

## Resonance 371

### Chapter 0371: Fifth Pattern

When Li Luo opened his eyes again, he was back in a familiar place—the backyard of the Xia Kingdom's Golden Dragon Bank.

His first response was to check his body. He found his resonance seeds glowing and wobbling unsteadily, sparking with new resonant power that had not fully integrated itself inwards. Five resonance marks could be seen on the surface of his resonance seeds.

Resonant power burned steadily around it like a star's corona.

Li Luo was stunned.

He was... a Fifth Pattern?!

His resonant power had brought him from the third subtier of the Pattern Genesis Tier to the fifth?!

He was pleasantly shocked. He had estimated one subtier at best. But the dao-gold cultivation breakthrough had exceeded all of his expectations by a happy margin.

Was the dao-gold cultivation breakthrough that strong?

Li Luo was overjoyed. Two subtiers meant that he had pushed his cultivation schedule by two or three months, which was a godsend for someone short on time like himself.

And it was not just his resonant power—he realized that the ugly wound on his palm had also healed completely. He marveled at the meticulous nature of the Dao Fields; they had really thought of everything. Not only did they top you up full of power and stuff your pockets with treasures, they even gave you a kiss on the head and healed your wounds before they sent you on your way.

Completely healed...?

Li Luo jerked around with a sudden realization.

BOOM!

He was smacked with a terrible roiling wave of resonant power, wet with the rusty smell of blood. Who else but Lin Suo?

Li Luo understood the menacing glint in Lin Suo's eyes immediately. The latter was charging over to seize Lu Qing'er before anybody could react!

"Dog!" Li Luo shouted. He had been careless. Of course the Golden Dragon Dao Fields had not just healed the wounds of their trio. The half-dead Lin Suo had also been fully restored!

Not even Li Luo could do much to stop him at the moment.

Lu Qing'er had noted Lin Suo's movements as well, but she stood stone still, staring at Lin Suo with an icy gaze and making no move to defend herself.

CRACK!

When Lin Suo's hand clawed out at Lu Qing'er, a ferocious swish came from above, lightning quick and out of the blue, smashing Lin Suo into the ground.

He lay sprawled in a crater, coughing blood in a way that spoke of crushed organs. He was hit so badly that even his skin had broken down, blood seeping out of woeful splotches.

Soon enough, he was as sorry a sight as before the Golden Dragon Dao Fields had healed him.

Li Luo looked up to see Yu Hongxi and some of the Golden Dragon Bank's higher-ups standing outside the transportation formation. Her face was full of cold fury as she stared down at Lin Suo like he was a maggot. She was a terrifying avatar indeed.

A Duke expert.

Li Luo shuddered a little. This was his first time seeing Yu Hongxi attack out of anger. The intensity... it was a Duke's rage, raw and unfettered. Enough to bend worldly natural energy to her will.

No wonder Lu Qing'er had not moved a muscle in the face of Lin Suo's attack—she had absolute trust in her mother.

"Lin Suo? What are you doing!?" Vice President Ning Que shouted severely, alarmed.

No one besides Yu Hongxi had reacted in time. They had hesitated because Lin Suo was also a member of the Golden Dragon Bank. Yu Hongxi's motherly instincts had kicked in. Of course she would protect her daughter.

She did not care about what Lin Suo intended, good or bad. Raising a hand against her daughter was out of bounds. If he died for it, so be it.

Li Luo, Lu Qing'er, and Qin Zhulu walked out of the transportation formation, along with the conflicted-looking duo of Ning Zhao and Zhu Xuan.

"Mother." Lu Qing'er ran to her mother, pointing at Lin Suo. "Someone must have sent him. He was out to get me."

She told her mother everything that had happened in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields.

"Golden Dragon Qi?"

Both Yu Hongxi and Ning Que gasped upon hearing the news, and an excited murmur broke out among the other higher-ups. When they heard that Lin Suo had stolen Lu Qing'er's Golden Dragon Qi, Yu Hongxi's delight turned to anger.

"Ning Zhao, is what Qing'er says true?" Vice President Ning Que quickly asked.

Ning Zhao nodded. "Father, it is... Lin Suo was a bad egg, and he even had us fooled. We thought we were joining forces to protect Qing'er, but that scum attacked her in secret."

Vice President Ning Que and the other higher-ups were looking sober. This was a grave matter.

Lin Suo had hidden his true intentions very well. It was beyond the work of a mere Resonant Master. Planting an agent so deep for so many years meant that there had to be a deeper, more sinister plot behind it all.

Perhaps he had been waiting for this opportunity all the while?

But why sabotage Lu Qing'er's Golden Dragon Qi?

Yu Hongxi's face was like stone. She turned to Lin Suo, who was still crushed into a crater at her feet. "Guards, take him to Dragon Dungeon. Make him talk. I want to know who was behind this."

A dozen shadows appeared immediately. They pulled black, spiked chains out of their sleeves, which they wrapped tightly around Lin Suo. The spikes buried themselves in his flesh, biting into his skeleton. They dragged him off into the sky and vanished.

Lin Suo had not been able to even make a sound. Li Luo silently bade him farewell. "Goodbye, friend. Looks like I won't be able to treat you to that meal like I hoped.

"Still, all I did was to bring you back to the Xia Kingdom. The rest has nothing to do with me. If you have a complaint, take it up with Yu Hongxi, Brother."

He jerked back to reality to find Yu Hongxi staring at him. He quailed a little, her terrifying presence from a moment ago still fresh in his mind. He could see that the wrath of the Xia Kingdom's Golden Dragon Bank leader was not to be incurred. Unless one had a death wish, of course.

While he squirmed, her features suddenly melted to a warm, glowing smile, filled with satisfaction.

"Li Luo, you did very well. I am proud of you."

Li Luo was a little startled by her sudden change of attitude. "Er," he offered cautiously, "does this mean I don't need to pay for the Resonant Bubble skill?"

### **Chapter 0372: Internal Conflict**

Li Luo's question took Yu Hongxi by surprise. She rolled her eyes at him. "Yes, it's yours, with my compliments."

Li Luo gave her a big thumbs up. "President Yu is the best. Under your steady captaincy, Xia Kingdom's Golden Dragon Bank is steered into bountiful seas and bonanzas of treasure."

"That silver tongue," Yu Hongxi muttered to herself, shaking her head. This kid was not at all like his father, a proud and almost careless man. He rarely paid attention to anything, seeing it all as below him. Getting a kind word out of him was harder than pulling teeth. Whereas this Li Luo was all too eager to pour on the honey for a gold piece.

Still, Yu Hongxi was in a good mood. Lin Suo's hiccup had not affected the outcome. Lu Qing'er had won back the Golden Dragon Qi, and a Golden Dragon Mountain writ to boot. An ideal result.

"Mother, that Lin Suo hid his powers really well. He was a Third Changing. We only managed to beat him and get back the Golden Dragon Qi thanks to Li Luo." Lu Qing'er said with a winsome smile at her mother.

"Well? I chose right, didn't I?" Yu Hongxi looked down at her daughter trying to hide her pride, and smiled affectionately at her. This lass was trying to rub one in at this time? She just wanted the win over her mother for doubting her choice of Li Luo as a teammate.

Still, Yu Hongxi had no complaints with Li Luo's performance. Just as Lu Qing'er had said, the three Pattern Genesis cultivators taking down an Evolving Resonance third tier Lin Suo was a remarkable achievement.

Although she had not seen the fight herself, but as a Duke she could clearly tell who had done the bulk of the work.

Li Luo was truly Li Taixuan's son.

Even without the overweening pride of his father, he had the same ostentatious flair to his work.

"I must thank you deeply for helping Qing'er secure both Golden Dragon Qi and Golden Dragon Mountain writ," Yu Hongxi said to Li Luo and Qin Zhulu. She was not ungracious with her praise at a time like this.

Li Luo and Qin Zhulu shook their heads. "Don't need to be so courteous, President Yu," Li Luo said brightly. "We got a lot of treasure in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields too. We're very grateful to you for the opportunity to enter as well."

Yu Hongxi inclined her head. She did not continue with meaningless pleasantries, wrapping up the conversation deftly before seeing them out with Lu Qing'er.

"You have worked hard in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields this time, and I'm sure you must be tired. Please return and rest well. If you ever have need of help, you can find me here at the Golden Dragon Bank. I will do my best with whatever I can," she said to the pair.

Both Li Luo and Qin Zhulu acknowledged her offer of help gratefully, then waved goodbye to Lu Qing'er and departed. They had been in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields for close to a month. Although it was not as harsh an environment as Umbra Cave, but it had still been tiring. They were eager to get some rest.

Lu Qing'er watched Li Luo go, her smile fading away with his figure in the distance. She turned back to her mother. "Mum, this time in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields has been strange from start to finish."

"Lin Suo must have been a planted martyr, ready to give his life for a cause. His skills might not even have been properly trained, but perhaps implanted with some forbidden arts at the cost of his lifespan. I was in error not to check him properly before. I should have been able to detect it," Yu Hongxi frowned.

She had sensed a glimpse of Lin Suo's strange power when she attacked him previously.

"Who planted him?" Lu Qing'er demanded.

Yu Hongxi was silent for a moment. "That is hard to say. I will go back and expel the entire upper management of Tiancang province's branch. But not before I hang them up by their feet and find out what they know."

"Maybe they don't know anything?" Lu Qing'er offered.

"If they knew, then they have failed me. And if they do not know, still they have failed us," Yu Hongxi stated flatly.

Lu Qing'er nodded, and asked another question that had been on her mind. "And the Golden Dragon Qi. Why was it with me?"

Yu Hongxi smiled. "It is definitely bestowed to one of those who are directly affiliated with the Golden Dragon Bank. And it wasn't only you who received it. Surely it's not that odd?"

"But why did Lin Suo know that I would get it, and then come to get it?" Lu Qing'er pressed.

Yu Hongxi shook her head to show she did not know.

"Mother, do you know how breaking the Golden Dragon Qi would have affected me in the future?"

Yu Hongxi sighed softly. "It would have stunted your future. Holders of the Golden Dragon Qi will enjoy great gains if they set foot on Golden Dragon Mountain. If the Golden Dragon Qi was spoiled, you would have lost that chance at a blessed fate."

"So... someone wanted to stop me from going to Golden Dragon Mountain?"

"It could be the work of my enemies," Yu Hongxi said angrily. "The position of Xia Kingdom Golden Dragon Bank leader attracts much envy, both from within and without..."

"Mum, you might be president here, but in the larger scale of things, surely that doesn't count for much," Lu Qing'er said half-teasingly. "Everything seemed off in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields this time."

"It seemed like there were people helping me from the shadows as well. That's something that not even you could do, right?" "And for the final dao-gold cultivation breakthrough, the three of us managed two breakthroughs each. But from what I know, that seems a little stronger than what we should have had..."

"Moreover, for someone to have trained a martyr like Lin Suo and hidden him even from you for all these years... it speaks of something big. I think we are facing opponents that might even be beyond you."

Yu Hongxi glared at Lu Qing'er. Was her daughter belittling her?

"Mother, I'm not looking down on you!" Lu Qing'er hastily clarified. "I'm just analyzing things objectively."

"And what else have you deduced?" Yu Hongxi said, curbing her pride.

"I think," Lu Qing'er said carefully. "This might have something to do with my dad?"

"Is Lin Suo's superior an enemy of my father?"

Yu Hongxi looked down at the floor in silence and continued walking on.

"Perhaps not an enemy, but even kin?" she said softly.

**Chapter 0373: Rest and Relaxation**

In the next two days, Li Luo remained at House Luolan's headquarters, not setting one foot outside the door. He was both recovering from the fatigues of the Dao Fields, as well as familiarizing himself with his newfound strength.

In a garden.

Li Luo sprawled lazily on a chair, limbs draping over its arms. The mild sunlight was as warm as a blanket, coaxing him off into a comfortable drowse.

Nearby was Cai Wei, today in a tight red top that flared out daringly at her knees. It hid nothing about her figure.

She was here to report on Suncreek Villa's progress in the last month. Li Luo was well-pleased with it. Thanks to the addition of Li Bi and the other talents from Resonance Artificers Hall, the scale of Suncreek Villa had increased dramatically. Fueled by his secret watersource and Bai Mengmeng's four-star formula, Suncreek Villa's returns were higher than they had ever been.

This was just the start. When the resonance artificers settled in proper and Suncreek Villa's reputation began to grow, so would the results.

Suncreek Villa's prospects were incredible.

Two slender fingers placed a peeled grape precisely on Li Luo's lips. He grinned, pushing the grape against his teeth, and leaned back to look upside-down at Cai Wei. "Sister Cai Wei, from my upside-down perspective, your mouth is a frown. Thanks to my amazing deduction skills, I know that rightside-up, you're actually smiling. And I know exactly what that smile means."

Cai Wei shoved the grape in with a bright smile. "Well in that case, hand over this month's load please."

Li Luo chewed the grape sourly. "I'll have you know that the last training was arduous, and-"

Cai Wei cupped his chin and pushed his mouth shut. "Hush now, be good. I can't help it either. Suncreek Villa is clamoring for secret watersource every day. If you stop providing, Suncreek Villa's results will suffer."

She turned to her other side and picked up a case which she opened in front of him, showing two glass phials inside. The liquid was filled with a rousing vitality that awoke a thirst in his resonant palaces.

Li Luo immediately sat up straight. "Seventh-grade spirit liquids and purifying lights?!" "Ah, has the young lord found his motivation again?"

Li Luo waved grandly. "Exactly what I needed after my last breakthrough."

"You are so predictable," she smiled. "If that's enough for you, why not prepare more secret watersource - increase the yield of Suncreek Villa?"

Li Luo pulled a long face. "Sister Cai Wei, remember the proverb: thin streams flow longest," he lectured her with irritating superiority. "If you squeeze too hard, you might break the golden goose's neck."

"You're no weak sponge anymore," Cai Wei said tartly. "Surely you can take some squeezing?"

Still, she was half-teasing. "Well in any case, Suncreek Villa has its success today mostly due to your secret watersource. That's a good thing, but in the long run it's risky. A single supply source is too sparse - not diversifying is a big risk."

Li Luo nodded in surprise. "Sister Cai Wei, that's some great foresight."

It was hard to predict the future. Especially when blackholes like the Housemeet were on the horizon. And was Li Luo going to always stay at Xia Kingdom? He did not know himself.

And if he left, Suncreek Villa would quickly revert back to its broken state.

This was a situation they had to deal with beforehand.

"What are you thinking, sister Cai Wei?"

"Nothing concrete. I just think that Suncreek Villa might need to prepare some other secret watersource as a standby. Of course, a supply with high quality and purity is not easily acquired. But regardless, preparations need to be made."

"Mm. I'll leave that to you, and also look out for more news on that front," Li Luo grinned.

She rolled her eyes at him. He was sure taking this lightly... and laying it heavily on her.

"Sister Cai Wei, I have another request," Li Luo said, pulling out the damaged Octagold Shield. "House Luolan has smithing businesses as well. Can you get someone to repair this? And also help me do some shopping - see if there are twin shortwords treasured artifacts that suit me well. At least upper white-eyes, although gold-eye treasured artifacts would be best."

Cai Wei received the Octagold Shield with trembling hands. Gold-eye treasured artifact? Li Luo sure said it casually enough. But such treasured artifacts were not common, and they had a price tag to match that rarity. Gold-eye treasured artifacts went for several million skygold. Even with Suncreek Villa's rising profits, they were not printing money here.

Still, Cai Wei did not gripe about Li Luo's extravagance. She sighed. "Gold-eye treasured artifacts are rare, and twin shortsword-types rarer still. But I will keep a look out. Still, I think it's more likely I find upper white-eyes or gilded white-eyes."

Li Luo nodded. "I'm counting on you," he said with real sincerity.

"It's my fault for always being so reliable," she sniped back at him. After discussing the details of the next batch of secret watersource, she hurried off on her business. After all, all matters in House Luolan, big and small, needed a final pass from her. She was the keeper of all matters, reporting everything that required attention to Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e.

If not for this dependable manager Cai Wei, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e would not have any time left over to cultivate at Astral Sage College.

As she left, Li Luo settled back down for his nap in the sunshine. A short while later, he sensed his sunshine blocked, and opened a grumpy eye to see a tall, slender figure with arms crossed, and looking down at him. The sunshine peeked through her hair, lending it a golden shine that was entrancing to watch.

On her shaded face, her golden eyes were like pools of liquid gold, drawing him in.

"Sister Qing'e, you're back!" Li Luo exclaimed happily. He had not seen her in the last two days. She had gone back to Umbra Cave to train.

Jiang Qing'e looked him up and down, then smiled. "Not bad, another jump. Fifth Pattern? Seems like this trip to the Golden Dragon Dao Fields was well spent."

Li Luo sat up happily and looked at the beauty by his side. He noted the chips on her armor and splotches of dark liquid, and understood that she had probably cut her Umbra Cave training short to rush back once she heard news of him.

Perhaps a few hours ago, she was still fighting abominations in that sunless place.

Li Luo felt a sudden surge of worry for her. He reached out and took her hand in his.

She looked back at him with a smile, not resisting.

And then she felt an object roll into her hand.

Looking down curiously, she saw a silvery pocket sphere.

"A present," Li Luo grinned.

She looked at it in surprise, her own reflection smiling back at her from the pocket sphere's silvery surface. She turned it over in her hands. It was cool to the touch, but warmed her heart.

"Suddenly hardworking, suddenly a present... did you do anything that's going to anger me?" she demanded of him with narrowed eyes.

Li Luo puffed up his chest indignantly.

"Okay, forget it. I know you can act."

She grinned back at him, stifling his epic monologue. She reached forwards to pull him into a tight hug.

She rested her cheek lightly on his shoulder, raising her hand up to look at the pocket sphere from around his neck.

"I like the present very much," she whispered into his ear.

### **Chapter 0374: Historical Baggage**

In the garden, Li Luo tugged Jiang Qing'e until she sat down with him, and he recounted what had happened in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields.

"So Lin Suo was not targeting you, but Lu Qing'er..."

She was surprised as well. Perhaps they had been too paranoid - they were clearly not the only ones with enemies.

"But that Lu Qing'er is really lucky... you guys really lucked out on many fronts inside there," Jiang Qing'e pointed out observantly.



Li Luo nodded. He could sense that Lu Qing'er had hidden things from them. Perhaps she had guessed something, but if she was not ready to share, Li Luo was not planning to ask. Everyone had their own secrets to hide.

He had also heard before that the dao-gold cultivation breakthrough was only a minor boost, and even a token improvement for the unlucky ones. A single breakthrough was considered very good. And they had enjoyed a double breakthrough each...

"Well, the Golden Dragon Dao Fields are controlled by the Golden Dragon Bank's headquarters, or perhaps one of their important people. They might not be able to intervene blatantly, but it would be all too easy to fiddle and tweak. Like the three gilded white-eyes - it would be foolish to think that there was no one behind that."

Li Luo nodded. "Seems like Qing'er has friends in high places."

"Or perhaps it's something to do with her father, who's rarely seen at Xia Kingdom."

"Qing'er's father?" Li Luo repeated. "You're right - I've never seen him before. Is he not from Xia Kingdom? Hey- that President Lu from Tianshu's Golden Dragon Bank wouldn't be her uncle, would he?" he noted with a sudden jolt.

"I hear that things were complicated back then. The version I heard was that Yu Hongxi was interested in mentor, but he got together with your mother. Yu Hongxi's pride made her leave Xia Kingdom. When she returned, she was already with a young child - Lu Qing'er. That President Lu came along with her as well. Of course the rumors were that President Lu was Lu Qing'er's father, but later those whispers died away. Neither Yu Hongxi nor President Lu treat each other in a likely way." Jiang Qing'e recounted.

Li Luo pursed his lips thoughtfully. So the last generation had quite a happening time as well, didn't they? Even a strong woman like Yu Hongxi had her soft spots. His dad must have been a real lady-killer.

"Lu Qing'er wouldn't be my sister, would she?" Li Luo suddenly blurted in a big-brain moment. "D'you think Yu Hongxi ran away with my dad for a tryst?" "It's not completely out of the question," Jiang Qing'e said with a wary look. "If that's really the case, mentor is in trouble. Your mother would beat him to death."

Li Luo shivered. His mother had a scary side to her.

"Well, I treat all of the above as hearsay. But I think that the events in Golden Dragon Dao Fields this time must have something to do with Lu Qing'er's father. Perhaps he's highly placed in Golden Dragon Bank? And Lin Suo might be sent by her father's enemies. But as to the depth and purpose of this attack, it's hard to tell without more information. Definitely a question for Yu Hongxi, and not us, to ponder." Jiang Qing'e said.

"Why would Qing'er's father remain far away from Xia Kingdom for so many years? I heard that she hasn't even seen him herself for years." Li Luo mused.

"Everyone has skeletons in the closet. Why care about it so much? Or..." Jiang Qing'e looked over at an excited Li Luo, "Are you interested for other reasons?"

"I'm just concerned for a friend!" Li Luo said, alarmed.

Jiang Qing'e smiled and changed the topic. "I heard from Cai Wei that you asked her to look for a twin shortsword-type gold-eye treasured artifact?"

Li Luo nodded. "My last pair was broken in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields. Normal resonant artifacts won't cut it for me now, so of course I need treasured artifacts. Gold-eye treasured artifacts would be ideal, but if not I could settle for an upper white-eye or gilded white-eye."

"With enough money, upper white-eyes and even gilded white-eyes should be readily available. There should be a decent selection from which you can choose. But gold-eyes are rare. Even within Golden Dragon Bank, they might handle less than 10 in a year. And to narrow it down further to twin shortswords will make it even rarer."

Even in House Luolan, gold-eye treasured artifacts were rare. The Imperial Fortress Sword she currently used was one of them - left to her as a present from her two mentors when she had enrolled in Astral Sage College. By the time Li Luo entered school, they had already disappeared, and so there was no such present for him.

Jiang Qing'e felt a sudden desire to spoil Li Luo a little.

"Twin sword gold-eye treasured artifacts are hard to find even within Golden Dragon Bank, but if you really want them, there's a place where you can choose as you wish. And more importantly... you can get it for free." Jiang Qing'e finally said.

Li Luo stared at her in shock. Could there be such a good thing in this world? The whole world knew that Li Luo's favorite word in the world was free!

"Which imbecile would happily let me walk away with a gold-eye treasured artifact?" Li Luo asked.

Jiang Qing'e smiled sweetly at him. "The treasure vault of Astral Sage College."

Li Luo stared at her, agog. "You're asking me to rob the vault of Astral Sage College?! I er, am not unwilling, but I don't think I have the skill." "You really have no boundaries," she rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe he had actually considered it for a moment.

"How would the school give me a gold-eye treasured artifact for free? They're no charity?" Li Luo asked impatiently.

"Normally not a charity, no. The school's treasure vaults are seldom thrown wide open to students, except for some special occasions... remember the Holy Grail Meet?"

Li Luo nodded. Of course he did. Plus, principal Pang Qianyuan had left him a super-difficult mission as well. Li Luo still had no idea how he was going to accomplish it.

"The Holy Grail Meet... let's just say that the school views it much more seriously than you can imagine."

"There are still more than two months to the Holy Grail Meet. In the month that you were away at the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, the school had already started extra training. There'll also be special training for the Violet Vibrance squads."

"In the next month, the special training will only intensify. It's best you don't skip those."

"After every month of special training, Astral Sage College will invite some of the neighboring schools for a sparring match. The scrimming helps us get a sense of where they are at, and also it's good practice."

"Don't treat the scrimms lightly - Astral Sage College's reputation is at stake. And this time round we're hosting. If the hosts lose badly with home ground advantage, it's going to be pretty bad for both school reputation and individual morale."

Jiang Qing'e was looking very serious now. "In order to encourage the students to fight hard for glory, whoever can do well and uphold the reputation will be allowed a free gold-eye treasured artifact from the school treasure vaults, as a reward."

Li Luo sat up so straight you could use his back as a ruler.

"Sister Qing'e, I've decided to forgo those things you call "meals" from now on. I'm off for special training!"

"For the glory of the school! It is the duty of this humble student to fight for it!"

### **Chapter 0375: A Gift for Bai Mengmeng**

In the end, Li Luo did not run pell-mell through the night to get back to school, because Jiang Qing'e pointed out that the mentors would all be sleeping already. No one would see his enthusiasm. Li Luo's motivation dried up at that point, and he generously offered to spend the night with Jiang Qing'e instead.

After dinner, Jiang Qing'e returned to her own practice.

Li Luo sighed deeply, then went to take a long shower and turn in.

The next day, Li Luo and Jiang Qing'e returned to Astral Sage College together. She was going to continue her cultivation in Umbra Cave - even though the place was sinister and dangerous, but if one could deal with the corruption from the Others, the rewards were considerable.

When they reached school they parted ways. Li Luo almost told Jiang Qing'e to be careful in Umbra Cave, then thought better of it. For newcomers like him, Umbra Cave might be quite an intimidating place, but for Jiang Qing'e, it was just a harsher training environment.

After saying his goodbyes, Li Luo headed back for his tower.

The first thing he saw when he pushed the door open was Xin Fu, having breakfast at the table. The latter was equally surprised to see him there. "You're back," he said in his usual lackluster tone.

"I'm back," Li Luo agreed.

"You've missed out a lot of special training in the last month," Xin Fu said with a hint of smugness. "You don't even know what you've missed. I'm already a Third Pattern myself. If you continue lazing about, I might even take your leader position, Li Luo."

"I see," Li Luo said, relishing every moment. "Sorry to say, I'm already Fifth Pattern."

Xin Fu's chopsticks fell with a clatter as a burst of shadow resonant power blasted his chair against the wall. "Good morning, leader! Have you had breakfast already? There's some here for you if you want." Li

Luo waved it away. "Very kind of you. Anyways, it seems like you haven't really been working hard in the last month. I'd better report that to mentor Chi Chan. After all, Mengmeng's the support in our team. When we fight stronger teams, the two of us need to take all the heat, so you'd better not fall behind."

"With my authority as a leader, I command you to reach Fourth Pattern in a month!"

Smiling broadly, he sauntered off to the basement.

Xin Fu stared at his retreating figure, and rubbed his chin ruefully. "Fifth Pattern... how is he such a freak? I miscalculated. Leader lives up to his title after all." While Xin Fu was doing some self-reflection, Li Luo had already made it to the bottom of the stairs, and spotted Bai Mengmeng deeply engrossed in her spirit liquids and purifying lights research. Today she was in a powder-blue lab coat that hung loosely on her petite frame. Her face was flushed and glowing.

She was currently in her research trance, and her eyes were as cold as a lake in winter. She measured out ingredients with robotic precision, the other hand taking down detailed notes on the changes.

Li Luo did not disturb her, instead watching silently from the side.

A full two hours passed before Bai Mengmeng spotted Li Luo. She came to a halt, and the coldness faded out of her eyes as emotion returned to her face.

"Leader? You're back!" She exclaimed with delight.

Li Luo nodded and grinned. "I have to say, your personality switch is fascinating."

While researching, Bai Mengmeng had been in full concentration mode. No interruption could make her so much as flinch, but now she was her usual bubbly, bobbing self.

Like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

Bai Mengmeng blushed, but did not say anything. She lowered her head to her research notes.

Li Luo came up to the table with a mysterious smile. "Mengmeng, this time I brought you a present."

Bai Mengmeng's hand froze, and she looked up curiously.

Li Luo reached into his pocket sphere and pulled out a rainbow-colored confectionery with a flourish, setting it in front of Bai Mengmeng. "Rainbow cake, made specially by a great chef in House Luolan. It's extremely delicious, even rated within the whole of Xia City."

Li Luo knew that she had no sense of taste, but was giving her cake? What was the meaning of this? Had he forgotten? Or was he just teasing her?

Her smile faded away and she nodded hesitantly. "I'll have a taste."

She reached out for the cake.

Into her extending hand, Li Luo placed a moss-green test tube.

"Ah, drink that first before you eat it," he beamed.

Bai Mengmeng looked doubtfully at the strange test tube, and then her delicate eyebrows started to twitch. "Leader, this... what is this?" she asked with a trembling voice.

"Drink it and find out," Li Luo urged her with a smile.

Bai Mengmeng uncorked it with mixed feelings welling within her.

Anticipation, and also fear that her hopes would be dashed. Uneasiness if it would work.

But finally she closed her eyes and tipped the contents of the entire vial into her mouth.

The icy, sticky liquid rushed down her throat, a strange sensation that made her almost want to vomit it back up, but she held on, swallowing it all down. After swallowing it, Bai Mengmeng did not feel any different, besides a numbness on her tongue.

Her face fell.

Li Luo offered her the rainbow cake. She hesitated, then took a pinch and put it into her mouth.

The fluffy cake melted in her mouth.

Li Luo watched on anxiously as well. Of course, this liquid was the potion to restore her sense of taste, that he had made in the last two days while resting at House Luolan. If his calculations were right, this should solve Bai Mengmeng's problem.

Bai Mengmeng held the cake in her mouth, not moving an inch, and not showing any expression. Li Luo continued to watch anxiously.

Did this mean that it had not succeeded?

He was kicking himself mentally when suddenly he saw a large tear roll down her cheek, followed by more and more.

"Mengmeng?" Li Luo asked cautiously. He didn't know if she was sad or happy...

She reached out for the cake with both hands, cramming handful after handful into her mouth until her cheeks were bulging like a hamster's. "Leader... I can taste it!" She sobbed.

"My sense of taste, it's back!" she said with a trembling voice.

Li Luo heaved a sigh of relief. Looks like he had succeeded after all.

He smiled fondly at the girl who was busy chewing cake and crying. "Careful there, don't choke."

Bai Mengmeng was busy cramming the last few smudges of cake on her face into her mouth. The sweetness might be normal for anyone else, but only those who had lost their sense of taste would find it doubly precious.

It was as though light had returned to her world.

As the last bit of cake finished up in her tummy, she wiped her red eyes once more, then stepped forward and flung her hands around Li Luo. She could not express her gratitude enough.

"Leader, thank you," she said softly into his ear.

Li Luo smiled a little embarrassedly. These girls - why did they only use hugging to express gratitude? Ah well, since she was so overwhelmed, he would overlook the fact that they were taking advantage of him.

### **Chapter 0376: Ticket Match**

The young girl's hug very quickly ended. She looked almost mournfully at the empty cake plate. "Don't worry, there's plenty of time to eat all the goodies in the future." Li Luo laughed.

Bai Mengmeng nodded so vigorously her neck looked like it was in danger of falling off. "Leader," she said fervently, "Thank you so much!"

"Aw, this is nothing. You helped me so much as well. At least half of Suncreek Villa's performance in the last month has to be credited to you. And anyways, it was what I promised you. Just don't blame me for taking so long," Li Luo said lightly.

She shook her head. Everyone weighed value differently. Perhaps to Li Luo, helping her regain her sense of taste was nothing; far from the value of a four-star spirit liquid formula. But to her, the value difference was the exact opposite.

Until now, she had only eaten for the sake of sustenance. Everything tasted like wax - a daily torture that she had become inundated to. And each time she had to pretend that nothing was wrong, to avoid any more unwanted attention.

"Leader, for all the formulas I make from now on, I'll definitely consider Suncreek Villa first!" she vowed.

"Oh how could we ever accept? There's no need... just maybe eight or nine formulas would do, too many and we would feel embarrassed," Li Luo said, his bashful tone at sharp contrast with the greed in his words.

Bai Mengmeng giggled. Talking to her leader always put her in a good mood.

"Oh right. I wanted to ask you if you had done any research regarding lightsources or watersources?" Li Luo asked, suddenly remembering his recent conversation with Cai Wei.

"My Nightmarish Water Butterfly resonance is affiliated to water resonance, so I'm a bit more familiar with watersource. But even so, all my efforts so far have been focused on the formulas, but not on secret watersource." She cocked her head inquisitively at him. "Leader, do you still need secret watersource? Suncreek Villa's is already very good. It would be hard to find better in the whole of Xia Kingdom."

"That secret watersource er... costs a lot. Suncreek Villa will need more sources to support its output in the future," Li Luo explained.

Bai Mengmeng nodded in understanding. "Well if leader has a need, I'll spend some time researching it... see what I can come up with."

Li Luo was deeply moved. "Mengmeng, I will definitely give you a satisfactory price for it."

She smiled and shrugged. She really did not care about such things.

While the two spoke, the refining workshop door inched open a crack, and Xin Fu's voice slipped through. "Mentor Chi Chan is here, she asks you to go up."

Both Li Luo and Bai Mengmeng jumped at the sneaky fellow's voice. What on earth was he playing at? Was he some kind of voyeur or something?

Still, this was no time to sort him out. He and Bai Mengmeng quickly tidied up and then went up to the living room. Morning sun streamed in the window, and sat in the light drinking tea was their learned and elegant mentor, Chi Chan.

"Oh? Fifth Pattern? Seems like the Golden Dragon Dao Fields did you quite a lot of good." Chi Chan said, holding her teacup aloft with her fingers.

Li Luo grinned. "I was just lucky. Went along for a good ride."

"I hear Qin Zhulu's Fifth Pattern now as well?" Chi Chan asked.

Li Luo nodded.

"Which means that in One Star Hall, you two are the strongest now. Even Wang Hejiu and Bai Doudou only managed to reach Fourth Pattern in the last month," Chi Chan noted.

"Logically, yes." Li Luo agreed. Before his waterlight resonance reached seventh-grade, he would probably have been on par with Qin Zhulu at the same cultivation level. But now his waterlight resonance was seventh-grade, and if they fought, Li Luo would probably have the upper hand.

Especially his arrow attack. The sudden surge in power was probably too much for Qin Zhulu to deal with.

Of course, this meant that he would have to tap upon the power of the three-tailed heavenly wolf.

Still, all in all he could well be considered the undisputed king of One Star Hall in Astral Sage College.

Chi Chan shook her head. "It's not enough."

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu looked at her, shocked. Fifth Pattern was not enough?

Li Luo was shocked as well. "Not enough to fight in the Holy Grail Meet?"

"Oh, Li Luo, since when did you become so naive and adorable?" Chi Chan laughed at him. "You think a puny Fifth Pattern can do well at the Holy Grail Meet? I'm only referring to the ticket match in a month's time." "Ticket match? Do you mean the scrim?" Li Luo clarified.

"Well, you can call it a scrim if you want. But the scrim has more significance than that. Only those who win in the scrim are allowed to participate in the Holy Grail Meet. Which means that tickets to the Meet are up for grabs here. It's basically an early preliminaries for the Holy Grail Meet," Chi Chan told them.

"As for Astral Sage College, our assigned competition this time is Blue Abyss Sage College. They're quite strong as well, and their reputation is well known throughout East Divine Continent."

Li Luo, Xin Fu, and Bai Mengmeng looked at each other. If they couldn't defeat this Blue Abyss Sage College, they couldn't even join Holy Grail Meet?!

This was no joke at all.

They knew that each of the sage colleges treated the Holy Grail Meet very seriously. It was not only a fight for reputation, but also about possession of the Dragon Bone Holy Grail. The magical item could grant their school reprieve from Umbra Cave, saving the school many resources and even student lives.

That was a benefit that they would all fight for!

And the supposed scrim was actually an early preliminary - only one of them would be able to qualify for Holy Grail Meet.

Basically elimination-style, come early.

Li Luo groaned. Suddenly the light-hearted casual practice he had imagined had turned into a bloody and intense all-out fight.

The starting horn for the Holy Grail Meet had come earlier than expected.

An early salvo of cannon fire, even before the real battle started.

"How does the ticket match work, anyway. We're only One Star Hall students - surely the pressure isn't on us?" Li Luo asked.

"That's where you're wrong. Whether ticket match or the actual Holy Grail Meet, all students from One to Four Star Hall play an important part, and contribute to their school's victory."

She took another sip from her tea cup, then set it down gently. "Of course, you're right that the Three and Four Star Hall students face a little more pressure, but that does not mean the younger students aren't important."

"Set the Holy Grail Meet aside for now - in the ticket match a month from now, the two sage colleges will each select seven members from across all four halls. Besides One Star Hall, the other three halls will send two representatives each."

"The seven will face off against their counterparts from the opposing school. Whichever school wins four out of seven wins the ticket."

Li Luo considered this. "So only the strongest of each hall gets to represent."

"Mentor, I heard that the school has a big reward for whoever helps to secure the ticket?"

Chi Chan nodded with a faint smile. "Indeed. Whoever helps win a ticket will be allowed into the treasure vaults to choose a gold-eye treasured artifact."

Li Luo sighed deeply.

"Although I have generally preferred the quiet life, but I am a student of Astral Sage College after all. My love for the school runs deeper than Qin Zhulu's voice. Therefore, I have no choice but to accept and represent the school, since I am the strongest amongst them."

**Chapter 0377: Angelwood Hollow**



Li Luo's quiet-life self-recommendation earned himself an eye-roll from Xin Fu and a giggle out of Bai Mengmeng. Their leader was always so straightforward. He hid nothing, skipping and hooting straight for the gold-eye treasured artifact in the school's vaults.

Chi Chan ignored his cheeky statement and coughed lightly to get their attention again. "And like I said, Fifth Pattern is not enough."

"Don't underestimate me, mentor," Li Luo argued. "You don't know what a savage fighter I am now."

Chi Chan ignored him again. "Seven matches in the ticket match. Each is important. If there is one that we are confident of winning, that would be over at Three Star Hall."

She smiled confidently. "Of course, I'm referring to Jiang Qing'e's match."

"Ninth-grade resonance, hardworking, and one of the most talented students that Astral Sage College has seen in a hundred years. The school has high hopes for her. Not just the ticket match, but she stands a good chance of being the strongest Three Star Hall student in all of East Divine Continent."

"It's basically a free win for Astral Sage College."

"As for the other six matches, it's hard to tell before the fight begins. Blue Abyss Sage College is not as strong as some of the others, like Enlightened Sage College. Still, they pour hard work and resources into their students, and it goes far. They might not have as good a batch of students compared to us, but from our intelligence, we hear that this iteration of Blue Abyss Sage College has two upper eighth-grade students."

Li Luo, Xin Fu, and Bai Mengmeng shivered a little. Two upper eighth-grades... that was very strong indeed. Even in Astral Sage College's One Star Hall, they only had Qin Zhulu at that level. Of course, they also had Li Luo's unusual dual resonances.

The other sage colleges must have their own hidden talents as well. They could not let their guard down just because Astral Sage College's reputation was slightly better.

"Still, resonance grade is important, but it does not mean everything. Strength is drawn from many different elements. In a fight to the death, a high resonance grade grants an advantage, but no guarantee."

"Mastery of the resonance arts, mastery in usage, tenacity, and of course... luck. Seizing opportunities in battle."

"We cannot be sure yet which of the upper eighth-grade One Star Hall students will take the field. But in a month both may well reach First Changing. Which means that they will step onto the field with an advantage over you. Don't ask me how they did it - each sage college has its own advantages, and will surely use them as best they can to build strong students."

"So if you want to defeat them, you have to reach the Evolving Resonance tier in a month as well! The gap between Pattern Genesis tier and Evolving Resonance tier is quite big. Even with your dual resonances, you might not be able to fully overcome an upper eighth-grade. And surely whoever steps onto the battlefield as your opponent will possess the same qualities of a good fighter."

Li Luo nodded. Back at the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, he had been a Third Pattern. Although he had not feared First Changing opponents thanks to his dual resonances and Resonant Bubble art, but those opponents had seventh-grade or below resonances. Against someone of Qin Zhulu's caliber, he would still be at a disadvantage. For example, Zhao Ziyang had a lower eighth-grade resonance, and was a Second Changing. Even with his full strength, Li Luo had only managed to tear down his defenses. If they had fought to the death, Li Luo would likely have lost... excluding the three-tailed heavenly wolf from the equation.

After all, those with eighth-grade resonances constantly lived and fought the best. Who among them didn't have the will to win? Such opponents could never be underestimated.

Although Li Luo had defeated the Third Changing Lin Suo, but Lin Suo's resonance grade was only seventh-grade. More, Li Luo had needed the power of the three-tailed heavenly wolf to defeat him.

Li Luo did not intend to use such a ghastly power for the ticket match. Firstly, the corruption had to be countered with Seraph's Pearl, but even so some vestiges of corruption would linger, especially if he used it too frequently. Secondly, if he had to use his trump card even during the ticket match, he would be saving nothing for the main show!

Just as mentor Chi Chan had said - if he truly wished to become Astral Sage College's One Star Hall representative, he would have to get to First Changing to win a nod of approval.

Also, if he reached the Evolving Resonance tier, he would only be one more stage away from the goal that Jiang Qing'e had set him: Second Changing.

Before he reached this point, he had thought her targets had been quite ambitious. But through his various opportunities, suddenly he found that he wasn't too far away after all.

"Mentor Chi Chan, how strong can the One Star Hall students at the Holy Grail Meet potentially be?" Li Luo asked.

"The strongest One Star Hall students?" Chi Chan considered it. "If you want to be the strongest, you would probably need to be Second Changing, or better." Li Luo's eyes bulged. "Or better?! Wasn't Jiang Qing'e only Second Changing herself at the end of the first year? You mean there are others who can compete against her from the other sage colleges?" Chi Chan looked at him. "She told you that?"

"Is that not the case?" Li Luo replied, puzzled.

Chi Chan laughed. "It is sort of true... Jiang Qing'e was indeed only a Second Changing at the end of One Star Hall. But there is a catch. It was not where she could reach, but where she chose to reach."

"Mentor, are you saying she purposely suppressed her cultivation speed?" Li Luo said in disbelief.

"Mm. This was hotly contested even within the school. Although Second Changing is already a stupendous achievement at the end of One Star Hall, but it's not the limit of a ninth-grade light resonance... When Jiang Qing'e was interviewed about it, the final conclusion pointed to her energy cultivation art as the reason."

"She did not choose the energy cultivation arts of Astral Sage College... but instead the one that your parents prepared for her." Chi Chan said.

"That energy cultivation art is incredibly profound... but strangely suppresses the cultivator's power in the early stages of cultivation."

Li Luo frowned. That was very confusing. All energy cultivation arts existed to make cultivation stronger. Why would his parents give her one that held her back instead?

"If I guess right, her energy cultivation art follows the iceberg theory - store a lot but show little. The suppression creates a pressure that will one day explode." Chi Chan said, as if reading his mind.

Li Luo's eyes narrowed. A long suppression, all for an explosive push someday? When would that day be? Clearly, Jiang Qing'e had not told him everything about this.

"In any case, there is no need for you to treat Jiang Qing'e as the gold standard for strength at the Holy Grail Meet," Chi Chan continued. "It is not the maximum standard possible... besides, when Jiang Qing'e was a One Star Hall student, there was no Holy Grail Meet."

"Without the Holy Grail Meet, the school will not lavish resources on the students. For example, the special training that you are undergoing. Natural individual talent is important, but the power of resources cannot be underestimated either. You should know this all too well."

Li Luo nodded. Whether in Umbra Cave's onyx lake or Golden Dragon Dao Fields's dao-gold cultivation breakthrough, he had achieved enormous breakthroughs that had catapulted him onwards. Without them, Li Luo would probably only be at the Fourth Pattern.

"Also, I'm not the one with the final say on the One Star Hall representative. All the Violet Vibrance mentors are eyeing the position. Although you and Qin Zhulu stand the best chance, but it's really a race in the next one month to see who can break through into the Evolving Resonance tier," Chi Chan reminded him.

Li Luo nodded. Seven matches at the ticket match. Each played a part in determining if Astral Sage College could qualify. The school would definitely take this decision seriously. They would not casually recommend him without careful consideration.

"Mentor, what's the special training lined up?" Li Luo asked curiously.

She smiled. "You guys are in luck. To have the Holy Grail Meet not even a year into your school life. The school has really brought out everything you could ask for. They've opened Angelwood Hollow for you."

"Angelwood Hollow?" the trio asked.

"It's a small space carved out of the Tree of Resonant Power. The essence of the tree is collected there. It will greatly increase one's cultivation speed, and does not harm one's foundations or core."

"Especially now that all of you are aiming for the Evolving Resonance tier - the hardest leap within the Resonant Master stage. Once you succeed, you will be at the peak of the Resonant Master stage, and begin your power accumulation for the uncharted territory of the General stage."

"The energy essence in Angelwood Hollow has been stored by the Tree of Resonant Power for years. It is normally left alone, but only for a competition as important as the Holy Grail Meet does the school unlock this special resource for the competing students to get a needed boost."

"Furthermore, only Violet Vibrance students are granted the privilege of using it," she told them.

The three nodded, humbled by their privilege. The world was not always and completely fair. The school wanted the best students, and would of course spend its limited resources on those with the greatest potential. The Gold Gleam and Silver Spark students would have to follow the rules. "Be prepared to move at any time. The other Violet Vibrance squads will also enter Angelwood Hollow at the same time. That is the final special training that the school has lined up for you." She rose and moved to the door.

All three watched her go, eyes shining with curiosity and anticipation.

### **Chapter 0378: A Beaten Yu Lang**

The Tree of Resonant Power was as majestic as ever, its crown an entire canopy of its own that sheltered the school. And in its shade, Li Luo met Yu Lang again for the first time in a month.

The latter was looking up at the leaves and sunlight pensively. The wind blew his hair away from his face, leaving his melancholy bare for the world to see.

"What are you looking at?" Li Luo said, walking beside him and looking up curiously.

Yu Lang did not reply, continuing to look up.

Li Luo felt like something was not right, and tilted Yu Lang's head back down. Li Luo saw that his friend's eye was badly bruised, as though he had been given a solid punch in the face. "Who would do that to my big brother Yu Lang?!" he yelled.

Yu Lang waved him to silence. "Not so loud," he said almost embarrassedly.

He looked sidelong to where Bai Mengmeng was standing with Bai Doudou. "Leader thinks I haven't been improving much lately. She's been giving me some tough love. These are marks of her whipping me into shape."

"So that's what all this moody acting is about," Li Luo grumbled.

Yu Lang coughed and puffed up his chest. "Thanks to the love of my leader, I've already reached First Pattern."

"You've changed," Li Luo sighed, shaking his head. "You're no longer that arrogant Yu Lang of the past."

"F\*ck, if you were beaten breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily, you'd lose your appetite for arrogance too," Yu Lang said tearfully.

Li Luo clapped him on the shoulder. "It's for the best," he said encouragingly. "Next time you'll be better at surviving. You're a Violet Vibrance student too, so I'm sure you'll take part in the Holy Grail Meet. You'll know how important it is to be strong then."

Yu Lang looked quizzically at him. "I wouldn't give two sh\*ts about Holy Grail Meet. And even if I was entered, I'd just go there to get by. As if the school would expect any glory out of me."

Li Luo smiled mysteriously at him.

Yu Lang felt a cold chill run down his spine. "Li Luo. Have you done something that you should apologize for?"

"My brother, you are as dear to me as an arm or leg," Li Luo said piously. "What would I ever do to you?"

"Hey!" Yu Lang shouted. "That used to be my line!"

The friendly bicker broke out almost immediately, and was interrupted a while later when Bai Doudou came up to them, holding Bai Mengmeng's hand. "Li Luo," she said gratefully, "thank you."

Li Luo looked at Bai Mengmeng's red eyes and guessed that it was for restoring her sense of taste. He waved easily. "It's nothing much. Mengmeng helped me a lot as well. This was just what I promised her in return."

"No, I owe you one," Bai Doudou said seriously. "If there's a chance in the future, I'll repay you."

She turned and left, tugging Bai Mengmeng along by the hand.

Yu Lang stared at him in astonishment. "Li Luo, what on earth did you do? How did you make that old tigress into such a warm little kitty?" "I just helped Mengmeng solve a little problem of hers," Li Luo shrugged. "Hey, you heard it, Bai Doudou owes me one. Shall I tell her to beat you up a little less?"

Yu Lang perked up, then quickly deflated. "Ah forget it. It's for my own good anyway."

"Are you in love with the beater?" Li Luo asked, looking at him strangely. "Do you think I, Yu Lang, am that sort of person?! I, I have the hardest bones in the whole of Astral Sage College! The whole school knows that!" Li Luo rubbed his chin. "Do you think my good looks will work on Bai Doudou, you think?"

"Li Luo, you're too ignorant. You might be just slightly more handsome than I am, but none of that will work on Bai Doudou. She's not that superficial." Yu Lang laughed. He had no idea what Li Luo was getting at, but for the moment he seemed back on solid ground.

"My charisma, my talent, and my efforts... I think they're much more outstanding than yours though..." Li Luo continued.

Yu Lang's face changed. "Alright, brother Luo. I admit that you are handsome. So there's no point going for that fish!"

Li Luo gave him another hearty slap on the back. "Yu Lang," he said, amused. "I didn't know that you liked that type..."

He really was in love with the beater.

Yu Lang's internal struggle continued on for a bit. "I'm not, I actually like the soft and cute type..." he mumbled as a final protest.

"Forget the cotton candies," Li Luo advised him. "Bai Doudou is a headstrong one. She might not be opposed to you at the moment, but still far from actually being fond of you. Best work hard and look ahead."

Yu Lang considered this for a moment. "Hey, Bai Doudou can't be more headstrong than senior Jiang, right? Teach me, brother Luo - how are you hooking up with so many girls even with a fiancée like that?" Li Luo glared at him. "Friend, you can eat sh\*t if you so please, but talking sh\*t will get you punched. I only make honest friendships."

Yu Lang was about to reply when a familiar voice interrupted them from behind. "What are you guys talking about? What hook ups?" Li Luo's head whipped around with a wide, cheesy smile for Lu Qing'er. She was clad in Astral Sage College's uniform today, custom-made to a flattering cut for her petite frame. She was also in her signature white lace socks. "Yu Lang said he wants to hook up with Bai Doudou," Li Luo said without missing a beat. "He asked me to help him make a plan."

Lu Qing'er was immediately interested. "You like Bai Doudou?"

Yu Lang stared at them, aghast and speechless. Finally he surrendered to Lu Qing'er's curiosity and decided to run away.

"He always said that he liked the soft and cute type, but now he's fonder and fonder of the one that beats him," Li Luo chuckled.

Lu Qing'er cocked her head. "Bai Doudou's not a bad person. She treats him strictly, but it's for his own good. Yu Lang probably senses that. But I think she does it because she's the leader. Kindness out of interest in him as a partner? I doubt it's that strong yet. If Yu Lang wants this, he'd better work hard."

Li Luo agreed. Out of the many girls in One Star Hall, Bai Doudou might lose out to the greatest beauties like Lu Qing'er and Bai Mengmeng, but in terms of popularity, she was up there with them. Especially among the girls, Bai Doudou's elan was highly respected.

With her refreshing candor and impressive abilities, many girls saw her as an idol.

"Oh, how's it going on your end? I mean that Lin Suo..." Li Luo asked.

"Not paying attention to it," Lu Qing'er laughed. "But given my mum's personality, he probably won't see the light of day ever again."

Li Luo nodded without much sympathy. Lin Suo had made a vicious attempt on Lu Qing'er's life and future. This was the price he paid.

As for the powers backing Lin Suo, that was none of his concern as well. He would leave Yu Hongxi to her own troubles.

At this time, the One Star Hall Violet Vibrance squads were all gathered. Li Luo spotted Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan looking warily at him. They had also heard the rumors that Li Luo had reached Fifth Pattern. He was ahead of them now.

Both were extremely disheartened by this news. When school had started, they had been overwhelming ahead of him.

Li Luo was not feeling very heartened himself. "Seems like the other students have been improving a lot as well. The legendary Golden Dragon Dao Fields might have brought Qin Zhulu and I to Fifth Pattern, but Bai Doudou, Wang Hejiu, and the others are pretty close behind still."

"That's because while we were in the Golden Dragon Dao Fields, the Violet Vibrance mentors were working hard on their students as well," Lu Qing'er replied. "The Violet Vibrance students are important seeds that are nurtured with all the school's resources. Astral Sage College's cultivation resources cannot be underestimated."

"Besides, I don't think your estimation is accurate," she continued with a smile. "From what I know, even Wang Hejiu only managed to reach Fourth Pattern just a few days ago. Which means that their resonant patterns are not as well marked as yours or Qin Zhulu's. The dao-gold cultivation breakthrough gave us a full double breakthrough, cutting no corners. Which means that they're early-Fourth Patterns, whereas you and Qin Zhulu are late-Fifth Patterns."

Li Luo snorted. "There's no such thing, though."

"It's just a way to visualize it. In any case, you and Qin Zhulu will definitely reach Evolving Resonance tier first, at this rate."

"I hope so," Li Luo said, as he looked up to see the Violet Vibrance mentors approaching.

Next, they were probably going to enter Angelwood Hollow... he was indeed curious to see how good this precious resource was, that Astral Sage College usually kept closely guarded.

### **Chapter 0379: Absinthe Energy**

As their mentors arrived, the Violet Vibrance students stood up dutifully to follow them up the Tree of Resonant Power.

Along the way, they spotted many other students cultivating. The students looked back at them with both envy and curiosity. It was a privileged group that walked in their midst, and news of the Violet Vibrance squads' special training had already spread.

To be able to access resources that the school usually guarded jealously... that was what the students were most envious about.

Although it invited a fair bit of resentment, but there was nothing to be done for it. The Holy Grail Meet neared, and only the best of the students would be favored with the school's resources, watering their chosen seeds in hope of fruit. Li Luo and the others headed on amidst the gazes, until they came to a place near the top of the Tree of Resonant Power. They were already past the clouds now, and when they looked down, the whole of Astral Sage College stretched out under the wispy cotton veil. In the distance, they could even make out the build-up that was Xia City.

Finally, Chi Chan and the other mentors came to a halt.

They had stopped at a wooden platform fashioned out of the Tree's trunk. In the middle of the platform was a door made of green wood, with a swirling rune in the middle that gently sucked worldly natural energy from its surroundings like an exhaust fan.

Chi Chan, Shen Jinxiao, and the other Violet Vibrance mentors all pulled out a violet seal each, that they pressed to the greenwood door.

It vibrated in response, then creaked open slowly.

Behind the door was a pool of green light, too bright for them to make out anything from the outside.

"Go on in then."

Shen Jinxiao said neutrally to them as he stowed his own violet seal in his robes and led the way in.

The Violet Vibrance students eagerly crowded after, unable to contain their curiosity.

Once inside, they stood on the spot, disoriented by the sudden change. When they recovered their bearings, they found themselves on a greenwood platform, almost identical in design to the one outside. Before them was a huge greenwood pillar that rose up into the sky, almost like it was a narrow, vertical mountain that propped up the entire space.

Along the pillar were emerald platforms that stuck out at intervals, going on upwards in layers as high as they could see.

"This is Angelwood Hollow?" Li Luo gasped as he stared upwards, lost in wonder.

Chi Chan cocked her head at him. "Want to go up and test it out?"

Without waiting for his answer, she swiped a hand, summoning a gust of energy that propelled him up on to one of the emerald platforms.

Li Luo righted himself carefully, pulling a pair of short blades out. These were temporary resonant artifacts that he had dug up - they were not even lower white-eyes. Still, they were functional enough for a place like this.

Li Luo was looking about when suddenly the faint emerald mist suddenly condensed, forming several figures.

Swish!

Each of them had a wooden spear that gleamed with a leafy green light. They stabbed at Li Luo.

He raised his twin swords and summoned his resonant power, moving to meet them with his blades.

As he drew close to them, Li Luo realized that they had empty eye sockets, despite their humanoid appearance. It made them extremely creepy.

Swish! Swish!

Water Edge cut cleanly through their necks with practiced combative efficiency.

He sheathed his blades and stood there easily. These emerald figures were only roughly at First Pattern in strength, and did not pose a real threat to him.

As Li Luo beheaded them, the green figures started to warp into a green mist that rose drifted through the air towards Li Luo.

"Absorb them." He was prepared to duck away, but Chi Chan's call out to him stopped him up short. Looking dubiously at the green mist, he let it come to him.

The moment it touched his body, it rapidly began to seep in.



Li Luo could feel a strangely pure energy flow through him, entering his resonant palaces with no resistance at all. They were easily absorbed into his two resonance seeds.

He didn't even have to spend any effort to process it!

Li Luo did not know if he was imagining it, but after taking in the green mist, his woodearth resonance seemed to grow a little more active. It was as though he had just consumed a spirit liquid. Not only did the peculiar mist assimilate well into his resonance seeds, it could even strengthen his resonant power like spirit liquids and purifying lights?!

That was some incredible effect, for sure.

Li Luo's eyes lit up with wonder.

"You can call these things absinthe puppets. They are formed from the mystical energy in Angelwood Hollow. The higher the platform, the stronger the absinthe puppets. As long as you can beat them, you can get the absinthe energy that they convert into."

"Absinthe energy is incredibly pure and forgiving. It does not clash with any resonant power, which is why you will be able to strengthen your resonant power foundations readily with it. Besides, absinthe energy also improves your resonance - it has the same effect as spirit liquids and purifying lights, albeit weaker and in a different form. Still, it doesn't hurt." Mentor Chi Chan's spoke loudly and calmly, her voice carrying to reach all the Violet Vibrance students.

There were stunned nods in response.

Usually, energy absorbed through the environment had to be processed with energy cultivation arts - and the quality of those would determine the final amount that they could use. But this absinthe energy could skip that step? That would definitely increase their cultivation efficiency by a huge margin.

As for the resonance refining effect, that was incredible as well. Before this, all they knew was that the effect of liquids and lights were unique. However, spirit liquids and purifying lights were expensive brews, and not a sustainable way of growing stronger. Although the effects here might be weaker, but who cared when they were free!

Li Luo sighed contentedly. No wonder this place was usually off-limits. It was heaven. He could only imagine how hard it was to create and protect such a place, for the school to guard it so carefully.

"But as magical as absinthe energy is, there is a daily limit. And when divided up across the halls, the amount reserved for One Star Hall students is even smaller. If you want to get more absinthe energy, your squad needs to climb up the layers as fast as you can," Chi Chan said meaningfully.

"Let me make it even clearer. To get the limited amount of absinthe energy available each day, whichever squad climbs the fastest will naturally get the largest amount of what is allocated. Do you understand?" Shen Jinxiao

The five Violet Vibrance squads looked at him, alarmed.

Which means... the more they had, the less there would be for the other squads.

Even at this highest level of privilege, still there was competition.

Shen Jinxiao waved his long sleeves in a grand gesture.

"Enough talking. If you're all ready, your special training begins now."

### **Chapter 0380: Special Training Begins**

Beryl-green mist floated within Angelwood Hollow, swirling gently about the platforms.

Li Luo's shortswords hummed with Water Edge, whistling keenly through the air.

Through the green mist, a dozen figures leaped at him, landing all around him. Their greenwood spears stabbed at his vital points.

Li Luo took a step inwards to his team, and suddenly his shape shimmered. In the next instant, many different Li Luos appeared, leaping out at the absinthe puppets.

They only had a basic intelligence, and were unable to tell real from fake. Their response was just to stab away at the Li Luo in front of them.

The spears passed easily through the illusions, dissipating them.

Shing!

From the other side, one of the Li Luos was more solid than the others. His sword gleamed, metallic brilliance refracted through its sheen of water.

With a practiced slice, he finished off two absinthe puppets expertly.

Three more jumped into the fray, their wooden weapons charged with a faint green power that flickered like fire. Again they stabbed at Li Luo's vital points.

Swoosh!

A shadow at Li Luo's feet took them, smothering out the green flames in a wave of darkness. Black chains of power tripped them up at the feet.

The absinthe puppets stumbled forwards.

Li Luo's blade was there to meet them, slashing out at the off-balance adversaries.

When his blade next stopped, three absinthe puppets lay inert on the ground, carved up.

Xin Fu appeared behind Li Luo, his own short dagger humming with a dark light. His black resonant power flowed and dripped like liquid night, caressing his blade with a curious smell of blight.

They had made quick work of five absinthe puppets, but Li Luo and Xin Fu did not relax. There were still a dozen more, green resonant powers flickering wraith-like ahead.

"Mengmeng!"

Li Luo called out.

Starlight power sailed out over their heads, and their outlines began to twist and warp. More illusions appeared beside them, until they now looked like an army standing against the outnumbered absinthe puppets.

"Charge!"

All the Li Luos and Xin Fus hollered, surging forth.

Among their clones, Li Luo and Xin Fu slipped in and out of the chaos, cutting down absinthe puppets left and right while they were distracted by the fakes. Shortsword and dagger stabbed and slashed in perfect mechanical synergy, until the last absinthe puppet fell over.

As the last one fell, the two boys finally straightened up in relief before slumping down to the floor, wiping the pouring sweat from their forehead. Their faces sagged with fatigue.

Bai Mengmeng squatted down in concern. "Shall we call it a day?"

Li Luo shook his head stubbornly. "We're not even at the limit yet. We're at the 19th level now. Just one more and we'll be at the elite level. I want to taste that juiciness today. We've come so far!"

This was their fourth day in Angelwood Hollow. Each day they would do their best to push through the levels, onwards and upwards.

The 19th level was as far as they had pushed in the last four days.

Li Luo glanced to the right side. He could see the other four Violet Vibrance squads fighting their hardest as well.

On the first day, Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan's team had been the most effective. They were the only squad with two Fourth Patterns. Although Li Luo and Qin Zhulu were both Fifth Pattern, but their squads lagged slightly behind.

On the first day, Wang Hejiu's squad had climbed a full six platforms.

Li Luo's and Qin Zhulu's had only managed five each, while Bai Doudou's and Yi Lisha's squads reached the fourth.

Still, the lead had been short-lived. As Li Luo's and Qin Zhulu's squads found their groove, they learned to work around their cores, and managed to turn the tables back on Wang Hejiu's squad.

Currently it was Li Luo's and Qin Zhulu's squads who had reached the 19th level. Wang Hejiu's was at the 17th, while Bai Doudou's and Yi Lisha's were at the 16th level.

Of course, the comeback had come on the shoulders of Li Luo and Qin Zhulu, who were both tired to the bone. Still, the cultivation benefits had been worth it.

As for the elite level that Li Luo had spoken about, it appeared once every 10 levels. The absinthe energy would be especially dense there, condensing into a single, super-strong absinthe puppet. Only by defeating it could they move on, and of course taking down this boss would give them a huge boost of absinthe energy.

A rare chance, begging to be plucked.

At the 10th level, the first boss had only been a First Changing, which they had taken down without much trouble.

The next one at the 20th level would definitely be much stronger.

Of course, after fighting an entire day, even Bai Mengmeng was fatigued, let alone the main fighters Li Luo and Xin Fu. That would only ramp up the difficulty.

The 20th level boss would not be easy at all.

But they had no other choice. The amount of absinthe energy was limited each day. In the past few days of cultivation, Li Luo and the others had always milked it to the limit. If they couldn't defeat this boss today, it would only take up their quota for the next day.

And if they gave up here, Qin Zhulu's side would definitely overtake them. The guy had a competitive streak a mile long, which they knew all too well. Even though they were friendly, but a competition as a competition. Going easy was not only disrespectful to his own squad, Qin Zhulu would not like it either.

"Today's problems will be solved by the us of today. So that tomorrow's us can take on tomorrow's problems." Li Luo vowed, springing to his feet. He turned towards where the green mist had formed a ladder that would take them onwards. He waved his team first, and led the way up the ladder as the leader.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu followed.

Watching them from on high were Chi Chan, Shen Jinxiao, and the other Violet Vibrance mentors.

"Who knew that Li Luo's squad would be the first to challenge 20," the balding mentor Mi Er said cheerfully.

"He's completely different from when he first enrolled. Not even Qin Zhulu could beat him now," Cao Sheng said.

"Dual resonances are coming into full strength now, aren't they," Chu Zi said, with an approving nod.

"I'm sure the One Star Hall representative in a month from now will be decided between Li Luo and Qin Zhulu."

Chi Chan remained silent amidst their praise, although there was a soft look of approval as she watched her students.

"Just because they're the first to challenge it doesn't mean they'll be the first to pass it," Shen Jinxiao said stiffly. "After all, it's much harder than their last boss fight at the 10th level. I doubt a first-time clear is possible."

The other Violet Vibrance mentors voiced their agreement in acknowledgment of the difficulty. Only Chi Chan remained silent, eyes still on the trio ascending to the 20th level.

Whether they could clear it or not... It all remained to be seen.