Bi to consider not accepting other villas' offers first. In five days' time, the Sunreek Villa will find an invitation to the Resonance Artificers Hall. At that time, we will show what we are truly capable of offering."

"Senior Li Bi, I promise you that you will not be disappointed."

Li Bi's doubtful gaze met Li Luo's own steady eyes, and she noted the confidence in them.

After a moment, she looked away to the cup that she was slowly prodding at.

Yan Lingqing leaped in to coax her as well. "Senior Li Bi, a few days will be no loss to you. Li Luo isn't one to exaggerate, I promise you!"

Li Bi eventually gave in to Yan Lingqing with an exasperated nod.

"Alright, Junior Li Luo. I will wait for the Sunreek Villa's pitch."

"If what you say is true, I think I will not be the only one who will consider joining. I think some of my other talented peers will be of the same mind."

Which meant that she would even bring friends.

Without waiting for further comment, Li Bi rose again, nodding to Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing on her way out.

Nearby, Mei Xuan'er watched Li Bi leave with gloating satisfaction. Surely the talks had failed. Yan Lingqing was so naive to think that she could drag others down into the mud she was in.

The Sunreek Villa was the pits.

She fully intended to make her opinion of them clear to anyone who would listen. The resonance artificers would be giving them a wide berth after this.

Back at Li Luo's table, Yan Lingqing was looking at him worriedly. "An eighth-grade secret watersource? Are you for real? You better not be making an empty promise." She had to present a united front with him when Li Bi was around, but now she made her doubts clear.

Jiang Qing'e leaned in for his answer as well.

Li Luo grinned. "I don't have an eighth-grade secret watersource presently."

Yan Lingqing felt the Aphid's Brew leaving her body. She was seized with a sudden urge to grab him by the ear and toss him out the window.

"But in five days, I will!" Li Luo clarified hastily. The tips of his ears tingled when he saw her eyes narrow with deadly intent.

"What do you mean?" Yan Lingqing asked, hand halfway towards him.

Li Luo instead turned to Jiang Qing'e with a cheery smile. "Qing'e, dear, help me send a letter to Sister Cai Wei. Tell her to send 50 vials of sixth-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights to the school, as fast as she can."

"50 vials?" Jiang Qing'e sputtered. Li Luo's face was fully serious, and she nodded dumbly. "I will send the letter. But 50 vials is over a million skygold... We might just be able to hear Cai Wei's screaming from here."

Li Luo's cheeriness faded away when the image of Cai Wei berating him filled his mind. House Luolan needed money on every front, and he was the ultimate black hole, sucking away at their finances.

But it couldn't be helped. He needed those spirit liquids and purifying lights. Badly.

After returning from the Umbra Cave, he could sense his sixth-grade waterlight resonance evolving. Inwardly, he was giddy with excitement about it. He had been feeding it millions of skygold worth of spirit liquids and purifying lights, all in hopes of reaching that critical breakthrough.

Up till now, it had shown no signs of coming through.

Li Luo was disappointed, but he had not given up. He knew that the jump from sixth to seventh-grade was a milestone. A sixth-grade resonance was considered a middle-grade resonance, while a seventh-grade was considered high-grade.

He believed that this would be an extremely hard improvement to achieve, but the payoff would be proportionately huge.

And when his waterlight resonance reached the seventh-grade, the secret watersource he produced would likely reach the eighth-grade without much difficulty.

That would help the Suncreek Villa grow stronger much more quickly. Together with Bai Mengmeng's four-star formula, the Suncreek Villa would be catapulted to greatness.

All the invested capital would be made back.

"I'm not sure if you're planning to swim in those liquids or something," Yan Lingqing said snappishly, "but if you don't produce an eighth-grade watersource on the day, I won't envy your fate."

She knew that Li Luo was the creator of the secret watersource, but she did not know that he could absorb spirit liquids at a near-unlimited capacity.

"Before that," Jiang Qing'e interjected, "I think the most urgent order of business is to get invited. As for that, it's all up to you."

No one else was familiar with Mentor Chi Chan, so Li Luo was the only candidate who could ask for the favor.

Li Luo didn't flinch. He stood up and headed for the door. Hopefully, he had won her enough glory in the Umbra Cave to sweeten her mood enough.

Yan Lingqing watched him go. "Can we really do well at the recruitment?" she mumbled listlessly.

She knew the Suncreek Villa's situation all too well. Average resonance artificers, run-of-the-mill formulas, and a surprisingly good secret watersource. But the best villas would be recruiting too. A single glowing point was nothing compared to the stars that would be present.

She believed that the Suncreek Villa would be able to grow strong in the future, but this was too soon.

Jiang Qing'e poured Yan Lingqing another cup of Aphid's Brew. "Don't worry. Li Luo doesn't usually brag without some measure of confidence," she said with a reassuring smile.

"Plus, you weren't in the Umbra Cave this time. You don't know half of what he bragged about inside there. It was much more ridiculous, and he pulled it off anyway."

"Oh?" Yan Lingqing perked up. "What did the kid do? Tell me."

The two girls settled back with their jug and spoke leisurely.

Chapter 0308: The Back Door

Li Luo scampered over to his mentor's tower.

The refreshing scent of pine and cypress filled the garden, and in their cooling shade, Li Luo spotted Chi Chan in a pavilion, enjoying a cup of hot tea as the wind tickled the chimes into a soothing jingle.

Li Luo walked up and bowed deeply to his mentor before planting his ass down with a cheeky grin.

Chi Chan was in a loose-fitting black dress, her hair still wet from the bath that she had clearly just taken. Her veil was still in place, and her eyes turned lazily to regard him.

"Yeees...?" she said.

"I wanted to ask Mentor to let me in through the back door. I was wondering if you could let the Suncreek Villa take part in the upcoming Resonance Artificers Hall recruitment," Li Luo said, getting straight to the point.

Chi Chan snorted with amusement. "Usually," she said, "people try to sneak their way through the back door with some prudence. Discreetly. Not kick down the door, hinges and all, on the way in."

Li Luo grinned. "Mentor, please."

Chi Chan reached into a sleeve and took out a golden leaf, which she tossed to him. On it was carved the mark of Resonance Artificers Hall.

"There, the invitation," Chi Chan said casually.

Li Luo was speechless. So easy? Sure, he had guessed that she would eventually cooperate, but not so easily.

"When the participants were being decided, I reserved an invitation for the Suncreek Villa, but I didn't tell you. If you hadn't come to ask me for it, I wouldn't have handed it to you."

She took a long sip of tea and smacked her lips. "Do you understand why?" she asked, cocking an eye at him.

Li Luo hesitated. "Because you think there's not much point in the Sunreek Villa joining this meet?"

"You're very self-aware." She smiled.

"Then why give it to me now?"

"Because you are a smart boy. You don't do useless things. If you understand the immensity of the task and still take it on, then you must have something planned."

"I have no idea what it will take for you to do well there, but since you have the ambition and confidence, I will do my part as your mentor to support you."

Li Luo felt like crying. "Mentor, you love me best."

She was unfazed by his acting, curling her fingers around her cup again. "I hear you asked the school for a reward of 100,000 points."

Li Luo started. Had Yu Lang worked that fast? The kid was really a master of fanning flames. His wind resonance had to have something to do with it. He was truly a master of people skills.

There was no way he was about to admit anything though. He shook his head stoutly. "No such thing. I might have saved countless lives and did the school a great and amazing favor, but that's something any student of the school would have done. Even if the school doesn't give me a single point, I will have no complaints!"

Her veil fluttered as she snorted particularly loudly. nOvE.lb-1n

"You'll probably hear about a reward within the next few days. If Vice Principal Su Xin asks for an opinion, I'll speak on your behalf.

"You don't have to be too shy about it either. You saved maybe a hundred lives back at the purified spot. The school has to reward that accordingly, for accountability."

Li Luo was moved beyond words.

"Erm, Mentor Chi Chan, do you know my father?"

"Eh?" She stared at him suspiciously, confused by the question from left field.

"I guess not. I thought my dad was too charming, and that that's the reason why you dote on me so much, Mentor." Crickets chirped merrily on the cypress boughs for a few moments.

"Shoo."

Hot tea suddenly rose from the cup, forming a smoking arrow that hurtled towards Li Luo.

"Mentor, I regret everything!" Li Luo wailed.

He emerged cautiously from the pillar he had taken refuge behind, and ventured another cheeky smile as he set the teacup in front of her with exaggerated politeness. "Mentor," he suddenly asked, "do you think there's anything fishy about the Heavenly Disaster Class Other's appearance?"

"What are you thinking?" Chi Chan said with a frown.

"Not thinking, just instinct... thinking. Insthincking." He grinned impudently at her.

"I wonder, could it have been lured over on purpose?"

"Are you suspecting Shen Jinxiao?" Chi Chan asked. "Suspicion is no use though. The school would not investigate a Violet Vibrance mentor on the basis of your suspicion. More importantly, I don't see how an investigation would yield anything."

"Keep those suspicions to yourself. When you're strong enough to face him as an equal, then you can voice those thoughts."

Li Luo nodded. It was true enough.

One day, when he was stronger, he could talk all the smack he wanted about Shen Jinxiao. He could even say things like "your face offends me" and other such crap.

Li Luo stood up, sort of cheered by the thought. With an enthusiastic wave for his mentor and benefactor, he took his leave.

Chi Chan watched him go, setting down her teacup.

"Shen Jinxiao, was it really you?"

...

Li Luo headed straight for his dormitory after leaving his mentor's place.

In five days' time, the best villas would be gathered. It would be no easy task to win hearts over those eminent villas.

Even if he completed his predicted evolution, an eighth-grade secret watersource wouldn't be enough to entice people.

He needed a strong formula for it as well.

Currently, the Suncreek Villa didn't have a single four-star formula.

As for the top villas, they would have at least one, if not several. Combined with their secret watersources and lightsources, the spirit liquids and purifying lights they produced would leave him in the dust.

He needed to bring more if he wanted to dazzle his audience at the meet.

The answer... a four-star formula, of course.

"I guess I'll go poke Mengmeng a little. Hopefully, she understands where I'm coming from," Li Luo thought to himself. After circling their tower, however, he found no sign of her. Instead, he found Xin Fu in the shadowy crook of the staircase, honing his dagger intently.

"Hey, friend. Seen Mengmeng around?" Li Luo asked.

Xin Fu looked up, surprised. "You found me?"

He had used a camouflage art to blend in with the shadows. How had Li Luo seen him so easily? Was his skill that weak?

"Mengmeng's in the refining workshop. She went there immediately after returning," he replied.

"Right... practice hard. I guess your arts aren't as strong as you thought." With a sanctimonious nod, he headed for the basement, smirking to himself.

His illuminating eye skill had broken the shadow wall!

"That will teach you to compose gravestone quotes for me! I better keep you busy. That's why I'm the leader!"

Xin Fu looked back down at his reflection on his shining blade, lost in self-doubt.

Li Luo hummed a tune as he headed down the stairs. Through the transparent crystal wall, he could see a small figure hunched up over the refining workshop. The board behind her was teeming with notes.

Li Luo paused for a moment outside, then he decided he wouldn't break her concentration after all.

He turned to leave. He thought that he should spend some time working on his taste-restoring spirit liquid too.

Otherwise, if she brought him a four-star formula and he didn't have the goods to exchange for it, that would be extremely embarrassing.

Chapter 0309: The Great Treasure Bai Mengmeng

What Li Luo hadn't counted on was the embarrassment would come knocking a lot quicker than he expected.

The next morning, he was still lost in sleep when an urgent knocking roused him from his dreams. He opened the door and peered out drowsily.

Bai Mengmeng.

She had dark eyebags, which looked comically odd on her fair face, but he barely noted it because of her words. "Leader! Leader! I've done it!"

"Done what now?" he asked blearily.

"Four-star spirit liquid formula!" She said triumphantly, blushing with pride.

Those magic words wiped the drowsiness away from him, and suddenly he was wide awake. "Done?!"

"Mm!"

Bai Mengmeng nodded madly.

"I'll get changed!" Li Luo yelled with excitement. Seizing her hand, he dragged her into the room and closed the door.

On the balcony, Xin Fu had been trying to get some sun, when he saw this bizarre scene take place before him. More artistic inspiration.

Crash!

Very soon the door burst open with a loud bang, and Bai Mengmeng leaped out, blushing to the tips of her ears.

"Why would Leader bring me into the room when he's changing..." She whispered to herself, touching her warm cheeks.

"But...

he has quite a nice figure."

The door flew open again to reveal a fully dressed Li Luo, who gave her a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Too excited."

She shook her head kindly. She too was excited, just not that excited.

"Let's go to the refining workshop. I can't wait to get my hands all over your stuff." Li Luo took her hand and shot off. His eyes glanced past Xin Fu on the balcony.

Xin Fu gave him a bright, sunny smile.

Li Luo had a bad feeling about the kid, but now was not the time. He could only hope the kid would stop trying to bury him.

The two reached the refining workshop quickly enough.

Bai Mengmeng pulled out a special slip. It was a waterproof and fireproof paper, designed to hold ink for a long time. Her meticulous writings were all over it.

She handed it over with great ceremony to Li Luo. "A third-grade spirit liquid, four-star formula." She announced proudly.

Li Luo took it as carefully as if it were his newborn child. These words were worth a fortune, precious knowledge detailing reactions that made the spirit liquids.

Li Luo read it, rapt. As a third-grade resonance artificer himself, he had come across a fair amount of formulas himself. Enough to know that Bai Mengmeng's formula was nothing less than an inspired masterpiece.

Each line of instruction on that paper represented countless experiments. Each experiment was carefully crafted by a fine mind, intimately familiar with the properties of each ingredient, and with a natural intuition for their combinations. Finally, this was the result.

"Truly befitting of a four-star formula..." Li Luo marveled.

In Xia Kingdom, spirit liquid formulas were divided into five star gradings. The higher the star grading, the rarer and more powerful the spirit liquid was. Simply put, the higher the star rating, the higher the upper-limit of the tempering strength.

Take a third-grade spirit liquid, for example. A two-star formula could reach about 60% tempering strength.

A three-star formula could reach 65% tempering strength.

A four-star formula could reach a whopping 70% tempering strength at the limit!

Which meant that generally, the quality of the formula determined the potency and worth of the spirit liquids and purifying lights.

With a poor formula, even the best artificer with the best watersource could not push past a certain hard limit.

Just like a skilled chef couldn't cook with no ingredients.

With unlimited talent and a pure watersource, the formula became the limiting reagent. The final result would be mediocre.

That was why it was so important for villas to have good formulas.

Of course, reaching that hard limit was easier said than done as well. Back when Li Luo had competed against Tang Yun, he had created a third-grade spirit liquid with a two-star formula. The limit was 60%, but he had only managed to achieve 58%.

Of course, Li Luo had been fresh into the ranks of a third-grade artificer, but it nevertheless proved that maxing out the potential of low formulas was easier said than done.

"Since it's a third-grade formula, I can try it out myself," Li Luo said eagerly.

Bai Mengmeng nodded. Her own talents leaned towards research, while her actual execution skills were not as spectacular. Although she was the creator of this formula, she hadn't actually made her own creation before.

It was always going to be a combination of theory and execution.

Of course, making this formula was 90 percent of the work.

There were plenty of ingredients at the refining workshop, left over from Bai Mengmeng's experiments. Of course, they were the exact ingredients needed for this formula.

Li Luo began refining immediately.

From the moment he started, his enthusiasm started to fade away into worried concentration. Sunreek Villa had third-grade formulas, but they were far more straightforward compared to Bai Mengmeng's.

Truly a four-star formula.

Li Luo failed dozens of times from the get-go.

He was looking a lot surlier now, and then threw Bai Mengmeng an embarrassed smile. "It's my first time working with something so sophisticated. Forgive me."

Damn, he was the young lord of House Luolan, for crying out loud. Since when had he become so pathetic? noVe-l&In

"You can do it!" She encouraged him.

Li Luo nodded fervently, then threw his energies back into his task. Suppressing his impatience, he began to tackle the problem with cool-headed analysis.

This time round, things went a lot smoother.

After a full two hours, Li Luo had burned his way through almost all the ingredients in the workshop. But his refining process was almost at the end as well.

Before him stood 18 different test tubes. Each one held a concoction of hundreds of ingredients.

Li Luo took a deep breath and rubbed his palms together. He held them up, and brought his resonant power forth.

The contents of all 18 test tubes rose obediently, hanging in mid-air before starting to swirl.

A ring of swirling liquids, intertwined with resonant power.

This process continued for several minutes before the spinning began to slow. A twinkling liquid had emerged, and Li Luo guided it gently into a crystal vial.

As the last drop plopped into it, Li Luo lifted the vial up with wild joy written all over his face.

"I DID IT!"

Bai Mengmeng was equally emotional, and she raced to the nearby table and back with the tempering measurement needle.

Li Luo stuck it into the crystal vial.

Two pairs of eyes watched the instrument eagerly.

The indicator jumped immediately to the 60% mark.

Li Luo gasped. That was insane. His first attempt, and already it was stronger than the Birds of Passage spirit liquid he had made back at Sunreek Villa!

When he mastered the formula, surely the tempering strength would rise even further!

It was a sensational result, testament to the effectiveness of Bai Mengmeng's formula.

"Wow! I did it!"

Bai Mengmeng grabbed both his hands in her own and pumped them up and down, lost in her elation.

Li Luo looked down at the girl before him.

A great treasure!

Chapter 0310: Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid

In the refining workshop, the boy and girl hopped up and down like a pair of excited bunnies.

Just as Li Luo had known from the start, the girl in front of him was a genius in artificing research.

Even though it was just a third-grade spirit liquid, a four-star formula was godly. It was probably worth more than the Sunreek Villa's entire net worth.

Half a year ago, the Sunreek Villa was not even on the villa rankings. After Li Luo joined, their watersource had helped them power through to some modest standing as a half-decent villa.

Still, their standing was shaky, and it had been easily undermined by Hanzhi's betrayal. If Li Luo had not intervened, the Sunreek Villa would have closed its doors by now.

But Li Luo also knew that his successes so far were not enough. A secret watersource was only one of three success factors. He needed good artificers and formulas as well.

Neither could be won by force, especially the latter.

But with his godly luck, Li Luo had stumbled across a genius from the moment he set foot in the Astral Sage College.

He felt like getting on his knees and thanking Mentor Chi Chan for putting this team together. "Mentor Chi Chan, thank you for your love!"

At the same time, he now looked at Bai Mengmeng with a "deeper interest."

Bai Mengmeng suddenly looked a little uncomfortable, pulling her hands back shyly. "Leader," she whispered, "wipe your mouth."

Li Luo hurriedly wiped his saliva away. That was embarrassing.

He glared at her to hide his embarrassment.

Bai Mengmeng giggled a little. "Leader," she said, puzzled. "It was your first time making the spirit liquid, and you already got such a high tempering strength. You didn't even use the secret watersource yet." As it was his first time following a four-star formula, she had expected him to reach 58% at best. But Li Luo had pulled off 60%.

"You'll know next time," Li Luo replied enigmatically. As if he hadn't used it—he had indeed used his secret watersource, secretly adding it into the mix.

"But..." Li Luo hung his head. "I haven't finished the taste-restoring spirit liquid yet."

He had made a pact with Bai Mengmeng that he would restore her sense of taste in exchange for the formula. She had already delivered successfully, while he was still empty-handed.

Bai Mengmeng smiled impishly. "There's no rush, I've waited so many years, a while more is okay."

"I'll finish it soon," Li Luo vowed. "Don't worry."

Bai Mengmeng nodded. She handed over the formula to Li Luo with great formality. "Leader, this four-star formula is yours from now on."

She handed over her years of hard work to him.

Li Luo received it with great formality as well, and stowed it with great care. "Don't worry, Mengmeng. I'll make sure your formula will become the most famous one among the third-grade formulas in all of the Xia Kingdom."

Only the top villas had four-star formulas in the third-grade spirit liquid market.

Once he improved his waterlight resonance to the seventh-grade and combined this with a fortified watersource, he would be able to punch with the best.

And then the Suncreek Villa would be up there with the best in the third-grade spirit liquid market.

"Leader, you haven't named it yet."

Li Luo thought about it for a moment. "Let's call it the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid."

Bai Mengmeng looked at him with wide eyes. It was named after her and her Nightmarish Water Butterfly resonance.

"That seems... too bold?" she said shyly.

"It is your work," Li Luo said seriously. "I want everyone in the Xia Kingdom to know that this was made by a girl called Bai Mengmeng."

She looked at him, eyes welling up with emotional tears, and she nodded.

Li Luo began to clear the table after a while. When he was done, he realized that the room was rather quiet. He saw that his squad mate was fast asleep on the table.

Her hair fell down beautifully, framing her innocent, little face.

Li Luo looked at the dark eye circles that spoke of her work through the night. It hadn't been a normal all-nighter either. It must have been a highly stressful one, to have worn her out so thoroughly.

Now the frenzy was over, and she had passed out, relieved that her work was done.

Li Luo was very touched. This four-star formula would be of great help to him.

He called her softly but got no response. She was in a deep sleep, but this was no place to sleep. He hesitated, then he scooped her up in his arms, ready to bring her back to her room. "She's really light."

She was limp in his arms as he walked out the door.

When he passed by the first floor, he heard a knock.

Li Luo's hands were full. "Xin Fu," he called, "get the door."

"Are you sure?" his teammate's voice asked from the room.

Damn, what was wrong with this guy? What was there to second-guess about opening the door? "Of course!" he yelled.

"Okay, then!" Xin Fu replied with relish.

Li Luo's eyes narrowed with suspicion. Then he remembered the girl in his arms.

"HEY, F*CK, WAIT!"

Clack.

The door swung open.

Outside were two familiar figures, who locked on to Li Luo and the girl in his arms immediately.

Li Luo, hugging Bai Mengmeng.

Li Luo looked back almost guiltily.

Jiang Qing'e and Lu Qing'er...

The temperature plummeted in a flash.