

Resonance 321

Chapter 0321: Go Wild For Daddy

The mentor was supposed to announce the results, but he had gone silent. In the lapse, people were starting to speculate in whispers.

"Must be because the tempering strength's too low, and the mentor's trying to save Li Lost some face," Mei Xuan'er cackled.

Some of the Resonance Artificers Hall students gasped. Surely it couldn't be that bad, right?

Li Bi's eyes narrowed in curiosity. What had the mentor seen that had affected him so? She knew this mentor well, both in terms of personality and ability. He was the rather solid type, and there was not much that could shake him.

What was on that needle before him?

An atrociously low number? Or a magically high one?

These were the only two possibilities.

"You don't think Li Luo's done something insanely impressive, do you?" she asked Bing Tao.

Bing Tao patted her hair thoughtfully. "I don't see it happening... Something more impressive than what the five fifth-grade artificers could produce? That seems unreasonable."

Li Bi nodded. As a fifth-grade artificer herself, she knew that she would crush any puny third-grade artificer that came up against her. Besides... Li Luo wasn't even on the same starting line as the other resonance artificers.

He was surely using a three-star formula against their four-star formulas!

A poorer runner, and a disadvantaged starting position. This was one race he stood no chance of winning.

But if it wasn't insanely impressive, was it mournfully bad? Surely not. It wasn't as if Li Luo had just hawked and spat some saliva into the vial.

While Li Bi's musings were only half-invested, over at the Sun creek Villa's side, Yan Lingqing, Cai Wei, Tang Yun, and the others had forgotten how to breathe.

Cai Wei twisted her fan hard enough that the wood creaked in complaint. "What's that mentor up to? Trying to stoke some suspense?"

"Something must have happened," Yan Lingqing said with uncertainty.

Tang Yun sighed. It was probably nothing good...

Only Jiang Qing'e remained her usual, serene self, hands composed neatly in her lap as she patiently waited for the result to be revealed.

As agonizing as the wait felt, it was actually not that long. The mentor recovered quickly enough, then he lifted the tempering measurement needle high in the air.

"Suncreek Villa, Li Luo. Tempering strength... 66%!"

When his voice rang through the courtyard, a stunned silence greeted these words.

All eyes were on him, conveying only two types of emotion: disbelief and wild disbelief.

66%?!

Li Luo's third-grade spirit liquid was at sixty-whopping-six percent?!

Wasn't that on par with Hanzhi?!

Impossible!

"Impossible!" The cry came from many of the villas who were watching. They had been in the business for years. They knew very well just how ridiculous this was.

Over at the Skypalace Villa, Master Gui Xu was gaping like a goldfish. "But... That's... Surely... a mistake?"

Leaning back in her chair, the First Princess surveyed Li Luo over the tips of her crossed fingers. Somehow, the result was a surprise, yet also somehow not a surprise.

Li Luo had indeed come prepared.

She did not think that there had been a mistake. As a member of the Astral Sage College, she knew how qualified the mentors of the Resonance Artificers Hall were. It was unthinkable that they would make such elementary mistakes.

She was much less shocked than the others present. No one had expected a miracle from Li Luo, except those who had already seen him work one back in the Umbra Cave.

Still... even the First Princess was awed. This Li Luo—if she hadn't reached out to him, she wouldn't know that he was electrically charged with a thousand volts of surprise power. He was like a treasure trove—you could keep digging, and still there would still be more to uncover.

House Luolan might have lost its two house lords, but these two young stewards were slowly but surely shoring up the foundations around their fallen castle. The First Princess felt sure that given enough time, House Luolan would see glorious days again.

And yet it was precisely time that they lacked the most.

She frowned slightly. Half a year. Although her royal uncle currently wielded most of the power in the royal court, she was still the First Princess and also sister by kin to the emperor. She knew the situation that House Luolan was in.

House Luolan had a secret chamber, and it was housing an item that even Dukes drooled over. And yet that chamber sat unguarded by a proper Duke. Only defensive wards stood around it, and that was not enough to deter the covetous ill-wishers.

They circled the house like hungry sharks, and even she was a little afraid of how many there were.

Not even she could say how House Luolan would end up in half a year's time.

...

"66?! You must be JOKING!" Duze Beixuan had fallen out of his chair, his face as shocked as if someone had just punched him. He kicked the chair aside. "That bastard Li Luo must have cheated! He must have bribed the mentor..."

Duze Honglian was stunned as well, but she quickly recovered. "Silence!" she commanded icily.

What an idiot of a brother. How could he possibly accuse the Resonance Artificers Hall mentor? If the Resonance Artificers Hall took offense, the Bigswamp Villa would never see another artificer walk through their doors.

Duze Beixuan came to his senses. He righted his chair and sank back down into it reluctantly. "Li Luo is just a third-grade artificer with no four-star formula. How can he possibly compete with Hanzhi in tempering skill?!"

Duze Honglian took a deep breath. "I don't know either," she said calmly. "But quell your rage. It does us no good.

"I told you, the boy is fey. Be on guard against him at all times."

Duze Beixuan noted his sister's words with dismay. Surely there had to be a limit to how much of a monster Li Luo could be.

This wasn't even logical, damn it!

The crowd broke out into an uproar, disbelief and excitement rippling through their ranks as it built to a vibrating crescendo.

Yu Lang grandly leaped to his feet. He spiked his hair up grandly, then he planted his hands on his hips. "LET IT GO!" he yelled. "GO WILD FOR DADDY! DON'T HOLD BACK YOUR EMOTIONS!"

Literally everyone gave him weird looks.

This guy had lost his mind.

On the stage, Chi Chan smiled behind her veil. "Well?" she asked Ling Zhaoying. "Exceeded your expectations?"

Ling Zhaoying's beautiful features were creased in a small, defeated smile.

"Interesting.

"Why does House Luolan produce so many monsters?"

Chapter 0322: Sixty Six

When the mentor announced Li Luo's result, the disbelief that greeted this declaration was resounding and expected.

Hanzhi was the most flabbergasted. He wanted to ask the mentor if he had seen the needle wrongly. Perhaps it was 56 and not 66.

Understanding the disbelief and uncertainty in the audience, the mentor spoke again without prompting. "Suncreek Villa, Li Luo. Tempering strength 66%. No error!"

The crowd's uproar subsided a little.

With this confirmation, there was no more room for doubt.

Hanzhi's face was contorting and twitching uncontrollably. He could not accept this outcome.

He could not believe that a mere third-grade artificer had managed to equal his result.

On what basis?!

He had used a four-star formula! The Suncreek Villa's upper seventh-grade secret watersource was not that much better than the lower seventh-grade secret watersource that the Bigswamp Villa had provided him. It was impossible for Li Luo to pull ahead because of that.

And no amount of artificing talent could have closed the gap either!

Although their tempering strength was the same, this was a terrible humiliation for Hanzhi. Fifth-grade against third? No matter how thick his skin, he could never declare this a draw.

Not if he had any pride or respect for the effort he had spent achieving the last two grades.

However, Hanzhi's devastation was not yet complete. The mentor started speaking again. "I declare the third-grade round of the Artificers' Fair closed. The results are in, and the final winner is the Suncreek Villa's Li Luo.

"Although both him and Bigswamp Villa's Hanzhi achieved 66% tempering strength, Li Luo's needle is slightly higher. In accordance with the rules, I declare him the winner."

He pulled out two more tempering measurement needles and stuck them into the two spirit liquids again, lifting up the result as clear confirmation.

The truth was plain for all to see. Indeed, both spirit liquids had reached the 66% mark, but Li Luo's was slightly higher.

It was an insignificant difference, one that would usually be ignored. But this was a competition, and precision counted.

Li Luo's win was well-deserved and rightful.

However, this was the final straw that broke Hanzhi. His rationality bubbled over, and his friendly smile turned into a snarl as he shook with rage.

Losing to a third-grade resonance artificer? How would he ever face the world again?

He was already experiencing a lot of friction in his relationships with the Bigswamp Villa's artificers. They had said many unkind things to him ever since he arrived. And with this crushing defeat, he could only imagine how much worse his days at the Bigswamp Villa would get.

"CHEAT! He must have cheated!" Hanzhi could bear it no longer, his voice rising to a hysterical pitch.

"Mentor, you are a resonance artificer too! You must know that it's impossible for a third-grade resonance artificer to make a 66% third-grade spirit liquid! How can a third-grade formula produce 66% anyway!?"

With each accusation, Hanzhi's finger jabbed accusingly at both Li Luo and the mentor.

The other five resonance artificers nodded in agreement as well. They could not accept the fact that they had all lost to a third-grade artificer.

The mentor turned to Li Luo. "I'm sure you can explain this?" he offered mildly.

Li Luo had laid low just for this moment. Now was the moment. "Thank you, Mentor!"

Li Luo smiled gratefully and nodded to the mentor in appreciation as he stepped forward to the center. The crowd hung on his every move.

"Hark, the traitorous ex-president of the Suncreek Villa speaks. Indeed, when your poisonous fumes hung in our air, we only had three-star formulas. But after you burned down the Suncreek Villa's laboratories, we rebuilt from square one. Thanks to our benefactor, we were able to obtain a four-star formula at her great expense.

"That is why I call this spirit liquid the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid.

"And now you can have my heartfelt appreciation if you stop looking at us as a broken villa, broken while you were captain at our helm."

The mentor blew out some air through puffed cheeks. That was a lot of damage. Li Luo had managed to deftly pack a condensed summary of Hanzhi's crimes into his explanation.

Burning down research labs was quite a travesty in the world of spirit liquids and purifying lights. Everyone understood how difficult and precious research was. Hanzhi jumping ship was not a problem, but firing the deck before you jumped was just blatantly callous.

Of course, the powerful factions in Xia City knew of it, but many of the Resonance Artificers Hall students had not known. Li Luo's words brought a fresh wave of hostility against Hanzhi.

At the same time, sympathy for the Suncreek Villa arose.

Hanzhi clenched his fists tightly, a tight knot of horror and panic within him. Li Luo had twisted a knife in his reputation. He would forever be ruined in the world of spirit liquids and purifying lights in the Xia Kingdom.

"Who would think that such a vile, traitorous, spiteful, emotionless, wretch was amidst us all along!" an anguished voice cried out.

"You've brought shame to all resonance artificers! If I were one myself, I would rather turn down employment than work in the same lab as you! Who's to say you wouldn't burn it down with me inside!"

The crowd turned in surprise to the owner of this impassioned outburst. They saw a youth seized in the moment, his eyes wild with emotion.

"Ah, don't look at me," he said in a voice most humble and noble. "I am just an unrelated audience member with a sense of justice."

The students near him snorted. "Weren't you just exhorting students to go wild for daddy a moment ago?"

"Do you think all of us have the memory of a bee?"

"F*cking Yu Lang!"

Duze Beixuan felt like his liver was on the verge of bursting. That cheeky punk was happily leading the Bigswamp Villa's artificers' minds in the direction of resignation.

Duze Honglian's expression was grim as well. Li Luo and Yu Lang were the perfect duo to play off each other. Even if they dissociated themselves completely from Hanzhi now, the Bigswamp Villa would still be affected.

It was... vexing.

On stage, Hanzhi was a quivering mess of rage, and he pressed on. "Li Luo, even with a four-star formula, there is no way you could have achieved 66% tempering strength!" he spat. "There has to be more!"

The other artificers nodded in agreement.

Li Luo's smile only grew wider, and he looked at the raving Hanzhi almost kindly.

Where else would he find such a good partner to work with him?

"If it wasn't for the fact that you burned down our labs, I would have thought that you were actually our ally."

He coughed once for attention, then he turned to the crowd and bowed slightly while beaming brightly.

"And now I would like to make an announcement.

"After half a year of growing our business and developing, we finally have made some modest accomplishments. I would like to present it before all of you today."

Li Luo fished out a crystal vial, showing them all the sparkling liquid within.

All eyes were on it.

Some had already guessed.

"Indeed, perhaps some of you can recognize it... It is nothing special, really, just a bit of our secret watersource."

Li Luo smiled, savoring the moment. "However, there's just one teensy, little thing...

"It is an eighth-grade watersource."

Chapter 0323: Plentiful Supply

Eighth-grade purity for a secret watersource!

Li Luo's words were met with a sharp collective gasp. Some of the other villas' participants leaped to their feet, thoroughly unsettled.

The Cultivators Hall students might not fully understand the implications of this declaration, but they enjoyed the bizarre reactions of the resonance artificers all the more for it.

"My God!"

Yan Lingqing's pretty, little mouth was currently wide enough to put an entire fist in.

She was wildly delighted when Li Luo revealed the four-star formula. To think that he would also have an eighth-grade secret watersource!

She felt like she was floating on air.

"Cai Wei, quick, bite me! Make sure I'm not in a dream!" Yan Lingqing thrust her hand in front of Cai Wei's face.

Cai Wei gave her a withering look, then one hand shot out to pinch her snow-white cheek like a crab's claw. She gave it a good, hard twist to add some color to Yan Lingqing's complexion.

"Owie!!"

Yan Lingqing's eyes watered from the pain, and she glared at Cai Wei.

Cai Wei giggled. Truth be told, she was in a strange state of mind as well. It felt like it was raining pizzas, and she had wondered if she was in a dream herself. But it was too painful to pinch herself, and since Yan Lingqing had volunteered...

"Qing'e, did you know about this already?" Cai Wei asked the girl who had been sitting there calmly since the beginning.

"How dare you keep it from us! We were wilting away from the anxiety!" Yan Lingqing burst out.

"I only knew he had a four-star formula as well. Not about the secret watersource," Jiang Qing'e said soothingly.

"But Li Luo isn't the reckless type. Since he pushed to get this chance, I guessed that he had something else prepared. That's why I wasn't too worried."

Tang Yun had finally recovered enough to speak. "The Young Lord is a genius. With this four-star formula and an eighth-grade secret watersource, the Suncreek Villa will rise like never before!"

The other resonance artificers cheered as well. An eighth-grade secret watersource should have been far beyond their reach, but now the young lord had delivered it straight to them!

Which meant that they could get a share of it in the future, right? Even one tiny sample would be enough to satisfy them.

At this moment, they were incredibly thankful that they had chosen to join the Suncreek Villa.

Yu Lang nodded with satisfaction. "The guy's got promise. Looks like he managed to learn quite a bit from hanging around me. Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid, eh... hey! It sounds like your name, Mengmeng!"

Bai Mengmeng gave him an earnest smile. "I made it, so Leader said he would name it after me as thanks."

"Li Luo, you bastard!"

"Eh?" Lu Qing'er's unfriendly interest shifted to their direction as well.

"Friend Yu Lang, I think you should watch your words," Bai Mengmeng said innocently to him. "Or I will tell my sister."

Yu Lang almost choked on his next insult. "Alright, calm down, don't be hasty. We wouldn't want to cause any deaths today, would we?"

Lu Qing'er pursed her lips. She knew that Bai Mengmeng had made the formula and gifted it to Li Luo, but to think that Li Luo would name it after her...

This little girl looked sweet and harmless, but she was clearly not one to hold back either. ...

"Eighth-grade watersource..."

The Duze siblings were completely thrown off by the revelation. This was even more sensational than him acquiring a four-star formula.

"How did he get something that pure?" Duze Beixuan croaked.

Duze Honglian rubbed her brow tiredly. Even she felt like cussing right about now. Was Li Luo some sort of portal to a world of treasures? It sure felt like he could pull them out whenever he wanted. After all their years of effort and mountains of skygold poured into research, the Bigswamp Villa's four-star formulas could be counted on one's fingers. In half a year, Li Luo's Suncreek Villa had already come up with one?

The secret watersource was even worse. His upper seventh-grade secret watersource had always been a threat, and now he had elevated it to an eighth-grade?!

Did he think he was some sort of cotton-candy seller? A new variation every day!

Only the strongest of all the villas, the Skypalace Villa, had an eighth-grade secret watersource. None of the other villas had such a treasure!

That was how rare it was.

And somehow, according to Li Luo, they had made it in half a year?! Bullsh*t!

"No wonder he managed to reach 66%." Duze Honglian sighed. The whole picture was clear now. With the help of a four-star formula and the eighth-grade secret watersource, Li Luo had managed to overcome the disparity between their artificing skills.

"The Bigswamp Villa lost badly this time." It felt almost biblical—Sun creek David taking down Bigswamp Goliath.

Duze Beixuan slapped a chair out of sheer frustration. The Sun creek Villa had always been a centerpiece target in their strategy against their rival, House Luolan. It had been going well so far, although inciting Hanzhi's betrayal had come at a hefty price. They had reasoned it out as a crucial step towards putting the Sun creek Villa in the coffin, but now the necromancer Li Luo had brought them back from the dead.

The bastard had to be possessed by the gods or something!

"Well?"

The First Princess inclined her head to look at an astounded Gui Xu.

"Well, there's nothing to say," he said with an arrested expression. "Four-star formula, eighth-grade secret watersource... who pulls these things casually out of the air?"

"Our own Skypalace secret watersource came at an astronomical price. You know that best, Your Highness."

She nodded. "Li Luo could not have acquired it. I suspect his parents might have left it to him."

The two enigmatic House Lords... it was possible that they had left many treasures to their heir.

Gui Xu nodded. "Regardless, now the Sun creek Villa has all the needed components to be a real powerhouse. They might even become a threat to us."

He lowered his voice. "Should we... do something about that? House Luolan and the Sun creek Villa are plagued by vicious storms at present, and it is always easy to act in troubled times." The Skypalace Villa was backed by the royal court of the Xia Kingdom. If the First Princess so chose, they could crush the Sun creek Villa easily.

"I have my own plans," the First Princess said coolly to him. "Don't act on your own accord."

Gui Xu nodded hastily, chastened.

She was trying to befriend Jiang Qing'e due to her staggering potential, so she would definitely be treating House Luolan well. Furthermore, there was the business of Li Luo treating the emperor's natural illness. That alone would stop her from doing him harm.

There were bigger fish to fry, especially in half a year's time, when everything would change.

It was also the time when the Regent would hand over the rulership back to the emperor. She did not know if her uncle would do so, but she was moving in the shadows to make preparations...

...

The eighth-grade secret watersource was a trump card that blew everyone out of the water.

It had also blown Hanzhi's mind.

He stared at the secret watersource in Li Luo's hand in horrified fascination. He had never seen such a wondrous thing before.

"Was that from the two House Lords?

"WHY! If only they had revealed it earlier, I would have led the Suncreek Villa to become the greatest villa in the Xia Kingdom. Why would I have ever betrayed you?!" Hanzhi howled.

He had only abandoned the Suncreek Villa because it had no future. If only he had known that Li Luo would pull out an eighth-grade secret watersource!

Not even the Bigswamp Villa had such a resource!

He stood there, waves of regret and frustration coursing through him.

Li Luo ignored the traitor. He turned to the gathered Resonance Artificers Hall students with a bright and welcoming smile.

"Esteemed senior brothers and sisters. The Suncreek Villa did not choose to participate in this fair for fun.

"As the president of Suncreek Villa, I extend our official invitation to all of you. Although the Suncreek Villa is small and lacks the illustrious history our friends here provide," he said while gesturing around, "we do have one small advantage...

"For example..."

He lifted the secret watersource high up in the air, and they were enthralled by the little vial of liquid diamond. He grinned widely, like the big, bad wolf ready to pounce on Little Red Riding Hood.

"Our secret watersource is in plentiful supply."

Chapter 0324: Flavor of the Month: Suncreek

Li Luo's juicy announcement was received with a few chuckles that were not at all malicious. Rather, they were thoughtful chuckles from the Resonance Artificers Hall students who were now interested.

The Suncreek Villa was indeed much weaker than its competitors... for now. With their four-star formula and an eighth-grade secret watersource, their rise was only a matter of time.

And just like Li Luo had said, the Suncreek Villa was small, and their talent pool was small. Which meant plenty of eighth-grade secret watersource for them to use.

That was the biggest draw.

After all, why would resonance artificers want to go to the best villas? It was exactly because they could provide the watersource that would help them improve their refining arts the quickest.

But the competition against colleagues in those villas was cutthroat. A newbie would not get access to those premium resources immediately. They would have to work their way up. In comparison, they could skip this entire trial by fire if they went to the Suncreek Villa.

Of course they would be tempted!

Suddenly, the Suncreek Villa didn't look like a broken-down amateur lab anymore...

Li Bi blew out a long breath. It was finally starting to sink in. She looked at Li Luo with renewed amazement.

He had actually done it!

She had been extremely disappointed when she heard that Li Luo would compete, thinking that he was going to make a farce out of it. But now she stood corrected, and she flushed a little with embarrassment.

From beside her, somebody squooshed her in a tight hug.

She started a little, but she recognized that it as her friend Bing Tao, who was squealing with excitement.

"What's up with you?" Li Bi asked.

"Oh, Ah Bi, you're a genius!" Bing Tao gushed. "You could tell that the Suncreek Villa was so strong? Was it Li Luo who confided everything in you?" Her voice was loud enough that others were turning around to look.

Li Bi felt a little embarrassed, but she did not show it. "Well, Junior Li Luo came to find me personally. Of course he told me... things."

She was not lying outright. Li Luo had indeed told her that the Suncreek Villa would bring an eighth-grade secret water source... although she had not believed it.

No one would have, in her circumstances. If you had to choose just one other villa besides the Skypalace Villa to have it, no one in their right mind would have guessed the Suncreek Villa.

"Ah Bi, are you going to join the Suncreek Villa?" Bing Tao asked brightly.

Li Bi hesitated. She hadn't rejected Li Luo outright, although she hadn't accepted either. Before this competition, she could have changed that state of affairs as she wished, but with the Suncreek Villa's landslide victory here, perhaps she didn't have that much of a say now. Sure, she was a fifth-grade artificer, but there were other fifth-grade artificers as well, and surely they were all interested.

So the question was not just whether she was interested, but whether they were still willing as well...

Although her feeling was that Li Luo would likely be agreeable, she did not dare to speak too boldly before things were confirmed. It would be embarrassing if things didn't go well!

"Probably," she hedged.

"Hehe, then help me tell Junior Li Luo that we're interested in joining too." Bing Tao said, giving her another big squeeze.

"Ooh yes, yes!" A few of their other friends nodded eagerly as well, eyes shining.

Looking at them, Li Bi felt a sudden tingle of irritation. "I'm not even in yet myself, and I'm supposed to speak up for all of you?"

"Surely there's no need..." she stammered. "Don't you all have much better choices?"

"Aw, there's nothing better than the Suncreek Villa out there. Not even the Skypalace Villa. They're strong, but we'll be plankton in that pond. The seniors will squeeze us dry. But I hear that the Suncreek Villa only has fourth-grade artificers right now. We'll be the gang bosses!" Bing Tao whooped.

"The only reason we all wanted to choose the Skypalace Villa was for their eighth-grade secret watersource. If the Suncreek Villa has one as well, it's the much easier route up."

The others nodded eagerly in agreement.

Li Bi grimaced. From disdain to puppyish adoration—the contrast was all too drastic. Still, it was understandable. No one could have predicted this outcome, herself included.

"I'll help you ask," she conceded with a sigh. "But if you're rejected, don't blame me."

They all nodded happily. None of them knew Li Luo personally, while Li Bi had been invited by him to chat personally before. Her help was definitely going to be a better way in compared to a cold application.

"The world is a strange place," Li Bi mused to herself. The Suncreek Villa had gone from obscure villa to flavor of the month.

She looked over again at the silver-haired youth, his cool, confident smile and good looks. Suddenly, she felt that working under him was going to be great.

She snuck a look at Mei Xuan'er. The fire had leached out of her, and now she was sitting woodenly on her chair, trying her best to blend into the furniture. The Resonance Artificers Hall students around her were looking at her with amusement as well.

The higher one flew, the harder they would fall.

Li Bi privately thought that if she had been in Mei Xuan'er's position, the embarrassment would have been enough to spur her on to dig a hole big enough to fit a two-acre mansion. Still, she was no friend of Mei Xuan'er's. The girl's poisonous words had been as much aimed at her as they had been targeting the Suncreek Villa.

Just desserts.

Li Luo was reading the students' reception of his statement, and he was getting a good vibe. He had successfully completed his mission here at the Artificers' Fair.

If all went well, the Suncreek Villa should soon be expanding rapidly. It would be an injection of talent far beyond the boost that Tang Yun and the others had provided.

It was a little cruel to compare, but Tang Yun and the others were chaff compared to the fine seeds of the Resonance Artificers Hall.

Although, this also meant that the demand for the secret watersource from the Suncreek Villa would increase sharply.

Li Luo's grin subsided a little, and he knocked on his waist with his fists. Such a heavy burden for one so young... "Good job, me. Dad, Mom, I'm almost sure that you two ran away because you didn't want to deal with this mess..."

Li Luo sighed as he took his leave.

Now he could turn his attention to his own improvement. He had to keep up with the Sun creek Villa's progress, or he would be wrung drier than a desert towel.

Chapter 0325: Brother and Sister

The Sun creek Villa had no more business at this fair, because the fourth and fifth-grade rounds were beyond their level.

It had taken all of the stars to align for them to even compete at the third-grade level. Without all of those conditions met, there was no way they could even begin to contest.

For now, it was enough. With the Budding Butterfly Spirit Liquid, they could take a large share of the third-grade spirit liquid market.

That was enough to shoot them up to a good standing.

Li Luo returned to the Sun creek Villa's zone, where he received a hero's welcome. Tang Yun and the others regarded him with burning passion.

They would have brought out the drums and gongs in celebration, but they had to take where they were into consideration.

"Well, Cai Wei? Any comments on this blackhole of spirit liquids?" Li Luo asked smugly.

Cai Wei was all charm now, her fan framing her face at her most favorable angle. "Young Lord, you were amazing," she said, large eyes glowing.

"From now on, the Sun creek Villa will definitely need much more secret watersource, so we're counting on you to produce at full capacity. If the artificers riot because we're out of watersource, that would be a disaster."

There was a teasing look in her eyes.

Li Luo's smugness evaporated. Cai Wei was not one to mess with. She had gone straight for his jugular.

Before he could reply, Yan Lingqing had grabbed him by the lapels. "Oh, well done, Li Luo!" she said with fake anger. "Well done not telling us and worrying us sick! Do you even trust us at all?"

Li Luo looked straight into her eyes. "Sister Lingqing," he said sincerely, "your words wound me. Without you, the Sun creek Villa would have closed its doors a long time ago. If I didn't trust you, who would I trust?"

"Pretty words," she said, mollified. He was very handsome, and his face was very close.

She flushed a little and pushed him away.

"Your seduction skills are growing by the day," Cai Wei ribbed him. "Even Lingqing's affected now."

Yan Lingqing huffed, then beat Li Luo's chest with a small fist. "I'll let you go this time, but if you hide anything from me again, I'll make sure you regret it," she pretended to threaten.

Li Luo quickly nodded. "It will be as you say. But for now can you go list those students interested in joining us? You're a Resonance Artificers Hall student as well, so you know them best. See who's a good fit in both ability and character."

"You sure know how to think of me... when there's work to be done," she grumbled.

"Hey, this should be a happy task. I'm giving it especially to you, so you can take all the revenge you want. Remember all those who were mocking you about a crater? Now's your chance to show them!" Li Luo said, cleverly flipping it around.

"Your foot must be itching to deliver two good kicks to that Mei Xuan'er. What better time to do it?"

Yan Lingqing's eyes lit up at the prospect. Indeed, now that they had won, the task should be pretty sweet.

"Alright, I'll do it for Qing'e's sake," she said huffily.

Li Luo grinned and gave her a thumbs up. The girl's fake-angry look was quite cute.

Recruitment delegated, Li Luo turned to Jiang Qing'e. "Well, what did you think of my performance?"

Jiang Qing'e looked at her fiancée, puffed up like a peacock, and could barely hold her smile down.

"Perfect. I couldn't have done it better myself.

"Like I told you before, Li Luo, you're as good as anyone else around, myself included. Actually, I think you've done more for House Luolan in the last half a year than me.

"Those are all my most sincere words. Feel good?" She smiled.

Li Luo breathed in deeply, his face ecstatic. "Feels terrific."

Hearing those glowing words of praise from the proud and reticent plump swan was a rare treat indeed. It made all that hard work feel worth it.

She was just too brilliant herself. Besides spirit liquids and purifying lights, Li Luo was still behind her in every other aspect.

"That's all you need to be satisfied?"

"Keep at it," she said with another small smile. "If we can steer House Luolan clear of the troubles half a year from now, those few words of praise will be nothing compared to what you'll get."

"Ah, and what is it I will be getting?" Li Luo asked.

Jiang Qing'e gave it a quick think, then she lowered her voice. "We could even get married on the spot."

Li Luo's head almost blew up from the excitement, but he calmed himself down quickly. "No."

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"The steps are not right. Like I said before, we have to cancel the engagement first. And then you can write me another one. That's a proper engagement," Li Luo said seriously.

To anyone else, it might have sounded as unnecessary as taking off one's pants to fart, but both Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e understood the difference.

And the significance.

"Must we really?" she asked softly. "In my heart, you will always be the most important person, Li Luo. I would even die to protect you."

"And I you, Qing'e," he replied with a tender smile.

The two locked eyes, then Jiang Qing'e felt a sudden surge of irritation. She reached out a hand to pinch Li Luo's ear.

He did not avoid it, but he felt a little uncertain. He remembered how she always went for the ear during their childhood squabbles.

But now there was only a warm caress, and no pain. She gently rubbed his ear, the gesture incredibly intimate.

Angry jealous hisses came from the students around them.

Damn, if they had known this would happen, they wouldn't have cheered for the guy!

Lu Qing'er was grinding her teeth flat as well. "Sly Senior Jiang, using your position to take advantage of Li Luo!"

Bai Mengmeng propped her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her hands. "They're really adorable. You know what Leader and Senior Jiang look like?"

Lu Qing'er stared frostily at her.

"Brother and sister, yes."

Chapter 0326: Celebration

The Artificers' Fair ended as a success.

As a competitor, Li Luo spectated the fourth and fifth-grade competitions, and was blown away by the difference in standard. He was humbled by how far the Suncreek Villa still had to go.

Still, they had shown great potential, and with the eighth-grade secret watersource, they had a solid foundation now.

He believed that they would make it to the top before too long.

When the Artificers' Fair concluded, each villa left with new recruits. The two biggest winners were the Suncreek Villa and the Skypalace Villa. The latter was a long-time hot favorite, dominating the previous competitions.

The former was a dark horse, outpacing everyone save the champion.

Seeing Yan Lingqing surrounded by a throng of students, Li Luo felt a warm flush of satisfaction.

And then he and Jiang Qing'e watched heads turn as the First Princess made her way over to them.

"Congratulations to the both of you. The Suncreek Villa has made waves here today," the First Princess said with a small smile, fresh as a spring breeze.

"You flatter us, Your Highness. We were merely lucky, whereas the Skypalace Villa is actually strong," Jiang Qing'e replied.

"Junior Li Luo, your popularity has been through the roof recently." The First Princess laughed.

"Eh, I was just a product of the circumstances. If I could live a quiet life as an heir to Dukes, I would be more than happy to stop risking my neck." He sighed theatrically.

"Heir to Dukes, hmm? Very droll," she noted. Li Luo had an amusing way of speaking sometimes.

"I hear that the Gilded Palace has already decided on the reward for your heroic acts in the Umbra Cave."

Li Luo perked up immediately. Obviously, the First Princess had a much more extensive and sensitive information network. He hadn't heard a thing about it yet.

He was actually quite anxious to know the answer. He was counting on it to help him with his hollow foundation problem. Although he was still some ways away from reaching the General Stage, it was a serious problem best dealt with sooner than later. Who knew what other problems would crop up later?

"Seems like the 100,000-point reward is coming." The First Princess did not beat around the bush. Li Luo heaved a huge sigh of relief inwardly.

"Many thanks for the information, Your Highness," Li Luo said gratefully, his happiness spreading across his face.

"The news would have come tomorrow at latest anyway. It wasn't much."

The First Princess turned to Jiang Qing'e with a half-smile. "Qing'e, I wanted to borrow Li Luo tomorrow."

"Is it about His Majesty's healing?"

The First Princess nodded. "It's been more than a month since the last time. But this time we cannot go out, so Li Luo would have to go to the palace."

"Sure," Jiang Qing'e replied easily. "No problem."

"Then I'll take him to the palace tomorrow."

After a few short exchanges, Li Luo's schedule for the next day was suddenly settled. It made him feel incredibly ignored, but he held his tongue. Still, who did they think was the acting head of House Luolan, damn it!

The two chatted a bit more, then the First Princess left.

"We should celebrate tonight," Li Luo said to Jiang Qing'e. "And gather the interested students as well. Get some networking going. Are you coming? I've already made preparations." Jiang Qing'e was usually not interested in such things, but this was an unusual victory that meant much for the Sun creek Villa, so she smiled and nodded.

"Quite confident in yourself, I see. To even have the celebration planned beforehand," she observed.

Li Luo grinned. Of course he was confident. A four-star formula and an eighth-grade secret water source? All they had on him was experience, and he even had a waterlight resonance that no one knew about.

As time passed, the throng of students around Yan Lingqing swelled to a ridiculous size.

"That many?" Li Luo exclaimed.

"There's probably quite a few that aren't graduating yet in the mix as well," Jiang Qing'e said, looking closely. "Lingqing's smart enough to get the recruitment started early. It saves us time next year, and they might be able to help us out with part-time work as well."

Li Luo was impressed. Lingqing had always been thorough that way. She had spent three years at the Resonance Artificers Hall, so she understood the talent pool well. She was truly the best person to handle recruitment.

"Li Luo, what do you think of my work?" Yan Lingqing strutted over with an army behind her.

Li Luo gave her a big thumbs up, then he smiled at the girl by Yan Lingqing's side. "Senior Li Bi, I wasn't bragging now, was I?"

Li Bi reddened slightly. "I was shortsighted," she said generously. "The President's skills are incredible." She had even called him "President."

"We'll be counting on all of you to bring the Sun creek Villa up from now on." Li Luo welcomed all of them with a smile.

"Today is a blessed day for the Sun creek Villa. If you aren't busy, please join me for a great celebration feast tonight. We'll drink until we drop!" Li Luo declared. Then they cheered.

Next, Li Luo went around to invite the MVP Bai Mengmeng, runner-up MVP Lu Qing'er, and the cheerleaders led by Yu Lang.

They were the center of attention here.

Most of the villas were run by middle-aged people, and they had other business to tend to. They did not linger after their business here was concluded. Unlike them, Li Luo was only a student at the Astral Sage College, so he did not need to care about those things.

Duze Beixuan and Duze Honglian watched the lively crowd from a distance, their faces equally sour. It seemed like the Sun creek Villa was now impregnable.

"Damn, we had them on the ropes. How did they make a comeback in just six months?" Duze Beixuan cursed.

"As if you don't know the answer yourself," his sister said peevishly.

"I swear, Li Luo's even more troublesome than Jiang Qing'e," Duzé Beixuan complained.

Duzé Honglian was of the same mind. When Jiang Qing'e was at the helm, House Luolan had managed to stay afloat, but barely. It had always been House Duzé coming out ahead, making the moves and making steady progress.

Ever since Li Luo came to Xia City, it had been House Luolan with the initiative.

The boy was really a demon.

Hanzhi had come skulking back to them now, and he could feel the prickling looks of the other artificers on him.

"Young Mistress, Young Lord, I have failed the Bigswamp Villa. I was useless. Please allow me to retire," Hanzhi said bitterly.

He knew that things would be awkward at the Bigswamp Villa if he stayed.

Duzé Beixuan swung on him, happy to finally have an outlet to vent on, but Duzé Honglian cut him off with a warning hand. "Vice President Hanzhi, leaving immediately after failing is not a wise choice. The struggle between the Bigswamp Villa and the Sun creek Villa is not yet over. If I were you, I would continue to bide my time."

Hanzhi looked up at her in wonder. "I'll die for you and yours, Young Mistress!" he vowed with feeling.

She nodded impassively, then turned away.

The loyalty of a proven traitor meant nothing to her, but it did not matter. She did not intend to let Hanzhi go, because he still represented a mark of shame for the Sun creek Villa.

He had value in that aspect. It was better to hold on to him for now.

Although, she still had the same thought as her brother...

"How did you lose that one? Useless bum!"

Chapter 0327: Slimeball

The next day, Li Luo realized that someone had glued his eyelids shut.

Ah, no, it was just that they were extremely heavy. He opened them and stared at the familiar ceiling above his bed. His tongue had been cut.

Ah, no, it was just cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He pried it off and groaned. His throat was dry as a desert, and his head was throbbing with a marvelous hangover.

Memories of the previous night came flooding back to him.

An unrestrained celebration, a mad run straight into drunkenness.

How on earth had he made it back?

He did the hardest sit-up of his life, and was shocked to see himself in his usual pajamas. His body looked thoroughly clean, and his clothes even had a nice fragrance lingering on them.

After scrambling up to his feet, he washed up and changed into clean working clothes. As his resonant power healing started to kick in, the throbbing in his head subsided.

His mind was clearing as well.

He pushed the door open.

He immediately spotted Xin Fu, bent over a canvas and drawing furiously. Li Luo hesitated, then he decided to ask, "Who changed my clothes yesterday?"

Xin Fu barely spared him a glance. "That depends if you're talking about outer wear or underwear."

"Huh???"

"At first it was Lu Qing'er who helped you take off your outer clothes," Xin Fu said patiently, still drawing as though he had all the time in the world. "But later, she was chased out by Senior Jiang, and then everything else was her.

"She helped you clean your body and get you into pajamas. Oh, she also spent the night here, in Mengmeng's room."

Li Luo was extremely confused. He felt very touched but also very... touched all over. She had seen everything and touched everything?!

That sucked! She had taken advantage of him!

Xin Fu looked up at his confused expression. "Leader, best keep such things to yourself," he advised. "If you tell anyone else, I'm afraid you'll be beaten to death before the day is over."

Li Luo stared at him loftily. "What's wrong with a fiancée cleaning her fiancé's body?"

And then he whirled around haughtily and headed down the stairs.

Xin Fu noted the spring in Li Luo's step as he headed down the stairs. "Tsk, lying man." The first thing Li Luo saw in the hall was Jiang Qing'e sitting near the window. She was not in her customary light armor and battle skirt. Today she was in a form-fitting blouse and trousers that softened her entire look.

The morning sun streaming in wreathed her curvy figure in long shadows and bathed her in a mellow, golden hue. She was a stirring sight.

Li Luo was about to greet her when he spotted another person. This one was in black, and she had a dry but classy manner about her. Mentor Chi Chan.

The two were sitting opposite each other at the table, steam rising in small wisps from their cups of hot tea.

Hearing his footsteps, they turned to him as one.

Li Luo smiled at them, then sat down at the table. "Good morning, both of you."

"Your heroics yesterday even had Dean Ling's attention." Chi Chan laughed.

"And so she's declared that she's dying to have me enroll in Resonance Artificers Hall?"

Chi Chan's smile faded away. "Still drunk? Is your ego inflated with booze or something?"

"You mean I still can't compete with Sister Qing'e's ninth-grade light resonance?" he asked forlornly.

Chi Chan shook her head. "Looks like it's not just your ego inflated with booze. Your whole brain is sloshing with swill too, apparently. A true ninth-grade light resonance is far more terrifying than you can imagine."

Li Luo's face fell. "Damn, Mentor. Did you have to crush your student's spirit so early in the day? Am I your student, or is the plump swan?!"

Jiang Qing'e was smiling quietly to herself as she beckoned towards the kitchen. Bai Mengmeng came bustling out with a piping hot cup.

"Leader, this is hangover soup. Have some, it will make you feel better," Bai Mengmeng said pleasantly.

Jiang Qing'e reached out for it. "Thanks, Mengmeng," she said with a smile.

Li Luo quickly added his thanks as well.

While Li Luo was nursing his hangover cure, Chi Chan changed the topic. "As for your Umbra Cave reward, the Gilded Palace has agreed to give you 100,000 school points as a reward."

Although he had already heard the news from the First Princess, Li Luo still whooped. He was on the verge of smiling, then he stopped himself instinctively. Some remnant trauma from the grinning demon.

"Thank you, Mentor. I'm sure you fought hard for me to get it," he said gratefully.

"I'll take those thanks because I did indeed fight hard for you. Shen Jinxiao was particularly vehement in his objections. He said that the reward was excessive, that it would set a dangerous precedent in the future."

"That old dog, I'll beat him to death sooner or later!" Li Luo cursed.

Chi Chan pretended not to hear that. She reached into her clothing and pulled out a black crystal card. "The points are all inside. Take it."

Li Luo reached out eagerly and carefully. 100,000 points. If not for the Umbra Cave, he would have taken forever to earn such a sum.

Plus, he had earned this himself, completely without Jiang Qing'e's help. That was the best outcome. After all, Jiang Qing'e was going to challenge the Seven Astral Pillars at the end of the year. She would need all the resources she could get too.

Jiang Qing'e was smiling widely as well. She was in a good mood. After all, Li Luo's hollow foundation was one of her biggest worries. With these 100,000 points, he would have enough Royal Sap to solve that problem.

One big problem off the table.

Chi Chan chatted briefly with the pair, then she took her leave.

Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e tidied up, then they said bye to Bai Mengmeng before heading out to the Bank of Points together.

The two walked along a leafy boulevard, dappled light paving the way under their feet.

Jiang Qing'e had her hands in her pockets, taking leggy, casual strides forward.

Along the way, many turned to watch them.

"Ahem.

"I heard you changed my clothes last night?

"How could you? If you didn't get my permission, you're violating my modesty, you know?"

Jiang Qing'e stretched lazily, yawning as she walked on. "Your modesty is an imaginary creature. People hear of it, but no one's actually seen it before. My sword, on the other hand, is a very real thing. Want to see?"

Li Luo trembled.

Jiang Qing'e cocked her head and stared at him from head to toe with a slight smile.

"Besides...

"There's nothing on that body I haven't seen when we were young. What is there to hide?"

Li Luo burned with embarrassment. "Jiang Qing'e, you're a real slimeball!"

Chapter 0328: Hitching A Ride With The First Princess

When Li Luo carried a green, wooden trunk out of the exchange palace hall, the very sight of it confounded every student and mentor who saw it.

Such a reaction was warranted. No one, not even a mentor, had ever expected a student to spend 100,000 points on Royal Sap.

Wasn't this completely overkill?

Were all new students so plucky?

"It looks like I've once again shocked the entire college," Li Luo joked with Jiang Qing'e.

Jiang Qing'e continued to strut beside him, lightly replying, "It looks like your severed foundation issue can be considered to be resolved. However, you still can't relax. I'm sure you understand your unique situation."

The sword hanging over his head—the inevitable five-year limit to reach the Duke Stage was something that loomed over him. His pitiful life was at stake, and he was definitely motivated to redouble his efforts. The last thing he wanted was a short-lived glory and life!

"The original plan I had for you was to reach the Second Changing of the Evolving Resonance Tier by the end of the year. However, this is the absolutely lowest bar possible for you to overcome. If you can prove your mettle, then perhaps you might be able to take a breather," Jiang Qing'e said mercilessly.

Li Luo did some quick mental math. With the wondrous encounter at the onyx lake, his resonance power had jumped, directly entering the Third Pattern of the Pattern Genesis Tier.

This windfall had saved him at least a month of bitter cultivation, buying him crucial time.

Yet when all was said and done, reaching the Second Changing by the end of the year was still an arduous task. **Over-1b/In**

Even when looking at each of the ten strongest freshmen of each batch, being able to enter the Pattern Genesis Tier whilst still being in the One Star Hall was a rarity. The Second Changing was an even higher hurdle to surmount.

Exceeding such expectations would be extremely difficult.

"I will do my best." Li Luo, on the other hand, was neither depressed nor disheartened, only nodding his head with all seriousness. All of this affected his little life. He had no other route to tread, except to struggle for that glimpse of hope for survival.

The good thing was that he had this wonderful backing known as House Luolan. Although it was no longer in its heydays, a starving camel was inevitably larger than a horse. It provided him with significant amounts of resources to allow him to succeed. Combined with the contribution points from the college, his debaucherous lifestyle full of squalor could be barely sustained.

"Now that the Umbra Cave mission has temporarily been completed, things will definitely ease up for a period of time. What you now need to focus on is the opportunity within the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. This opportunity is extremely difficult to come by, and if you are able to properly reap the benefits, your strength will take a leap forward, Jiang Qing'e helpfully reminded him.

Li Luo nodded. He was extremely curious about the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. The Golden Dragon Bank clearly possessed capabilities beyond his wildest imagination. It was a superpower that surpassed the Xia Kingdom. Even the Astral Sage College was not qualified to speak on equal terms with the headquarters.

Naturally, the Golden Dragon Dao Fields that were constructed by the bank would be anything but ordinary.

"What do you plan to do now, then?" Li Luo followed up.

"A quick rest for a few days and then I will reapply to enter the Umbra Cave," Jiang Qing'e replied after a moment of pondering.

"Back to the Umbra Cave?" Li Luo asked in surprise.

He had experienced the environment there, and everyone was perpetually kept on their toes. The cold and suppressive atmosphere cast a shadow over everyone's mood.

An ordinary individual would treat the Umbra Cave as a death sentence! If they had a choice, they would never step back into that accursed land. Furthermore, the tasks assigned were arduous and life-threatening. Jiang Qing'e had actually taken the initiative to go back?

"The Umbra Cave is an excellent place for cultivation," Jiang Qing'e explained softly.

Li Luo's expression was complex. He was cognizant of why Jiang Qing'e was also throwing herself into trial after trial, struggling to improve her cultivation. Ultimately, House Luolan's situation was dire, and the housemeet in half a year was the true calamity.

Thus, she had to exhaust all means necessary to strengthen herself, even voluntarily entering places of immense danger, all to serve as a grindstone for her improvement.

In the end, Li Luo did not say much, but he steeled his determination in his heart. He would enter the Dao Fields and find his own opportunities to obtain greater power. House Luolan's disaster would not be borne by just Jiang Qing'e alone.

As the duo walked out of the college, they noticed a golden carriage, emblazoned with the emblem of a golden Luan, stopped right by the gates.

It was the First Princess's personal carriage.

Surrounding it was a team of elite wolf riders, their gazes cold and vigilant.

As the two approached the carriage, the First Princess got up and smiled as she walked towards them.

"Your Highness, I will leave Li Luo to you." Jiang Qing'e said.

The First Princess' lips pursed into a thin smile. "You can relax, Qing'e. I will definitely return him in one piece."

Jiang Qing'e laughed in response, and after exchanging a few more cursory greetings, she waved goodbye to Li Luo and turned to leave.

"Junior Li Luo, please."

The First Princess indicated for him to board the carriage, her exceptionally beautiful face graced with a radiant smile.

All of a sudden, Li Luo could feel that the gazes of the surrounding students had become piercing. The numerous students who were merely making their way around were staring daggers at him upon this sight. In fact, the majority were Four Star Hall students. The First Princess truly possessed significant stature within it!

Although the crowd felt that the First Princess was not romantically inclined towards Li Luo, this brat was still the very first individual to be personally invited by Her Highness onto her carriage.

This was a sight that incited jealousy.

No longer being able to handle the sharp looks of the public, Li Luo immediately hopped into the carriage. The interior of the carriage was spacious and tidy. A row of bookshelves was placed on one end

of the carriage, and beneath it was a desk with a lit stick of fragrant incense. This aromatic scent cleanly permeated the entire interior.

The First Princess followed suit shortly after, gracefully sitting down on one end whilst beckoning towards Li Luo. "Please take a seat."

Li Luo, one who never stood on courtesy, also found a spot opposite her. "It looks like Her Highness has helped to increase the hate... I mean my popularity within the college."

"You're popular enough as it is. This much more shouldn't faze you."

Gracefully, she lifted a teapot and personally poured Li Luo a small cup of steaming tea.

Unable to accept this, Li Luo hurriedly accepted the cup and joked, "With such a great honor accorded to me, I will definitely have to give my life for Your Highness."

"Your words don't seem to match your actions," the First Princess replied whilst shaking her head at his insincerity.

Although she was one for conquering the hearts of others, she could discern that beneath Li Luo's warm and amicable demeanor bellied an individual with unmatched pride. Wanting to win his heart was not realistic, and thus she had never planned to do so. She had always assumed that Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e would become a pair.

Not wanting to harp on such meaningless chatter, she spoke up. "Junior Li Luo, do you think you can resolve His Majesty's ailment within half a year?"

Li Luo paused to consider, scratching his head. "I do not dare to make promises I cannot keep. Your Highness should know that although I can treat the issue, my personal resonant power is simply too weak. Thus, I can only take things slow."

His response was met with furrowed eyebrows. "Your Highness, is there a reason for your urgency?"

"The sooner you can resolve this, the better." A glimmer flickered through the First Princess' eyes as she shook her head.

"Then I will have to do my best!" Li Luo smiled. He could tell that there was a pressing reason for this deadline; however, he was not inclined to poke his nose into matters of the royal family.

After which, the two began to chat about other things, such as the numerous ongoings within the college. The First Princess' natural charisma took full bloom as the duo talked about everything under the sun, creating a harmonious atmosphere within the carriage.

The carriage sped along its path, finally entering the vicinity of Xia City. The royal palace might have been tightly guarded, but upon seeing the First Princess' personal carriage, they allowed it to travel unobstructed.

Eventually, it pulled to a halt in front of a grand palace. Li Luo and the First Princess made their way out and were greeted by the bows of the imperial guard, giving him a chance to experience what it felt like to be royalty.

Entering the palace hall, Li Luo once again managed to see the Little Emperor.

His Majesty was dressed in yellow emperor's robes, exuding an aura of regality. Unfortunately, the only thing that detracted from his majestic appearance was his pale demeanor.

When the Little Emperor saw the First Princess, he let out a look of jubilation, which only deepened upon seeing Li Luo. Li Luo was here to help him treat his illness.

"Sister!"

The Little Emperor immediately ran over to grab the First Princess' hand.

Upon this sight, she gently patted his head and spoke a few words to him before turning to face Li Luo.

"Shall we begin?"

Li Luo nodded his head in agreement.

The First Princess arranged for the Little Emperor to be sent to the back of the palace to prepare himself. When Li Luo finally entered the room, he had already changed into a simple set of pajamas.

Li Luo did not beat around the bush, sitting down cross-legged behind the Little Emperor whilst instructing him to remove his upper body robes.

Although the Little Emperor paused for a brief moment, he did as he was told and disrobed, revealing an emaciated torso. Shockingly, a lotus pattern could be seen engraved onto his back, intertwined with the position of his meridians.

Li Luo maintained his composure, feeling that the Little Emperor's skin looked even more fair as a result. "I'm going to begin."

After which, Li Luo closed both his eyes, focusing on channeling his resonant power, preparing to start the therapy.

Atop the bed, lustrous resonant power began to bloom from him.

Throughout this process, the First Princess continued to sit by their side, quietly observing the treatment.

Time gradually went by, and half a stick of incense had passed.

At this point, an imperial guard strode in, speaking to the First Princess in a low voice. "Your Highness, the Regent is here to visit Your Majesty."

Her eyes flickered as she lightly commanded, "Watch over His Majesty."

It seemed as though she was speaking to herself, as no one responded. The only thing that seemed to have changed was that the shadows now seemed to have changed their object of focus.

Immediately after that, she got up and calmly walked towards the palace hall.

Chapter 0329: Ambition

When the First Princess reached the side chamber, she saw that the Regent had already arrived. Clad in his python robes, he cut an impressive figure.

"Greetings to my royal uncle," she said, entering with a courteous smile and curtsy.

The Regent smiled back. "Luanyu, back from the Umbra Cave? It went well, I trust?"

The First Princess nodded. "Smoothly. After all, Principal Pang watches over us."

"Principal Pang is a gold needle in the haystack of the Xia Kingdom," the Regent said. "We are all much safer with him guarding the Umbra Cave."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before the Regent got to the heart of the matter. "Is His Majesty well? Is Li Luo of some help?" The First Princess' smile did not falter. She was not surprised that he would have found out about Li Luo. After all, his reach was great, as was his information networks. Apparently, she had not managed to keep this from him either. And since she had invited Li Luo over for a second time, it was easy enough to deduce that there had to be benefiting from him somehow.

The First Princess decided that there was no harm in speaking more frankly.

"Mhm. His condition frustrated every healer we knew before this, so I saw no harm in letting Li Luo give it a try. It does seem to be just a tiny bit effective, so I see no harm in letting him try it out a bit longer. There's no other way anyway."

The Regent's surprise was evident. "If even the Dukes with healing expertise can't do anything about it, how is it that a mere Resonant Master can?"

The First Princess shrugged truthfully. "I do not know. Perhaps something to do with his dual resonances?"

"Indeed, dual resonances are rare for a Resonant Master. But all of the Dukes have dual resonances too," the Regent replied.

Still, he did not pursue the matter beyond that comment. "Well, the world is a strange place. Perhaps the boy has some unique powers. Still, his cultivation level is weak. Best watch over him closely so he doesn't hit a bottleneck. It concerns His Majesty greatly."

"As Royal Uncle says." The First Princess dipped her head.

A few more pleasantries were exchanged before the Regent dived in again. "Luanyu, you'll be out of school in another half a year, yes? It's about time for marriage as well. There are many potential suitors in the Xia Kingdom. Have you taken an interest in any? Just say the word, and your royal uncle here will take care of it for you." n-(OveLbIn

This one threw the First Princess off, but she recovered quickly. "I have never considered that problem before," she said almost shyly. "No one has won my heart yet."

"Well, keep a lookout on the daily. I know you are proud by nature, and a talented person. But these are important life matters that cannot be dismissed easily."

The First Princess nodded with a small smile of acknowledgment. "I thank Royal Uncle for the concern in my life matters. If I can see His Majesty take the throne successfully, that would be fulfillment enough for me. Which reminds me...

"It will be time for His Majesty to take the throne in half a year's time," she said with a sweet smile. "You have worked very hard all these years. But the agreement that you had with my father will finally be complete.

"I hope Royal Uncle is prepared for your own life matters, and does the coronation ceremony justice."

The Regent sighed. "The Little Emperor is no longer little. Time sure flies.

"Don't worry, Luanyu," he said with a smile. "I'll make the coronation ceremony a grand affair. It should satisfy you."

"My thanks to Royal Uncle!"

The Regent waved off the thanks, then he left shortly after.

The First Princess continued to hold her smile until he was out of sight, before she let it fade from her face.

"Trying to get me married off so quickly?" she muttered to herself. She knew the rule—once married, she would be off to her husband's, and would not linger at the royal palace.

The emperor was still young. If she left, then the Xia Kingdom would fall back into her uncle's hands. Her father's empire would no longer be in their direct line.

Who would be the true power in that situation?

For all these years, the Regent had bathed in his power. Governors paid homage to him and obeyed him. If this kept up, they would eventually support his ascension to proper kingship, even though he himself had no such ambition.

Even though? As if.

The First Princess sighed to herself. If not for all her workings behind the scenes, the situation today might be much worse.

That was part of the reason why she admired Jiang Qing'e so much. Both were in very similar situations.

Hopefully, her uncle would cooperate and hand over the reins smoothly at the coronation ceremony in half a year's time.

It was that, or potentially civil war.

She clenched her fists tightly, both in dread and to steel herself.

...

After the Regent walked out, he boarded a luxurious carriage that was waiting for him by the road. It was emblazoned with his python mark too.

He sat in the dim carriage and let it take him onwards.

"That lass Luanyu is urging me to give up power?" He laughed snidely to himself.

In the gloom of the carriage, something stirred. A voice came to him, a bare whisper in the air. "Was that not your promise with the old king?"

"I am just afraid that the emperor's youth will weaken the royal court with inexperience. It is the royal family holding the power in the Xia Kingdom now on paper, but in reputation, the Astral Sage College is a cut above us. And it's lucky that Pang Qianyuan has been in the Umbra Cave all this time. Otherwise, who would be the true ruler here in the Xia Kingdom? One word from Pang Qianyuan, and a new era could be ushered in. The Xia Kingdom was built by us, the Gong family. We are the rightful rulers. The Astral Sage College is just a thorn in our side. Our ancestors should never have allowed them to settle here!"

He raved on, the fury in his voice building up.

"I once suggested to the Astral Sage College that they would do well to give me a vice principal position there. They were arrogant enough to refuse."

Gradually the fury faded away back to calm.

"It is often said that there are two rulers in the Xia Kingdom: the royal court and the Astral Sage College."

"Preposterous. When has a nation ever had two rulers?" His eyelids drooped slightly. "For all these years, I have used this power to grow our roots. The Little Emperor is too young. He would waste all my years of effort. I am just doing what's best for them as well."

"Hehe, tough love? If I didn't know what you'd actually done, I might actually have been touched by that speech."

"Besides, you might be the Regent here at the Xia Kingdom, but rightful rule belongs to the Little Emperor. Many will still back him here at Xia. And the old king might well have left something powerful behind..."

"Back when your Gong family settled here at the Xia Kingdom, they set up a defensive ward around the entire kingdom, but they passed the right to wield it to the Little Emperor. You cannot afford to be unruly, because you cannot best that defensive ward's power," the raspy, almost mocking voice said.

"If you want to take it down, you will need a King's power. Only a King's power..."

"That's a little out of reach for you. But I have a suggestion that you might want to consider."

The Regent said nothing, but there was a shocked look in his eyes. He closed them. The carriage fell back into silence.

1. TN: Royals wear dragon robes, but honored officials can wear python or flying fish robes because of the visual similarity.

Chapter 0330: Words from the Heart

Wew.

Li Luo breathed out and let his resonant power fade away. Looking at the scrawny back of the Little Emperor, the green lotus seemed to have gotten just a touch lighter in color.

"It really works," he noted tiredly. "Your Majesty, it's done."

The boy had been sleeping fitfully, but he was jerked awake. He hurriedly put his shirt back on. "Li Luo, you're amazing. I always feel so much better after you treat me. You're much better than those Duke quacks."

Li Luo laughed. It was at times like this that he was reminded of the boy's youth. If he was truly stronger than a Duke, he wouldn't be screwing around in a place like this. He would have gone straight to school to teach Shen Jinxiao the lesson of his life, via stomping on his face.

And Pei Hao. That one required a stomping too.

He was still lost in his stomping fantasies when the First Princess reentered the room. She saw the boy looking much more fit, and she brightened up as well.

Li Luo's treatment was really working.

"Sis!" the boy called out.

She tenderly straightened out his shirt, then turned to Li Luo. "Junior Li Luo, thank you so much."

Her words were soft, and she had a different look from her usual regal composure. She was truly moved by Li Luo's help for her brother.

The feeling was completely aromatic. It was the same feeling of gratitude a desert wanderer had when he came across an oasis.

In half a year, they had to be ready for the struggle for power. And the Little Emperor's frailty might well become an excuse for the other powers to pounce upon.

Even if Li Luo could not cure him completely by then, if he could just go without any spasms or accidents, that would already do wonders for the First Princess' peace of mind.

"Thank you, YourHighness. House Luolan needs friends like yourself."

The First Princess inclined her head in understanding. "We are like souls in the same boat after all."

Li Luo laughed at that. "Your Highness is too humble. Surely you know the storm that House Luolan is weathering? The vultures circle."

"Do you think the vultures do not fly here as well?"

Li Luo was drawn up short. This was the first time that the First Princess had spoken of her own history and secrets. It had been brief, but symbolically important. It was a gesture that marked their deepening relationship.

"In half a year, it will not just be House Luolan that will face trials. The king and I also stand on the cusp of important changes.

"The wolves prowl for House Luolan's treasure. If they are not repelled, the house will end in death. House Luolan will be no more here in the Xia Kingdom." She looked at him full in the face. "We are the same. At the coronation ceremony, we will find out if my brother can truly take the throne and wield the royal power that is rightfully ours.

"According to the promise, my royal uncle will step down. But I am not sure he will do so willingly. Power is a curious thing. Those that taste it often develop an addiction," she said evenly. n-/o)-V/-e(-l/-&))1-)n

Li Luo felt a prickle of fear. He was an outsider to royal intrigues, and House Luolan had never gone up against the royal court. He had not imagined that their factions would be just as vicious.

It was sobering information. It meant that the Xia Kingdom would never be the same after that.

The regent had laid down deep roots while on the throne. He had gotten comfortable with his power. If he did not go willingly, uprooting him would devastate the Xia Kingdom one way or the other.

No wonder the First Princess was so anxious about the Little Emperor's illness. Any weakness would be exploited by their enemies as a way to undermine his reliability and credibility. And the more the Regent rose, the further away the First Princess would fall.

"Li Luo, I am not telling you this to ask House Luolan to stand with us. Bluntly speaking, House Luolan cannot even stand with us," she said with an apologetic but firm smile.

Li Luo nodded. They were ugly words, but true ones. In a fight of this level, without even a Duke to hold them down, they would be blown away like cannon fodder.

Their relationship was built on the foundation of Jiang Qing'e's potential and Li Luo's curious healing abilities.

With that alone, they had won the First Princess' confidence.

They might not be standing together on the battlefield, but both knew that their futures were connected now. Of course, Li Luo would be hoping that the First Princess' faction won.

Compared to the power-hungry regent, whom Li Luo had always been a little leery of. The man was too dangerous and wily. If House Luolan came too close, he would swallow them whole without leaving a single bone behind.

"Your battle will be tough as well. I do not know what House Lords Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan have left to you, but the treasure is an irresistible temptation for many. You will probably face many Dukes.

"Although both you and Jiang Qing'e are valued students at school, I am not sure it will be enough to turn away the pack of wolves. They will not pass up on the chance to smash House Luolan's headquarters. Plus, Principal Pang has not left the Umbra Cave in years, diminishing the Astral Sage College even further, and with it any protection you might hope to rely on."

Li Luo nodded. "Do you know which powers are against us, Your Highness?"

She shook her head. "It all depends on who is tempted."

He sighed. This fight was not just about the five Great Houses. There were many more besides them. Hyenas and vultures, on top of the wolves.

The weighty topic addressed, the First Princess brought the conversation into lighter waters, and they had a pleasant time together.

And then she personally escorted him out of the palace, even calling him a carriage.

"Your Highness," Li Luo said, turning to her with a smile. "House Luolan has fallen far.

"But I will not let my parents' legacy be destroyed so easily."

He had chosen his words with care, and they smashed through one needling doubt that had nestled like a rock in her heart. She returned his smile. "And neither will I."