

Resonance 311

Chapter 0311: Embarrassing Times

Somehow, the sun shining brightly through the doorway did nothing for the chill in the air. Li Luo looked at the two girls with some dread.

How would a fiance feel seeing her betrothed with a beautiful, young girl fast asleep in his arms?

Was his life in danger?

Li Luo soon had his feelings under control. What was there to be afraid of? He saw a friend sleeping, and she had helped him so much. He was just returning the favor and getting her back to her room.

He gathered up his courage and mustered up a confident smile. "So, why are you girls here?"

As they took in the scene, Jiang Qing'e's eyebrows went up with just a hint of amusement, while Li Luo could hear Lu Qing'er's teeth gnashing from where he stood.

Jiang Qing'e entered first. "Asleep?" she asked calmly. "Better get her to her room first."

Li Luo nodded, turning to bring her up the stairs. On the way, he passed Xin Fu, who was perched on a step. "Leader," he said, tugging his hood lower, "your back is a little wet."

"And your mouth is a little big," Li Luo snapped back.

Did Xin Fu have to point it out?

Lu Qing'er walked in as well, sitting down at the table. "Are there really that many rooms at House Luolan?" she muttered to herself.

Her voice was not particularly loud, but Jiang Qing'e heard her anyway.

Of course, the golden-haired girl remembered how she had used those words to send Lu Qing'er fleeing.

Was this Lu Qing'er's jibe back that she should watch Li Luo more closely?

Jiang Qing'e sat down too. "One room, two rooms, not much difference," she said indifferently.

Lu Qing'er stared at her. "You're a savage, Senior Jiang! You'll regret those words."

Jiang Qing'e propped her chin on her hands\ and cocked her head. "I'm waiting."

During the girls' verbal fencing match, Li Luo managed to settle Bai Mengmeng in, and he now hurried down the stairs. "Mengmeng worked through the night researching spirit liquid formulas, so she's completely worn out. She fell asleep in the refining workshop."

Jiang Qing'e noted the happiness in his voice. "A good result?"

Li Luo pulled out the formula recipe out with a flourish. "A four-star formula for a third-grade spirit liquid."

Both girls gasped at it. They also knew the value of that tiny piece of paper.

Especially for the Suncreek Villa—it was a real lifesaver.

"Incredible research," Jiang Qing'e said with admiration. She herself had never touched resonance artificing herself, but through her years of managing House Luolan, she had paid much attention to their greatest asset, the Sun creek Villa. After all the years of effort and capital poured into the venture, no one had managed to create a four-star formula before. Yet Bai Mengmeng had done it alone, and at such a tender, young age.

"She just gave it to you like that?" Lu Qing'er asked disbelievingly.

As the young mistress of the Golden Dragon Bank, she knew the market value of a four-star formula perhaps better than any of them. It would fetch tens of millions of skygold.

"Well, of course part of the proceeds will belong to Mengmeng, but strictly speaking, I'm getting a real steal here."

Of course he couldn't reveal the matter of her taste buds. It was her secret to share.

"With this four-star formula, the Sun creek Villa stands a real chance at the Resonance Artificers Hall event," Lu Qing'er noted.

"It's not enough." Li Luo knew that it was a big step in the right direction, but it would not carry them all the way to success.

"Qing'e, did Sister Cai Wei send the spirit liquids and purifying lights yet?"

"She's almost torn her hair out thanks to your request," Jiang Qing'e replied with some sympathy for their administrator. "She just spent a large sum in the last few days to shore up some of House Luolan's enterprises. Your sudden request was too much. Perhaps in three days, she would have had an easier time of things, but you only gave her one day."

Li Luo felt a little pang of guilt. His request was urgent, but the meeting was soon, and he didn't have time.

"But in order to meet your request anyway, Cai Wei went to the Golden Dragon Bank. She went to take a loan. For you, she even threw away her pride."

Li Luo was stunned. "The Golden Dragon Bank? They've always been very strict about loaning eligibility."

"Well, we shouldn't have been eligible," Jiang Qing'e said, gesturing at the other girl sitting quietly at the table. "But luckily, the young mistress of the Golden Dragon Bank spoke up on your behalf at great length. President Yu eventually caved in and made an exception."

"Thanks, Qing'er!" he exclaimed.

Lu Qing'er shook her head and smiled, then she lifted up a silver chest. "The spirit liquids and purifying lights you wanted are here. I really didn't do much. The Golden Dragon Bank is all about business. House Luolan has always honored their credit, so a few days in the red shouldn't be a big deal."

In truth, a million skygold was nothing to her, and she could have all too easily paid for it herself. But she was wise enough not to. It would change the entire dynamic, and others would make fun of Li Luo for being broke. "But my mother asked me to remind you to make a trip to the Golden Dragon Bank when

you're free. She says she wants to discuss the matter of the Golden Dragon Dao Fields with you," Lu Qing'er said.

"The Golden Dragon Dao Fields, huh..."

Li Luo nodded. Of course he had not forgotten. He was very curious about that mysterious place. Perhaps there would be more twists of fate contriving to help him get stronger still.

He didn't have much time. He needed every last bit of help he could find.

"After I settle the meet, I'll go and find your mother," Li Luo promised.

Lu Qing'er smiled mischievously. "Oh, and one more piece of news. I hear that the Bigswamp Villa is sending Hanzhi to represent them for this meet."

Hanzhi...

Li Luo's eyes went flat at the mention of the name. The Suncreek Villa's traitorous president!

Li Luo really didn't like the guy. He was always free to leave, but poaching the Suncreek Villa's resonance artificers was extremely detestable. Plus, committing grand arson at the Suncreek Villa's labs was just straight up nasty. They had lost many years of painstaking research as a result.

"The Bigswamp Villa is doing this on purpose," Jiang Qing'e noted coolly.

Li Luo nodded. It was a move, calculated specially against him. When the new talents saw the ex-president of the Suncreek Villa, they would be reminded.

If even the president had run away to the Bigswamp Villa, what more could the Suncreek Villa offer?

Even before they got to the demonstrations, the Suncreek Villa would already be trashed in the minds of the students.

Li Luo sighed. It seemed like the difficulty had just been ramped up another level.

He patted the box full of spirit liquids and purifying lights.

Just as well. The higher they fly, the harder they fall.

And from their crater, the Suncreek Villa would rise.

Chapter 0312: Sentient Resonant Powers

For the next few days, Li Luo was very busy.

First was the refining of spirit liquids and purifying lights. He could feel his sixth-grade waterlight resonance tingling already. He fed it accordingly with spirit liquids, and it absorbed it all with supernatural efficiency. If anyone else could see the speed at which he consumed them, they would have thought that he had lost his mind.

Only someone like Li Luo, with the void affinity of his blank palaces, could hold such a tremendous capacity of spirit liquids. Any other resonance would have been completely saturated and be unable to evolve any further.

Improving his waterlight resonance was the most important task for the Artificers' Fair. He would be the one to create the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid. Although Yan Lingqing and Tang Yun were fourth-grade resonance artificers, Li Luo did not believe they could make a better third-grade spirit liquid.

Most importantly, the other villas would not send a third-grade resonance artificer to make third-grade spirit liquids. They would choose more experienced resonance artificers, to show off the range and depth of their expertise.

That was how Li Luo would distinguish himself. If a third-grade resonance artificer like him could stand out, that would be truly sensational. He would be the dark horse that stole the thunder of the show.

It was the hardest approach, but also the one that would pay off the best.

With the completion of his four-star formula and his waterlight resonance on the cusp of reaching the seventh-grade, Li Luo felt confidence building in him.

Of course, all of this rested on the assumption that he could reach the seventh-grade. Which came back to him gulping spirit liquids like a drunkard at the inn.

Besides absorbing the spirit liquids and purifying lights, Li Luo's spare time was spent in the refining workshop. He had to familiarize himself with every step of the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid. A four-star formula was many levels harder to craft than a three-star formula.

He wasn't planning to fail dozens of times at the Artificers' Fair. The Sun creek Villa would become a laughing stock if he did that.

He was so busy that time seemed to fly by each time he checked.

During these days, stories of the Heavenly Disaster Class Other at purified spot 13 had spread throughout the school, drawing more attention and bolstering Li Luo's reputation further.

Many of the students spoke admiringly of his daring plan to lure the spirit beast over from the forbidden zone.

It was a mad plan, but pulling it off required courage in the face of a bleak situation.

Even the proud and experienced Four Star Hall students paled at the thought of luring something even stronger than a Heavenly Disaster Class Other. They shook their heads and muttered about young calves not knowing to fear tigers.

They knew that even among the Seven Astral Pillars, no student in the Astral Sage College would've dared to take on the great spirit beast.

Except Li Luo, apparently. He had escaped, and he was only a puny, little Resonant Master.

Purified spot 13 had held out until the reinforcements arrived... No, actually, the reinforcements hadn't even been important. According to the accounts, Li Luo had used the principal's seal to take care of the great spirit beast as well.

Which meant that Li Luo was the MVP for sure. They had him to thank for their lives.

A glory unparalleled in the history of the Astral Sage College.

He was truly a legend in the school now. And his status reached this point in a day more or less.

Of course, there were suggestions floating around that Li Luo should be generously rewarded. Otherwise, there would be no proper closure to the affair.

The voices built up some significant momentum.

Finally, the Gilded Palace, the highest administrative body of the school, announced that discussions were ongoing regarding the reward, and of course the school would not let such merit go unrewarded.

There was only a day left before the Artificers' Fair now.

Li Luo's waterlight resonance still had not reached the seventh-grade.

And he had already finished the batch of spirit liquids and purifying lights.

He had truly underestimated the chasm that divided a middle-grade resonance from a high-grade one.

Li Luo walked out of the tower in a daze. It was noon, and the sun's warmth was welcome.

He shook his befuddled head. The intense absorbing and refining practice had left him in a poor state.

He could feel that his waterlight resonance was powerful enough to evolve, and yet he lacked one final push to trigger it.

As if there was a thin barrier stopping him.

He knew that this was the infamous bottleneck.

Li Luo wasn't panicking. On the contrary, he was quite calm. He knew that the more anxious he was, the slower things would move along.

There was a lake just on the other side of the road, so Li Luo took a stroll along its banks and headed for the little island at the center.

Along the way, he passed many students, who now regarded him with an equal mix of curiosity and respect.

Li Luo knew that Yu Lang must have been busy helping him boost his reputation further. It seemed like his 100,000 points might well land in his lap soon.

Cheered by the thought, Li Luo walked on until he reached the center of the lake. He warily eyed the figure amidst the large gravel.

Mentor Chi Chan.

Li Luo hesitated before walking up to her.

She was in her customary black outfit, but now she was barefoot, letting her feet rest gently on the smooth pebbles.

"Mentor." Li Luo greeted her.

"Your primary resonance is on the verge of a breakthrough."

Li Luo stared at her in surprise.

"The resonant power is overflowing out of you. That's one of the sure signs. I've been watching you for a few days now. Of course I know."

Li Luo grinned. "And of course you are going to give me some advice, right?"

She arranged herself into a more comfortable sitting position, letting her feet trail in the cool lake water. "The jump from sixth to seventh-grade is particularly drastic. Crossing the barrier from middle to high changes things at a fundamental level.

"The mark of a high-grade resonance is sentience in one's resonant power. This tiny spark of awareness cannot be underestimated. You have tangled with many opponents with strong resonances. You know as well that their attacks were harder to deal with.

"Imagine two armies fighting. One faction only knows how to make a straight charge, while the other understands the principles of formations, of strategy, to divide and conquer... If they clash, the former always loses."

Li Luo nodded. He understood the principle of it, and he had faced many strong opponents, but...

"Sorry, Mentor, I haven't really felt it myself before, to be honest. When I clashed with Duze Beixuan and Wang Hejiu, I didn't feel it too clearly." He shrugged. "Dual resonances are too strong, and I smashed their resonant power cleanly."

From his reading of her mood, Li Luo felt like he had said the wrong thing almost the moment he finished speaking.

Chi Chan slowly turned to him and began to laugh. A nasty sort of laugh.

BOOM!

A gigantic wave of lake water broke the calm surface, and a water tiger roared. With a swishing crack of its tail, it batted Li Luo, who flew into the lake.

Li Luo howled and splashed. It was cold inside.

Chi Chan sniffed. "I was instructing you on resonant powers, and you want to show off your dual resonances?"

"Better cool your swollen head in the lake for a bit."

Chapter 0313: Seventh-grade Waterlight Resonance

Li Luo was shivering uncontrollably in the center of the lake, feeling a little grouchy. He was telling the truth though! When he fought the likes of Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan, whatever little glimmer of sentience their resonant powers possessed had been drowned out by sheer power. Dual resonances were super awesome.

"Dual resonances are very powerful, but you wield them like an ogre's club. Sheer power, used in a short and furious blast. Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan aren't that much stronger than you, so they crumbled

before it. But your opponents will only get stronger from hereon. Overwhelming them directly with brute force will not always work.

"At that time, whoever wins the struggle of sentient resonant powers will have the upper hand in battle," Chi Chan said.

Li Luo nodded seriously. He knew the truth of it. His dual resonances were very strong, but they cost a lot of energy. They couldn't last.

"Your primary resonance has gained enough power for the breakthrough, but you are short one last step. That is resonant sentience."

She paused for a moment. "Which is strange. At this stage, the sentience usually comes naturally. For some reason, it is harder for you. Perhaps it has something to do with the dual resonances..."

Li Luo squirmed a little. She knew that he had dual resonances, but she didn't know he actually had two more secondary affinities behind them.

Water primary, light secondary.

These two were compatible elements, or at least they had been up till this point. If they gained sentience, there would inevitably be friction. Perhaps the stronger water resonance would suppress the weaker light resonance. That had to be what was holding him back.

Which meant that all of this was caused by the upset balance between his primaries and secondaries.

If he wanted to get out of this situation, he would have to strengthen the weaker light resonance. At the very least, it would have to be strong enough to shrug off the water resonance's pressure on it. Once it achieved sentience, then things would be smooth sailing again.

His eyes lit up with new energy. "Mentor, I know what to do."

Mentor Chi Chan took a look at her student, then she stood up on the water's surface. A wave of water rose up around her, and when the swirling subsided, she was gone.

Li Luo himself used his water resonant power to help him float on the lake's surface.

He sorted out his thoughts while the sun dried him. The light resonance was secondary. Even when he was absorbing worldly natural energy, his primary resonance would naturally absorb more energy.

If he wanted to change that state of affairs, then he would have to begin from the absorption process.

Li Luo stretched out his hand and commanded the water to rise. He formed it into palm-sized water mirrors and arrayed them around him.

Tilting them all upwards, he directed sunlight onto his body.

He could feel his light energy rising to the fore.

Li Luo used the 12 Step Weave energy cultivation art. However, this time he purposely suppressed his water resonance absorption in order to balance his powers.

Although this was usually a detrimental thing to do, Li Luo's aim here was not raw progress, but building harmony.

With his calibrations, the 12 Step Weave helped bring both resonant powers into his body at approximately an equal rate now.

Waterlight resonant power flowed through his veins.

When it reached his first resonant palace, it flowed into his resonance seed.

Li Luo could sense slight tremors from his first resonant palace. Markings were starting to appear on the surface of his resonance seed.

His resonant power was changing.

Li Luo's heart leaped. As hypothesized, the imbalance between his powers was what had been limiting him. They had been locked in an intangible struggle to reach sentience, and of course his secondary resonance had lost. Allowed to take their natural course, his water resonance would have awakened first, followed by his light resonance much later.

That would have delayed his overall progress significantly. And Li Luo did not have that kind of time to spare.

The Artificers' Fair was tomorrow. If he didn't pull a seventh-grade waterlight resonance out of his ass, then the four-star formula would not have as sensational an impact as he had hoped.

Encouraged that his method was working, Li Luo calmed himself down and continued.

Within his body, an equal amount of water and light energy continued to enter his waterlight resonant palace.

The patterns on his resonance seed started to deepen and clarify.

Approximately two hours passed.

Suddenly, Li Luo heard a loud humming from his resonant palace.

As if a thousand sparrows had started hopping and chirruping all at once.

It was the resonant power within him, awakening.

Li Luo opened his eyes. He could feel that his resonant power had not increased that much, but now the power came to him more easily. His mastery over it was much better.

He sent forth an experimental thread of energy, forming a spout of water.

In the core of his spout was a thick band of glowing light.

Li Luo flicked out his finger, cutting through the surface of the lake.

He judged that both the speed and power were much stronger than before, and he grinned to himself.

He had fed this thing millions of skygold over the last half a year. Finally, he was a seventh-grade. It was harder than raising a child, for crying out loud!

Chapter 0314: Artificers' Fair

The Resonance Artificers Hall had a rather unique system compared to the rest of the Astral Sage College. The students were also divided into four star halls, but as a support vocation, their fighting skills were understandably lacking.

That was why dangerous tasks such as the Umbra Cave would not involve them. Of course, if any student was brave enough to volunteer, the school would not stop them.

Still, that did not mean that they did not contribute in other ways. Their benchmark was tied to the number of successful spirit liquids and purifying lights they made each year. These were either consumed or sold by the school to defray expenses.

In truth, the revenue did not just defray expenses—it brought in a sizable fortune. If you treated the Astral Sage College as a separate entity, it would definitely be seen as the number one villa in all of the Xia Kingdom.

It was to be expected. Close to a third of the elite resonance artificers in the Xia Kingdom had walked out of the Resonance Artificers Hall's doors.

That was why they attracted many villas each year to the career fair, and the villas would try any method available to win them over.

No one would ever feel that they had too many resonance artificers. Besides, these were elite resonance artificers. Although the Artificers' Fair seemed like a simple affair on paper, it was actually a vicious and desperate scrabble between the top villas to secure talent.

It was definitely a major event in the spirit liquid industry.

The Resonance Artificers Hall was located in the southeastern section of the Astral Sage College. The place was filled with lakes, glistening like shining mirrors from above, while a network of elegant bridges criss-crossed their surfaces, joining the buildings up. It had a completely different look compared to the Cultivators Hall.

Today, traffic on the bridges was especially heavy, and the loud chatter resulting from the influx of guests was amplified by the way their voices carried over water.

In the center of the entire location was a courtyard made entirely of white jade. It floated in the middle of a huge lake and was enclosed by stone steps that extended outwards and upwards, giving spectators an unhindered view.

People had been scurrying back and forth to the courtyard since the early hours of the morning.

Besides the resonance artificers clad in the Resonance Artificers Hall's uniform, there were also others who had come in the colors of their respective villas.

Li Luo, Jiang Qing'e, and Yan Lingqing had arrived at the crack of dawn as well, where they met up with Cai Wei, Tang Yun, and other managers from the Sun creek Villa.

Tang Yun and the other artificers looked around the Resonance Artificers Hall in wonder. "So this is the legendary Resonance Artificers Hall. We dreamed of making it to this paradise when we were younger."

Li Luo smiled politely. Was this their lament of a life wasted? In their younger days, Tang Yun and the others had evidently failed to enter the Astral Sage College and, as a result, the Resonance Artificers Hall.

The fact rankled. Not because he was so concerned over Tang Yun's future, but rather that the Sun creek Villa only had one person who had graduated from the Resonance Artificers Hall... Yan Lingqing.

While he chewed on that unappetizing fact, another storm arrived. "Young Lord," Cai Wei snapped at him. "Just how bottomless is that appetite of yours?"

Li Luo smiled at her weakly. It was very bottomless indeed. So bottomless that if he actually told her the truth, she would probably quit on the spot. So for the sake of her feelings, he wouldn't tell her.

"Sister Cai Wei, do not worry. All the investment will pay off," Li Luo assured her. "Today I will fill the ranks of the Sun creek Villa until we are bursting. And then we will take off to glory and greatness."

Cai Wei scowled prettily at him. "Do you think I don't know where we stand?"

She was one of the core managers of House Luolan, and she oversaw most of their businesses, the Sun creek Villa included.

It was precisely this understanding of their position that made her pessimistic about their success here at the Artificers' Fair. She felt that it wasn't even a wise decision to participate at all!

Although the thought of getting the Resonance Artificers Hall graduates was tempting, it was a delectable cake that the Sun creek Villa had no business trying to secure a piece of.

Forcing their way forward would only backfire on them and make them look like fools. And by the pained expression on Tang Yun's face accompanied by regular sighs of resignation, Cai Wei wasn't the only one who felt that way.

Neither of them could see a reason for the Sun creek Villa to participate in the Artificers' Fair.

Look at the caliber of the other participants, for goodness' sake! If this were a forest, the other villas would be like weathered oaks. They had laid down extensive roots and grown to an impregnable size. The Sun creek Villa was a sturdy, young tree that had been growing at a rapid rate, but they were unable to compete with the historical majesty of the others.

A small, puny villa going up against the might of these giants.

"Young Lord, how about I take your place later instead? You are still young, and I'm sure you have been busy with cultivation..." Tang Yun offered dubiously.

Although Li Luo showed promising talent in artificing, his youth and lack of experience would put him at a severe disadvantage. He would cause them to lose face.

Tang Yun would rather endure the humiliation on his behalf.

Li Luo did not really know how to handle their pessimism, but he did not bother to explain either. "Don't worry," he said, waving off Tang Yun's offer. "Leave it to me."

Suddenly, he felt weighed down by the tension emitting from all of them, even Jiang Qing'e.

Tang Yun and the others were clenching their jaws tightly, their anger all too apparent.

Li Luo could guess even before he turned around to spot a group of people walking down a bridge. Everyone else gave way to them.

It was a familiar bunch of faces indeed.

The siblings Duze Honglian and Duze Beixuan. The House Duze contingent followed behind.

The anger of the Suncreek artificers was not directed at the Duze siblings, but instead at the man who was standing by their side.

He was a rather powerful-looking man, clad in a fine set of artificer robes. A friendly-looking smile was currently fixed on his well-chiseled features.

Li Luo immediately guessed it. This had to be the previous president, Hanzhi.

There was only one vile traitor who could get the entire Suncreek Villa riled up, including Jiang Qing'e.

"That dog!" Tang Yun swore from between gritted teeth.

The Bigswamp Villa's artificers tramped across the bridge. They had spotted the Suncreek artificers and were looking at them with mocking looks that spoke volumes.

Clearly, they were surprised to see the Suncreek Villa on such a big stage.

"I say, Li Luo's gone mad. He can't tell good from bad at all. Does he think the Suncreek Villa stands a chance here?" Duze Beixuan sneered.

"Just focus on ourselves," Duze Honglian said flatly. "No need to care about anything else."

Her brother was taken aback. Usually, his sister would back him up, but now she did not seem keen on the taunting.

"Sis, House Luolan is our rival. You can't change your stance just because of what happened in the Umbra Cave," he argued.

"You're overthinking it," Duze Honglian said after a slight pause. "It's true that they rescued me in the Umbra Cave, but that changes nothing. I just think that taunting serves no purpose... After all, the results will say it all."

"Besides," she said, turning to stare her brother full in the face, "haven't you realized that with Li Luo, the more you taunt him, the tougher he gets?"

Duze Beixuan started. "Surely he can't do that every single time!" Still, he seemed convinced enough to call off the taunting.

The Bigswamp Villa's contingent walked on past the Suncreek Villa's.

Hanzhi's oily smile paused slightly longer on Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo. They knew the poison he was hiding behind that friendly facade all too well.

He did not say anything, nor did he have to. He knew the wretched position that they were in very well, and their inability to challenge him. They did not deserve proper attention.

But just as his eyes flicked away onwards, Li Luo suddenly stepped forward. "President Hanzhi, long time no see."

The whole Bigswamp Villa group stopped and turned. Duze Honglian frowned.

Hanzhi turned to Li Luo, his smile not faltering one bit. "Young Lord Li Luo, I am now the vice president of the Bigswamp Villa, and no longer the president of the Sun creek Villa. You may add a 'vice' before my title."

Li Luo waved it off. "No worries. With your methods, I'm sure you can finish off the president quickly enough and take his place."

The Bigswamp artificers stiffened, although a few looked at Hanzhi apprehensively.

Hanzhi's smile subsided by a few millimeters. "Young Lord Li Luo, did you stop me for such a meaningless exchange?"

"Oh no," Li Luo shook his head. "I wanted to thank you." His face was the very poise of sincerity.

Hanzhi smiled back coldly. As if.

Li Luo sighed. "My thanks are genuine. If not for a poisonous sleazebag like yourself leaving the Sun creek Villa, how could we have improved so rapidly since?"

A few quiet sniggers.

"Actions speak louder than words, Li Luo." Duze Honglian cut in. "A clever tongue will win you no graduates."

She turned and walked away.

The Bigswamp Villa's people hurried after her.

Hanzhi paused a moment longer. "Young Lord, you are a clever boy. But still only just a boy..."

"A stage like the Resonance Artificers Hall's fair is too big for the Sun creek Villa. It will swallow you. Forcing your way forward will only end in disgrace.

"Because the two House Lords treated me kindly once, let me offer you this piece of advice: take the Sun creek Villa and leave this place. You will lose everything that you have worked so hard to build up."

He then walked on.

Chapter 0315: Hanzhi

As for Hanzhi's friendly-sounding advice, Li Luo just smiled and shook his head almost pityingly. The livelier the pre-fight, the sweeter his victory would be.

"Let's go, then. To our places." He beckoned to his seething employees, then he led the way with Jiang Qing'e into the courtyard, heading for their allocated place.

Along the way, they ran into Li Bi, who was with a group of friends that were all outstanding students as well.

"Senior Li Bi!" Yan Lingqing waved enthusiastically.

Li Bi turned around at the call, smiling at Yan Lingqing before speaking to Li Luo. "Junior Li Luo. The Suncreek Villa really came, I see."

"And it's all thanks to Senior's advice."

Li Bi gave him a puzzled but polite smile. She didn't know if it was something to be thankful for. The Suncreek Villa looked shabby compared to these other villas.

"Who's your representative? Lingqing?" Li Bi asked. She knew that the Suncreek Villa had no fifth-grade artificer, so their strongest had to be someone of Yan Lingqing's level.

Yan Lingqing pointed a hesitant finger at Li Luo, who smiled. "Senior Li Bi, it will be our young lord taking the stage."

Li Bi stared at him in shock. "Do you even know what you are doing?" she burst out.

She could not understand it. The Suncreek Villa was the weakest villa present. And they were sending a third-grade resonance artificer?

Were they intending on creating the greatest comedy act ever?

"Senior Li Bi, I know what I am doing. And believe me—I won't make free with the Suncreek Villa's reputation," Li Luo said seriously.

Believe you? On what basis, that was preposterous?!

At best, the Suncreek Villa could enter the third-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights category. But other villas would be sending fifth-grade resonance artificers armed with high-star formulas. The Suncreek Villa's only promising point was their upper seventh-grade watersource, which other villas had as well.

A third-grade resonance artificer with a low-star formula? Li Luo could never hope to compete.

They would be laughed out of the courtyard. How was that supposed to attract any Resonance Artificers Hall students?

Li Bi looked at him with disappointment. "Do as you will."

Then she left.

She had been charmed by his confidence back at the inn, but now she saw that it was mere bluster.

Her friends turned to her when they were out of earshot. "That's Li Luo?" they asked curiously.

"He's become very famous recently."

"Oh yes, I heard he performed superbly in THE Umbra Cave. The school is giving him a special reward."

"And he's easy on the eyes too," a fashionably dressed senior said archly. "At least I'll have eye candy at the Suncreek Villa."

Some of the other girls giggled excitedly as well. "Looks like Senior Bing Tao's heart's aflutter. But Jiang Qing'e has laid claim to that one. So be careful she doesn't beat you up."

Bing Tao sighed and then shook her head. "Still, pretty looks alone aren't going to bring in the business. The Suncreek Villa is too weak. They have a dim future."

"You seemed interested a few days ago, no?" she asked Li Bi. "Must be that Yan Lingqing and her sweet talk. Still, you'd do well to see this matter with a clear head, you know." Li Bi sighed. Bing Tao was her good friend. Although the latter was only a fourth-grade artificer, she was excellent too. She had admitted some interest in the Suncreek Villa to her friend a few days ago, but Bing Tao had dismissed it as far-fetched.

Now that she knew it would be Li Luo representing the Suncreek Villa, her last hope had vanished.

Forget it. If Li Luo wanted to be suicidal, there was nothing she could do about it.

On the other side.

"Oh no, Senior Li Bi looks very disappointed." Yan Lingqing wailed. "It's all your fault, Li Luo." She glared at him. "Why did you have to insist on participating?!"

Li Luo was speechless. Was there no one who believed in him?!

"Well, we'll see," he managed.

At their allocated position, he spotted a few more familiar faces.

Yu Lang, Lu Qing'er, Zhao Kuo, Bai Mengmeng, Xin Fu, and a few others had all come to lend their support.

Li Luo beamed and waved enthusiastically.

Yu Lang chopped the air decisively. "Gentlemen, reveal the banner."

Zhao Kuo and the others cheered as they unfurled it. On it were the words "Fly high, Brother Luo! The fan club will always be right behind you!"

Yan Lingqing covered her face. "Can they not?" she whispered. "It's incredibly embarrassing."

Li Luo puffed his chest out proudly. "I think it's swell," he said fondly. "Good for morale, at any rate."

"And if we lose later??"

"At least Yu Lang and the others believe in me. That's one better than you guys," Li Luo complained.

Yan Lingqing barely had energy left to shrug.

Lu Qing'er was of the same mind. "Beware the hubris. What if the Suncreek Villa flops?"

"I believe in Li Luo!" Yu Lang declared stoutly.

"Besides, I have a backup plan." He waved grandly to Zhao Kuo and the others.

They sneakily unfurled another banner. "Don't worry, Brother Luo! Try again next time!"

Lu Qing'er didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

They had every outcome covered.

Confidence in Brother Luo, my foot!

Chapter 0316: Ling Zhaoying

The courtyard steadily grew more lively as the morning wore on. Even the Cultivators Hall students were here to watch the entertainment. Watching some refining was a nice, relaxing change after their purging mission in the Umbra Cave.

Besides the Suncreek Villa, every other villa present was easily in the top 20 in the Xia Kingdom...

Such was the standard for an invitation. These villas had all proved themselves as highly capable.

In comparison, the Suncreek Villa was unproven on every front.

This was where the lions gathered. Meeker villas were like scavengers that were afraid to pick up scraps while the kings feasted. They would end up empty-handed for sure, and that would just be humiliating.

The crowd suddenly parted for a group. They were led by the First Princess.

Behind her was a retinue of skilled artificers. Their arrogant expressions were an unspoken declaration that they knew just how good they were.

"That's the Skypalace Villa, a subsidiary of the royal court. They are the foremost villa in the Xia Kingdom... Excepting the Resonance Artificers Hall, of course," Yan Lingqing said to Li Luo.

He nodded. He had heard of the Skypalace Villa before, of course. One could not help but hear about the best. Even among these villas, they always had the first pick at the Artificers' Fair each year. Fortunately for the other villas, the Resonance Artificers Hall had set a hard quota on the recruitment numbers for each villa; otherwise, the Skypalace Villa would be sweeping up most of the talent each year.

Li Luo was pretty confident that the Suncreek Villa could be ranked top 10 in another six months. But to overtake the Skypalace Villa? There was still a long way to go for that. At least for now, it was too lofty a goal.

Not long after the Skypalace Villa's arrival, a rich voice called out, and the crowd fell silent. Everyone turned to the stage.

The Resonance Artificers Hall's elites walked out on stage, fronted by a beautiful matron in pure-white robes. Her golden hair was like a crown on her head, and her features exuded mature wisdom befitting of a queen.

"That's the dean of the Resonance Artificers Hall, Ling Zhaoying," Yan Lingqing said with reverence.

"She's the only eighth-grade resonance artificer in the Xia Kingdom.

"She has an upper eighth-grade light resonance."

She grinned at Jiang Qing'e. "This is the dean who kept trying to persuade Jiang Qing'e to join the Resonance Artificers Hall but failed every time."

"An eighth-grade resonance artificer with an upper eighth-grade light resonance..." Li Luo marveled. Besides Jiang Qing'e, this was the highest quality light resonance he had seen so far. After all, water and light resonance cultivators were rather rare, and there were far fewer of the latter compared to the former. That was why in their industry, there were always far more spirit liquids than purifying lights.

Plus, this dean was an eighth-grade resonance artificer.

Resonance artificers were different from alchemists in many ways. Most pertinently, spirit liquids and purifying lights often cost far less than pills and potions of the same grade. However, many pills and potions could not be used more than once, as they made drastic changes to one's core. Overdosing could lead to destabilization.

However, this difference only applied to spirit liquids and purifying lights below the seventh-grade. At the seventh-grade and above, there was a sharp spike in the price of spirit liquids and purifying lights, and they were seldom seen as well.

The reason was very simple. The number of seventh-grade resonance artificers could be counted on one's fingers. $n(-\mathbf{O}-\mathbf{V})/\mathbf{E})-\mathbf{I}-/\mathbf{B}..1//n$

What about eighth-grade artificers?

The dean of the Resonance Artificers Hall was the only one who could make such things. One could only imagine the price each one would fetch. They might not even be for sale.

Perhaps only a small group of Duke experts could afford such rarities. And for something of such quality, they were probably willing to hand over a sizable fortune. At such a high level, resonance artificers were on par with alchemists.

This was also why Li Luo had chosen the path of a resonance artificer after he acquired his resonances. At least he could make his own spirit liquids and purifying lights in the future. He would not be at the mercy of others.

The queenly Ling Zhaoying walked on to the stage and surveyed the crowd. She started to speak in her rich, throaty voice.

"Welcome. We are all familiar with each other, and we know why we are here. I will not repeat the same, tired old phrases. On behalf of the Resonance Artificers Hall of the Astral Sage College, I welcome all of you eminent guests. I hope that our graduating students find good homes with you.

"As for the rules of the Artificers' Fair, everyone has already been informed beforehand. Without further ado, let us begin."

She was concise to the point of being almost brusque. Before the crowd had properly settled in to listen, her opening was already over.

"This Ling Zhaoying's a real character." Li Luo chuckled.

"Well, she's an eighth-grade resonance artificer. Her status in the Astral Sage College is rather special. I heard that the principal went to great lengths to invite her to the school," Jiang Qing'e said.

Li Luo nodded. That made sense. An eighth-grade resonance artificer was a walking miracle. No matter where they went, they would be hotly fought over. Even Dukes were not as valuable.

A Resonance Artificers Hall mentor walked out. "The first round of the fair is the third-grade round," he declared in a booming voice.

"There are six villas participating.

"Bigswamp Villa. Artificer: Vice President Hanzhi, fifth-grade resonance artificer.

"Ultraviolet Villa. Artificer: Vice President Huangfu Xu, fifth-grade resonance artificer.

"Arctic Blizzard Villa. Artificer: Vice President Bing Ling, fifth-grade resonance artificer.

"Inkwater Villa. Artificer: Vice President Mo Tai, fifth-grade resonance artificer.

"..."

At the last name, the mentor's booming, confident voice faltered. "Sunstream Villa... Artificer: President Li Luo. Ah... third-grade resonance artificer."

The crowd processed this with confusion. Surely he had read it wrongly? Or they had heard it wrongly?

Out of the six villas, the other five were elite villas, their reputation well-known. And then suddenly the Sunstream Villa...

They only knew that it was affiliated with House Luolan, but they were nobodies in the rankings of the Xia Kingdom. Even House Luolan itself was more well-known.

Most importantly, the other villas had all sent forth fifth-grade resonance artificers to refine a third-grade spirit liquid, because that would allow them to maximize the potential of their formulas and demonstrate their best.

Not the Sunstream Villa, which was sending a mere third-grade resonance artificer... Li Luo's name was recently spoken of with some modest approval within the school grapevine.

But still...

How could he hope to compete?

The crowd was strangely silent as they pondered this bizarre twist.

Hanzhi stood up first, his signature false-smile firmly fixed on his face.

"Give us your best, Vice President Hanzhi," Duzhe Beixuan said with a smirk. "The better you acquit yourself, the worse off Li Luo will be."

Hanzhi smirked back. "Don't worry, Young Lord. The Bigswamp Villa has nothing to fear from the Sunstream Villa."

Duze Honglian was a little more objective. "The Bigswamp Villa has never once considered the Sun creek Villa our rival. They are far from where we are. We have bigger fish to consider. Vice President Hanzhi, you will do your best in the third-grade round so that the Bigswamp Villa can be the best out of all the competitors, not relative to just one underdog."

Hanzhi nodded solemnly.

"You are right, Young Mistress. My perspective was too limited."

At the same time, on the stage where the leaders of the Resonance Artificers Hall were seated.

Dean Ling Zhaoying turned to the woman by her side. "This Li Luo is your student, is he not, Chi Chan?"

Li Luo's mentor nodded. "The kid asked me to pull strings to get him in, so I let him."

"He's only a third-grade resonance artificer, and he's here to create a third-grade spirit liquid? Does this boy think he's Jiang Qing'e?" Ling Zhaoying remarked with a sunny smile.

"Is that resentment I hear?" Chi Chan noted mildly.

"What a waste, that girl. A ninth-grade light resonance! Even I haven't reached that level, not after a whole lifetime!" Ling Zhaoying tutted.

"Watching that potential just sit there is killing me!" She slapped her chair for emphasis, and that drew some startled looks.

"To each their own. If she does not fancy the path of a resonance artificer, would you force her onto it?"

Ling Zhaoying shook her head. It was a topic that she had visited and revisited many times over the last few years. She turned her attention to the silver-haired youth instead.

"Well, let's see what this House Luolan kid has up his sleeve, since he dares to go up against fifth-grade resonance artificers.

"If he's here to make a farce out of the Resonance Artificers Hall's meet, then the Sun creek Villa will be banned from my hall for life."

Mentor Chi Chan shook her head. She knew that Ling Zhaoying had always resented Jiang Qing'e's choice, and it lent a sour cast to her words. She didn't really mean that threat, but it was still true that the Sun creek Villa would be thoroughly disgraced if Li Luo did not pull off a miracle today.

And so...

She looked back at her cheeky, little protégé.

Was this kid really going to deliver?

Chapter 0317: Hack You To Death

Li Luo stood up, heedless of the astonishment around him.

"Seems like no one believes in the Sun creek Villa." He grinned at Jiang Qing'e and Yan Lingqing.

"I wonder why."

Yan Lingqing was in a black mood indeed.

"Do your best out there," Jiang Qing'e said with her signature incline of her head.

She knew that Li Luo had the four-star formula from Bai Mengmeng, which would help them shorten the gap with other villas... but not close it.

After all, the other competitors were all fifth-grade resonance artificers. Creating third-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights was a walk in the park for them, and they would surely be able to produce some fine liquids and lights.

Li Luo was just a third-grade artificer. How could he possibly make up for the gap between them?

Cai Wei fanned herself, trying to curb her own irritation. The Suncreek Villa had finally managed to claw together a modest reputation, and they were in a much better situation than before. But a loss here today could send them tumbling back down to square one.

Still, it wasn't her place to demand otherwise, not if the ultimate decision-makers, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e, had agreed to this.

More importantly, she understood the two of them. They were even more invested in House Luolan and the Suncreek Villa than she was. It was impossible that they did not know the implications of failing here today. If they had chosen to go ahead anyway, then they had to have something up their sleeves.

As for what it was... she would just have to wait and see.

Li Luo walked out of the Suncreek Villa's position and headed to the center, where a refining platform had been prepared for him.

Over at the Skypalace Villa, the First Princess had spotted Li Luo. The boy seemed to show up everywhere. First the uproar in the Umbra Cave, and now he was here at the Artificers' Fair as well?

He was either on a roll... or entirely mad.

The First Princess looked over at a middle-aged man by her side, whose hair was shot through with white. "Master Gui Xu, is there any chance a third-grade resonance artificer can challenge the fifth-grade artificers?"

The man called Gui Xu laughed. "Your Highness, are you referring to President Li Luo from the Suncreek Villa? It's very difficult."

He continued without prompting, "The Suncreek Villa lacks the experience and depth in their research. Compared to elite villas like the Bigswamp Villa, they are outclassed in every aspect.

"The three major factors in artificing are the artificer, the formula, and the secret watersource.

"First, in terms of resonance artificer, the Suncreek Villa is far behind, third-grade against fifth.

"As for formulas, the Suncreek Villa has never shown a four-star formula before. Whereas for these elite villas, the only reason they would join the lowly third-grade competition is because third-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights could be one of their market specializations. All of them will bring four-star formulas, without exception.

"As for the secret watersource, I hear that the Suncreek Villa has recently come into possession of an upper seventh-grade secret watersource. This is their only advantage. The other five villas only have lower seventh-grade watersources. It's perhaps an inch ahead for them in this case...

"Even so, the difference between an upper and lower grade is not enough for them to turn the tables.

"That's my assessment... President Li Luo should stand no chance at all."

The First Princess nodded thoughtfully. Gui Xu's opinion was professional. It was measured, calculated, and based on a wealth of experience. But she wasn't about to take it wholesale. She knew that Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo had to have reached the same conclusion as Gui Xu. So why had they come anyway? They had to be trying something, and they had to be fairly confident to risk the Suncreek Villa's reputation.

But what could possibly make Li Luo that confident?

The First Princess was extremely curious.

After the incidents at the Umbra Cave, she no longer underestimated Li Luo. The man was as innocuous as an ice cube, floating along harmlessly under the bright sun in the sky—Jiang Qing'e. And yet he was like an iceberg, hiding his dangers under the water.

This Li Luo was definitely more than met the eye.

As he walked up on stage, it brought him in close proximity to Hanzhi, who smiled at him warmly.

Li Luo threw a careless look his way. "Oh, Hanzhi."

"Is there something else you have to say to me, Young Lord Li Luo?" Hanzhi asked breezily.

"When given the chance, I will get people to hack you to death. When you set foot outside in the future, remember to get House Duze to arrange more bodyguards for you."

Hanzhi's smile froze on his face. He was taken aback by the stark, naked threat and pure venom that backed Li Luo's menacing declaration.

This was lawless!

Hanzhi's composure slipped. "You are breaking the rules, Young Lord Li Luo," he said darkly. "House Duze might respond in kind to the artificers of the Suncreek Villa."

"Oh, the rules were already broken a long time ago. You burned them down to ashes along with the research labs of the Suncreek Villa."

Li Luo strolled on to his assigned refining platform.

Hanzhi watched him go, glowering. Eventually, he huffed and swept it from his mind. House Luolan was on shaky ground as it was. They had their hands full just keeping afloat. Threaten him? That was naive.

Did Li Luo think that he would be intimidated by that?

"So be it. If you are going to threaten me, then I'll deal with you in kind. And this is the best opportunity for me to deal with you, when you've served yourself up on a silver platter!"

The tale of the Suncreek Villa's former president taking down the current one—that would be one for the books. The perfect nail in the coffin that had been built steadily around the Suncreek Villa over the last few years.

Li Luo paid no more attention to Hanzhi after that, although he did still have a serious killing intent against the guy. Hanzhi had not only betrayed House Luolan, but also ruined their work. Li Luo was still seething over that.

House Luolan had not treated him badly either. Hanzhi had been able to rise to a fifth-grade artificer thanks to the generous support of House Luolan. But now that the house was weak, he was happy to kick them while they were down to ingratiate himself with his new employer and flee to House Duze.

That was the starting bell marking the death of rules.

Li Luo had not dealt with this matter beforehand because he had had too many other things on his plate. And Hanzhi had laid low after joining the Bigswamp Villa as well. Until now, at least, when he was personally taking part in their competition to snub them.

Li Luo's words were no empty threat. If he saw the chance, he would gladly bring the might of House Luolan down to finish off Hanzhi without a second thought.

Li Luo stood still at his refining platform, looking up at the huge crowd. It was a lot of pressure. Li Luo was unaffected. He knew that few among them believed in him, but this was a necessary part of his plan. The more they doubted him, the greater the shock would be when the result was announced. They would remember the Suncreek Villa all the more because of it.

He believed that after this Artificers' Fair, the Suncreek Villa would firmly be on an unstoppable track up to glory, even if they would not immediately become one of the top villas.

Ting!

A bell pealed once, the clear note hanging in the air. The voice of the Resonance Artificers Hall mentor boomed out again.

"Let the third-grade round officially begin!"

Chapter 0318: Challenging the Fifth-grade Artificers

With the cry heralding the start of the competition, the atmosphere of the fair immediately heated up. The spectators' fervent gazes were focused upon the elevated platforms. The audience also included numerous Resonance Artificers Hall students, all of whom possessed a lack of familiarity with the scene presented before them. As a result, their eyes were glued to the artificing process of these uncommonly crafted spirit liquids and purifying lights, determined to better understand and appreciate the process.

On the six refining workshops, the five fifth-grade resonance artificers possessed looks of indifferent calm. Utilizing their expertise and skills to refine third-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights was complete overkill. If not for the fact that each house was planning to demonstrate their ultimate piece of work, a junior fourth-grade resonance artificer would have been more than enough.

Their smooth and graceful movements belied their experience. Water and light resonance energy gushed out like tides, flowing with complete ease and control with just minor movements of their

fingers. It was as though life was imitating art itself. The resonant power enveloped the numerous materials on the refining platform, harmoniously disintegrated into fine powder as they formed a glorious symphony within the crystal vials.

Immediately after, a dazzling flash preceded the sublime fusion of the ingredients. It has to be said that Hanzhi and the other fifth-grade resonance artificers were truly the best individuals for showcasing the splendorous wonders of each artificing villa. Their exceptional abilities were cleanly brought to light amidst the refinement of spirit liquids and purifying lights. Everyone who had the privilege of watching this scene was only left with a sense of awestruck appreciation.

However, not everything went as planned, and some discordant elements had been thrown into the mix...

Boom!

A crystal tube on Li Luo's refining platform shook violently and vigorously when the materials merged, eventually culminating in a chaotic, explosive display.

He had made a mistake during the final step of fusing the ingredients together.

Honestly speaking, such a sight was not uncommon. However, compared to the smoothly flowing movements of the fifth-grade resonance artificers, Li Luo's misstep seemed all the more glaring.

Low whispers began to circulate around the fair.

Even an illiterate fool could tell that Li Luo's skills were not up to par, relative to the other competitors—his actions were jerky and unrehearsed.

The difficulty of concocting a third-grade spirit liquid was not something to be scoffed at.

Everyone's attention was focused atop the refining platform. Specifically, Mei Xuan'er guffawed unrequitedly at this sight, immediately turning to face Li Bi. "See? Looks like I wasn't wrong after all. The Suncreek Villa is a dumpster fire. Once you jump in headfirst, you're doomed."

Li Bi didn't bother to retort, whereas Bing Tao simply nodded, whispering in a hushed tone, "Mei Xuan'er may be irritating, but her words aren't wrong. The Suncreek Villa has always been weak. Furthermore, they only dispatched a third-grade resonance artificer. Aren't they just trying to ruin what's left of their own reputation?"

"If they don't even bother to maintain their own reputation, it's a terrible place to be."

Li Bi paused for a brief moment before sighing helplessly. "I have never said that I would definitely join the Suncreek Villa. Enough, let's just await the end of the competition."

Bing Tao waved her hand in defeat, not mentioning anything else.

On the other hand, Mei Xuan'er was cackling gleefully. The Suncreek Villa would inevitably become the biggest joke during this Artificers' Fair. Their entry had only tarnished the high standards of the fair.

Although her words were unpleasant to hear, some of the students were inevitably affected, darkly nodding in agreement. It looked as though all hope was lost.

Li Luo, on the other hand, was completely disregarding what was happening amongst the audience. He was fully focused and concentrated on the refining process. The distractions of the world had all but disappeared in his mind.

His expression was calm, and he was seemingly unaffected by the previous mistake. This would not be the last time such a scene would occur, and hence it was nothing to be concerned about.

The number of failures would be inconsequential. Ultimately, what truly mattered was refining a third-grade spirit liquid within the allocated time.

He extended his palm, and resonant power that took the form tendrils snaked out, directly wrapping around the ingredients. In a blink, they were completely refined by his power, ridding them of their impurities before being separated into their appropriate amounts. After a brief moment of measurement, the ingredients were combined in a crystal tube.

The process of fusion began anew.

Time gradually passed as Li Luo continued to experiment in wide view.

His subsequent attempts led to another three failures. However, he wasn't the only one disappointed in himself. The other fifth-grade resonance artificers, with the exception of Hanzhi, also felt the same way at his wastefulness.

Although fifth-grade resonance artificers did not possess a guaranteed chance of success, they did not act so frivolously.

However, Li Luo was completely unconcerned with their opinions. With his unparalleled ability to concentrate, his Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid had reached a third of the way to a complete fusion. Such progress lagged behind his "peers," but he was unflustered, taking things into his own rhythm.

Atop the elevated platform, Dean Ling Zhaoying's expression lit up for a moment as she focused on Li Luo. "Li Luo's spirit liquid has undergone more than 10 different steps of fusion... This is not something a three-star formula can achieve."

"As I said, this brat isn't a complete numbskull. He wouldn't attempt to do something he had no chance of succeeding in. It looks like this is his hidden ace," Mentor Chi Chan dryly commented. "So it looks like he's using a four-star formula?"

Ling Zhaoying nodded. "I don't know where in the world he could have found something like that, but I don't think I'm wrong."

Mentor Chi Chan's gaze held a trace of interest. Ling Zhaoying was an eighth-grade resonance artificer and was extremely astute. If she said so, then it had to be true.

As for how he could have obtained a four-star formula...

Mentor Chi Chan had her suspicions as she broke into a smile. This Li Luo must have bewitched that brat Bai Mengmeng! Why else would she work so hard for his sake?

"However, even with a four-star formula, the gap isn't so easily closed." Ling Zhaoying smiled as she stroked her chin.

"It has increased his odds at least. Who knows what other tricks Li Luo might have concealed?" Mentor Chi Chan replied. It looked as though things were heating up.

"Oh? Do I sense favoritism?" Ling Zhaoying smirked.

Chi Chan was beaming, but she did not reply. Logically speaking, Li Luo's chances of success were abysmal. However, common sense often didn't apply to this devil. He'd only leave people in shock, and it wouldn't be the other way around.

Tick tock tick tock. Time continued its inevitable march as the competition proceeded.

Under the watchful eyes of the audience, the other five resonance artificers were reaching greater levels of completion. Hanzhi was particularly eye-catching.

He was the only one to not have made a single error thus far.

Even some of the great villas' sixth-grade resonance artificers nodded in appreciation of his abilities. This Hanzhi possessed talent. Although he had been led astray in the past, entering the Sun creek Villa had eventually provided him with the environment to develop his potential, reaching his current height. Duzé Beixuan and Duzé Honglian were both looking at the scene atop the refining platform in satisfaction. Hanzhi's performance was truly commendable.

"It looks like Hanzhi's determination to demonstrate his worth is clear for all to see. I'd thought he would be nice enough to spare his old home some pity." Duzé Beixuan grinned.

Duzé Honglian tartly replied, "Normally speaking, most traitors are ruthless towards their previous affiliates. I think Hanzhi wants to completely wreck the Sun creek Villa's morale. That is the most important thing in his eyes."

"Sister, don't you think the result has been set in stone?" Duzé Beixuan casually remarked. "Li Luo has been too ostentatious recently. This might finally be an opportunity to suppress him properly."

Duzé Honglian listened without comment, pausing for a moment. If it was in the past, she would have coldly chuckled by now, completely disregarding Li Luo. Yet the incident in the Umbra Cave had changed her. This brat was truly mysterious and unfathomable.

As a result, her reply lacked conviction.

"Perhaps? I suppose the outcome will clear that up."

Chapter 0319: Successful Artificing

Dong!

The sun rose higher into the air, bringing with it physical heat to match the atmosphere below. And then the same clear gong that had announced the start of the round rang out across the refining platforms, and everyone sat up straighter.

It signaled someone's completion.

To no one's surprise, the first to finish was the Bigswamp Villa's Hanzhi.

He lifted a crystal vial with a satisfied smile. Dark-gray liquid swirled within, almost paste-like in its consistency. It was filled with an ash-like sediment that danced with surprising lightness despite the thickness of the solution.

Those familiar with spirit liquids and purifying lights recognized it immediately. It was what the Bigswamp Villa used to compete against the other elite villas: the Coarse Dust Spirit Liquid.

This was the Bigswamp Villa's only four-star formula among its line-up of third-grade spirit liquids.

There were approving cheers and applause for his work. Hanzhi seemed well-placed to win this round. Not only had he executed a flawless artificing, but he had done so in the fastest time.

Both Duzé Honglian and Duzé Beixuan were smiling, satisfied with his work.

Hanzhi rubbed his hands together with great pleasure, then he looked over at Li Luo's side. The boy seemed oblivious to the fact that Hanzhi had already finished. He was still a ways away from succeeding.

Hanzhi smirked. A mere third-grade resonance artificer? No amount of talent could help him overtake a fifth-grade resonance artificer.

Of course, speed wasn't one of the judging criteria. The final tempering strength was everything.

Hanzhi was pleased with his work today. He was confident that his spirit liquid would be the finest out of all that was produced today.

With this, he could talk as big as he wanted.

Not long after Hanzhi finished, the other four fifth-grade resonance artificers finished as well. They also looked well-pleased with their creations.

Which made everyone turn towards the last competitor, Li Luo. He had yet to finish.

Step by step, he moved through the procedure. His concentration was absolute, and he was lost to the world that watched his every moment from every angle.

Over at the Suncreek Villa contingent, Yan Lingqing and Cai Wei were beside themselves with anxiety. Despite willing herself to relax, Jiang Qing'e's back had grown straighter and straighter over the course of the competition, and now her golden eyes were tightly fixed on Li Luo, hunched over his refining platform.

"Come on, Brother Luo!"

Yu Lang rallied the gang for a cheer.

Lu Qing'er and Bai Mengmeng were identical quivering lumps of nervousness.

Their shouts soon had a few Cultivators Hall students joining in. They were only here for fun after all—they did not care about politics or factions. Besides, Li Luo's heroism in the Umbra Cave had earned him a lot of respect, and they showed it now through open and generous support.

Soon enough, the cheers picked up lusty momentum, leaving the other villas amazed. They had not expected Li Luo to be so famous in the Astral Sage College.

Hadn't he just entered the school half a year ago?

Li Luo was as oblivious to the encouragement as he had been to the silent pressure. He was entering the most complicated phase now, where complex reactions between his tricky compounds were finally starting to trigger.

Rows of test tubes were laid out before him, and he weaved an intricate symphony of artificing with his fingers. His waterlight resonance danced in threads, sending sparkling light twinkling off the transparent gloss of water and glass. Each movement of his fingers sent streams of resonant power into a test tube, catalyzing reactions and amplifying their potency further and further.

Like a courtesan waving her sash, Li Luo threw more threads of power, his entire being engrossed in his task. He charmed the audience and ingredients alike, seducing them to his will.

He looked perfect, invincible. He could do no wrong.

When the ingredients began to fuse, more and more impurity leached away, until they all sparkled like crystals under the light.

Up on the stage, Ling Zhaoying frowned. "There's something strange about the boy's resonant power."

"Li Luo has a dual resonance," Chi Chan answered. "It's to be expected."

"No..." Ling Zhaoying said uncertainly. "It's not the dual resonances... His resonant power is making those ingredients purer than they should be."

"It's a purity that matches the other fifth-grade resonance artificers. Very strange..."

Chi Chan was surprised by this. "How can that be? His first resonance is water, but the second is wood. Surely wood resonant power offers no help to making spirit liquids and purifying lights."

Ling Zhaoying shook her head to clear the irrational irritation she was feeling. "Well, in any case, the kid has some good foundations. He made a few mistakes at the start, but he adjusted quickly enough. I think this one should be a success. And I was right... that looks like a four-star formula to me."

Chi Chan was not surprised either. Li Luo was a third-grade resonance artificer, so a third-grade spirit liquid was just at the limit of what he could accomplish. Success was not guaranteed, but it was nothing surprising either.

Still, this wasn't the autobus. Just finishing was not enough.

The tempering strength was everything. It was a quantifiable mark of the strength of the villa you stood for.

Now that everyone had started with equal footing of a four-star formula, a third-grade resonance artificer like Li Luo should technically be far behind the other fifth-grade resonance artificers in terms of execution.

That was precisely why there were two number grades separating them.

As for the seventh-grade secret watersource, the other five fifth-grade artificers had them as well. How was Li Luo going to catch up?

Time ticked on, and the competition was almost at a close now.

As the cheers and yells rang out, Li Luo's resonant power suddenly roared forth in a majestic surge, and all the solutions rose up from their bottles to form an eddy in the air.

Within the ingredients, the resonant power was an anchor, holding them all together, polishing them until starlight began to glimmer and glow from within.

Finally, drops of dewy liquid began to trickle down into the crystal vial that Li Luo was holding out, already partially filled with the secret watersource that he had prepared.

Hiss!

A thin tendril of smoke rose out, still glittering with speckles of starlight. It danced on the rim of the vial like a freed fairy.

Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid, finally completed.

The entire audience gave him rapturous applause.

Li Luo finally noticed it, the sound returning to his ears and brain as his concentration faded away. He received it with a grateful smile. His schoolmates were awesome.

"All he made was a third-grade spirit liquid," Mei Xuan'er said, shaking her head in disgust. "From the way his fan club's going crazy, you'd have thought he beat all the other fifth-grade artificers."

"The results are not out yet," Li Bi chided, frowning. "So I don't see why you have to let your tongue loose already." She was getting annoyed by Mei Xuan'er's shrewish complaints.

"As if it makes a difference," Mei Xuan'er sniped back.

Li Bi remained silent, turning back to watch Li Luo walk towards the mentor on stage for the last step of the whole process.

The most important step of all.

The tempering strength test.

Chapter 0320: Stealing The Show

The crowd fell silent when the organizing mentor began to walk towards where the liquids and lights were arranged on a table. An excited hush swept across the crowd as they waited for the results.

The mentor first walked towards Hanzhi's platform. The latter took a welcoming step back, gesturing with a smile towards his creation.

The mentor nodded and picked up the spirit liquid, inserting the tempering measurement needle.

A few seconds passed.

The crowd was still eagerly silent.

"Bigswamp Villa, Hanzhi. Your spirit liquid has a tempering strength of... 66%," the mentor announced with a broad smile of approval.

A loud cheer sounded, and those well-versed in the business nodded in approval. A four-star formula for a third-grade spirit liquid should have an upper limit of about 70%. Hitting 66% already qualified it as an excellent spirit liquid.

Of course, Hanzhi was able to achieve this because he was a fifth-grade resonance artificer. A third-grade resonance artificer should only be able to reach about 63%.

Which was also the average standard of the Bigswamp Villa's Coarse Dust spirit liquid on the market.

After all, not even the Bigswamp Villa had the luxury to assign their fifth-grade resonance artificers to refine third-grade spirit liquids. It was not an efficient allocation of their manpower.

"Barring any sudden upsets, I think Hanzhi should be the highest scorer," Gui Xu told the First Princess. She nodded slightly in acknowledgment. Upsets... they were precisely things you could not predict after all.

"And Li Luo?"

Gui Xu snuck a look at her sideways. Somehow, she seemed very interested in the boy. Could there be something going on between them?

Gui Xu considered it for a moment. "Their only selling point is the upper seventh-grade secret watersource. If Li Luo is using a three-star formula, no amount of genius will push him past 60%—that's the upper limit of a three-star formula."

"And if Li Luo uses a four-star formula?"

"I haven't heard of the Suncreek Villa possessing a four-star formula," Gui Xu said, surprised.

"Just because you haven't heard of it doesn't mean they will never have one," the First Princess said with a slight smile. "Since Li Luo can pull an upper seventh-grade secret watersource out of his hat, who's to say he can't pull a four-star formula out of thin air too?"

Gui Xu rolled his eyes inwardly. The First Princess did not understand the liquids and lights industry. Formulas were worth millions of skygold. Each four-star formula was carefully tracked and monitored by the experts in the industry. A four-star formula pulled out of thin air? Impossible.

However, since the First Princess had pressed him for an answer, he had to reply, out of deference to her rank. "Even if Li Luo had a four-star formula, a third-grade resonance artificer like him would only be able to produce something between 60% and 62%. That's the insurmountable difference between him and the other fifth-grade resonance artificers like Hanzhi.

"If Li Luo achieves 63%, I would see that as a huge victory for him already. He would have essentially proven that he simply lacks the experience as a resonance artificer. It would indicate that he can match their results once he reaches the fourth-grade, which is something only geniuses among artificers can claim."

The First Princess nodded again.

Meanwhile on stage, even the organizing mentor could not resist a quick comment. "Congratulations," he said to Hanzhi.

As a resonance artificer himself, he knew that this result was impressive. Even before he tested the other artificers' products, he knew that Hanzhi's was likely to be the highest.

Hanzhi nodded back in courteous acknowledgment before turning to look at Li Luo.

Li Luo was busy stretching out the kinks in his back. That had been a really tiring process.

Sensing Hanzhi's gaze, he straightened up to look at him. "Hack you to death!" he mouthed silently.

Hanzhi's eyes flashed with anger. "Oh, Li Luo, your words might be full of fire, but they will not save you from your loss today." The mentor continued to test the creations of the other four fifth-grade resonance artificers.

"Ultraviolet Villa, Huangfu Xu. Tempering strength 64%.

"Arctic Blizzard Villa, Bing Ling. Tempering strength 65%.

"Inkwater Villa, Mo Tai. Tempering strength 64%.

"..."

The cheers rang out non-stop for them. Fifth-grade resonance artificers showing off their skills on a simple product had a charm to it, the pleasure of seeing a product finished to near-perfection. Of course, Hanzhi still remained at the top.

66% was still the highest so far.

After examining the other five artificers, the mentor finally reached Li Luo's refining platform. All eyes were on him now.

Everyone knew that this test was the real highlight of this competition.

Was the president of the Suncreek Villa really that confident? Or was it all just youthful bluster?

If it ended up being the former, the Suncreek Villa might well emerge from this competition as the ultimate winner. If it were the latter, they would be laughed out of the Fair.

"Go ahead, Mentor," Li Luo said casually, handing over his Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid.

"Well, don't be too stressed, young man. Take it as a challenge against fifth-grade artificers."

Li Luo nodded breezily.

The moment the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid was placed in his hand, the mentor sensed something different. From the pale shine of the liquid, he could tell that this spirit liquid was something special.

His eyes widened in surprise.

The rising scent was pure and thick—far beyond the quality a three-star formula could hope to achieve!

Quickly, he dipped the tempering measurement needle in, and his eyes steadily grew rounder as the reading climbed.

63... 64... 65!

The needle slowed, but did not stop.

Finally, it climbed up to 66%!

That was on par with Hanzhi!

How was that possible?!

For one irrational moment, he thought that the tempering measurement needle was broken. But all of the tempering measurement needles he had prepared had been rigorously checked beforehand.

They were all custom-made, specially to avoid errors.

Which meant that Li Luo's spirit liquid was truly at 66% strength! It was not a three-star formula at all!

With his years of experience in the industry, he knew that this was nothing less than a four-star formula!

Apparently, Li Luo had not brought a knife to the gunfight after all.

But that could not be right. Even a four-star formula should not have been able to reach 66% in the hands of a third-grade artificer!

All of these fifth-grade artificers had four-star formulas as well, but only Hanzhi had made it to 66%. What was Li Luo's edge?

The mentor stood rooted to the spot, reeling from the shock.

"Mentor, your announcement? Everyone's waiting," Li Luo said affably.

He jerked back to reality and stared at the silver-haired youth before him.

"Kid, you sure know how to steal the show."