

Resonance 471

Chapter 0471: Defense

After deciding on their plan, Li Luo and the others hesitated no longer. They immediately triggered the anima cumulonimbus.

The one chosen to do the triggering was Bai Mengmeng. She would have to remain still and continuously funnel her resonant power into the anima cumulonimbus to stimulate the worldly natural energy within it into a reaction.

Bai Mengmeng was the weakest among them. Plus, her skills were suited to support rather than battle. Putting her on the task would free up the other fighters to deal with the other schools. She leaped down into the lake, dainty as a butterfly, and settled down into the lotus position on the water.

"Begin." Li Luo nodded.

Bai Mengmeng tucked her chin in and closed her eyes. Starry resonant power began to spread from her body, then it was funneled forward into the anima cumulonimbus.

With the addition of her resonant power, the worldly natural energy in the anima cumulonimbus began to stir. A kaleidoscope of colors blazed in every direction, refracting off the water's surface to create a myriad of hues that energized the mist.

The energized mist was then absorbed into the 23 flowers as usual, and now there was colorful condensation forming in tiny beads on the petals.

The sign that the anima dew was forming.

It was beautiful, but it was not the most spectacular phenomenon happening at that moment. Everyone's eyes were directed skyward. The rainbow lights had blasted through the energy membrane dome above them like a spotlight in the sky.

Everyone within 50 kilometers could see it.

"Wow. We're screwed," Li Luo said dryly.

"Everyone is going to be on us," Yu Lang said. "The Holy Grail people sure know how to start fights."

"Well, fighting's the point of the Holy Grail Meet. We're here to determine the strongest school and strongest students." Bai Doudou was the most grounded in reality.

Li Luo nodded cheerfully. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, the anima cumulonimbus has been activated. Now we're in for a whole mountain of trouble. I'm sure the other students are all rushing over. We'll be locked in numerous battles, perhaps at the same time, unless we choose to find a partner... But like I said, this isn't the time to be sharing. We have to get off to a strong start to earn respect. Any weakness we show here will only make our next play more difficult."

"It was a tough decision, but I think it's the right one. I think the schools that make it to the end will all choose this approach."

The others nodded. In a brawl, it was a power play to establish yourself as a lion first, and not a wolf in a pack.

Li Luo was aiming to be a lion. Independence was the name of his game.

"Our mission is to keep them off the anima cumulonimbus. At all costs. All we need to do is buy time until tomorrow morning, and the anima dew will be ours to collect. Once it's safely in our anima gourds, it can't be stolen anymore, and the other schools will leave of their own accord."

Dew could not be taken away from the anima gourd, not even if the holder was eliminated.

This was part of the game too. It encouraged students to fight a little more selflessly, and also gave them more options in a fight.

It was also to keep the fights a little cleaner.

The mechanic of anima cumulonimbuses already started enough fights.

If a school could hold out the entire night without their defenses breaking, then they deserved the rewards of an anima cumulonimbus.

"Mengmeng, tell us immediately once the anima dew is completely harvested," Li Luo ordered.

"Alright. Best of luck to all of you. I think I have the easiest job," Bai Mengmeng said shyly.

Yu Lang's eyes went soft as he looked at the sweet, little girl.

"Wipe that sickly smile off your face," Bai Doudou hissed at him. "Or I'll do so permanently with mouth surgery."

Yu Lang's smile evaporated.

"Alright, let's go set defenses." Li Luo clapped his hands, then he set off for the outside of the valley.

The others followed.

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When the column of rainbow light blasted up into the sky, many teams noticed it immediately.

"Rainbow light—an anima cumulonimbus. And from its brilliance, probably a medium one at that," a youth in yellow commented.

The greed and hunger among his teammates was all too evident on their faces.

"Liu Xiao, looks like your information was good," the youth in yellow said to the person beside him.

Liu Xiao had managed to escape after their last disastrous battle, although he was wounded quite badly.

The person who had spoken was the One Star Hall leader for the Iron Sands Sage College. His name was Zhao Xingying, and he was a Second Changing, one of the stronger ones in the One Star Hall.

"Although a medium anima cumulonimbus is a tempting prize, the Astral Sage College is there," Liu Xiao croaked hoarsely. "I've told you already that they might have two dual resonance users."

Zhao Xingying's eyes narrowed. "Two dual resonance users across four halls would be remarkably rare already. Two within a single hall? In truth, I have my doubts."

"So do I." Liu Xiao nodded. "I'm not sure about that Yu Lang person, but Li Luo definitely has dual resonances. And he's very strong."

Zhao Xingying considered it. At least one dual resonance user... that alone was difficult enough to deal with. And their point of reference for a dual resonance user was Lu Ming of the Heavenly Inferno Sage College. A tough opponent indeed.

They had no guarantee of being able to take him down.

Plus, there was the X-factor of a possible second dual resonance user.

"Boss, do we go for this anima cumulonimbus?" Liu Xiao asked anxiously.

"Since we're here, how could we give up without a fight?" Zhao Xingying said with a tight smile.

"Whether the information on the Astral Sage College's dual resonance users is true or false, we have our own forces, and our own ways of fighting. Plus, we can source for reinforcements."

He jerked his head towards the forest around them, where there were others gathering.

"Hello there, friend. Are you from the Iron Sands Sage College? I'm the commander of the Imperial Gem Sage College, Zheng Fuxing." A student stepped out. He had a wiry build, but his muscles looked hard as rocks.

"And I'm the overall commander of the Heaven's Path Sage College, Ding Chi," Another youth with flaming-red hair strode forward, a big smile on his face.

These two schools were part of the joint force that Li Luo's group had decimated previously, which was why they were so eager to show up.

Zhao Xingying smiled widely back at them and waved them over.

"I'm the commander of the Iron Sands Sage College, Zhao Xingying. Come closer, friends. Let us talk about the issue of taking this medium anima cumulonimbus."

The two other commanders nodded eagerly.

"With pleasure."

Chapter 0472: Battle Deployment

"There are three main routes to the valley. I'll take the center and try to draw the other school commanders.

"Qin Zhulu, Yi Lisha, your squads have the left.

"Bai Doudou, Wang Hejiu, your squads are on the right. It might be harder on you because of the rumors that Yu Lang is a dual resonance user. They might concentrate more of their forces on you, but while you're suffering, the rest of us will have an easier time. We can throw their allocation into chaos."

Li Luo paused to make sure they were all following his plan so far.

"In the early stages, we might have two or three sage colleges coming at us at once. We might have less numbers, but I believe we're stronger individually."

Besides himself, an elite fighter, they also had Qin Zhulu, who was on the level of other school commanders. Even if Li Luo himself were not around, Qin Zhulu would still have a shot at being the strongest student.

Besides, Bai Doudou and Wang Hejiu were at the peak of the First Changing themselves.

Between the left and right routes, it seemed like Qin Zhulu would have an easier time, while Bai Doudou and Wang Hejiu would probably see more heat come their way.

"Want to send Yu Lang to my side?" Qin Zhulu offered.

He was happy to share the burden and draw some of the forces his way.

Li Luo considered it, but he eventually shook his head. "You're meant to have the advantage on your side. If you can beat your opponents back quickly, that would be ideal.

"Yu Lang's side is supposed to suffer. No need to worry about him."

Yu Lang rolled his eyes. Damn, now he was a sandbag.

Still, he understood the daring plan that Li Luo had hatched. Routinely allocating their fighters was not going to help them overcome a stronger force. They had to use their one card: the fake information that Li Luo had planted before.

"Everyone, this is our first fight. I hope the Astral Sage College does well," Li Luo said, cupping his fist to each of them.

They exchanged tight, nervous smiles, then they headed off to their respective positions.

Lu Qing'er lingered a little, her beautiful eyes regarding Li Luo with concern. "Li Luo... are you going to be okay?"

Li Luo had already openly revealed that he was a dual resonance user. He would definitely be targeted. And if anything happened to him, it would be disastrous for their school's morale. Their defensive line would also be broken wide open from the middle.

"Never ask a man if he's going to be okay!" Li Luo said indignantly.

She snorted. "Need me to stay and help you?"

"Student Lu Qing'er," Li Luo said imperiously, "you were ordered to follow the commander's orders. Even though you are very pretty, you will still be punished for disobedience!"

"Always full of nonsense." She rolled her eyes at him before hurrying off to join her squadmates.

Li Luo admired her lithe form from behind for a while and then leaped to the top of a tall tree. He could see the entire battlefield well from there.

He eyed the treetops carefully, watching for movements in the leaves that would indicate that people were below.

There were many of them coming.

Li Luo's guess that it was three sage colleges coming for them.

The observation went both ways. From his prominent vantage point, many of the attackers had spotted him as well.

Suddenly, a student in yellow clothes broke out from the pack and approached Li Luo, perching cautiously on a nearby tree.

He was only 20 meters or so away.

"I assume you are the Astral Sage College's commander, Li Luo? I'm Zhao Xingying of the Iron Sands Sage College," he said to Li Luo.

Li Luo nodded with a casual smile.

"I'm impressed by how well you've kept yourself hidden. There was no information about a dual resonance user," Zhao Xingying said.

"Ah, we've shown you one as a teaser. Obviously, we can't show you everything." Li Luo winked.

"You mean Yu Lang? Is he really a dual resonance user as well?"

"Who knows?" Li Luo splayed his fingers, palms upward.

"Commander Li Luo, let me get straight to the point... I just want to ask if you intend to take the entire medium anima cumulonimbus for yourselves."

Li Luo nodded.

"Are you sure you're not biting off more than you can chew?" Zhao Xingying commented.

"Better a bigger bite than starving to death." Li Luo grinned.

"We have three sage colleges gathered here. You think the Astral Sage College can take us all?"

"Well, we have to try."

Zhao Xingying paused for a moment. "Commander Li Luo, if you're willing, the Iron Sands Sage College can work with you. Let's join forces and send the other two schools packing."

"So quick to betray your alliance?" Li Luo was astonished.

"We're not allies, per se. We just came for the anima cumulonimbus together. We are happy to work with whoever gets us access to it," Zhao Xingying said candidly.

"And you're not afraid that I'll tell on you?"

"They wouldn't believe you, and I wouldn't admit to it. Come now, Commander Li Luo, surely you're not that naive."

"Hmm. And how much do you want?" Li Luo asked.

"Half."

Li Luo laughed out loud. "You're quite a greedy one too, I see. I guess we can't make this work."

"Very confident, I see," Zhao Xingying said, irritated.

"How about this... you three commanders can face off against me. If you win, I'll give the anima cumulonimbus up. If you lose, leave us alone. Agreed?" Li Luo offered.

Zhao Xingying stared at him. "You want to fight us three-on-one? Commander Li Luo, you're a wild one."

"It's always good to find out where one's limits lie," Li Luo said.

"An admirable and rousing offer, but I refuse," Zhao Xingying said dryly. "We have the numbers advantage. Why would we fight you?"

"A pity." Li Luo sighed. Indeed, Zhao Xingying was too sharp to fall into his simple trick.

"Since we cannot come to an agreement, this conversation is over. Commander Li Luo, on behalf of the Iron Sands Sage College, the Heaven's Path Sage College, and the Imperial Gem Sage College, we declare our intention to attack," Zhao Xingying announced firmly.

"However, as a mark of respect to you, all three commanders will come to face you. You'll get your wish, in a fashion."

He lifted his hand high in the air and made a curt, chopping motion.

From behind, resonant powers fired up like fireflies in the dusk.

Chapter 0473: Forces Meet

With the rising cluster of resonant powers popping across the treeline, the battle for the anima cumulonimbus began.

Li Luo was calm in the face of superior numbers. He had no illusions that it would be otherwise.

He watched the resonant power flares with a studied expression, even as their users came towards him. He could see that three of them were at the Second Changing.

Zhao Xingying was among them.

These three had to be the commanders of the three sage colleges.

They were definitely very strong.

Again, he had never doubted that they would be this strong. They were at the top of their respective classes in their schools. The classic combination of talent waiting to be honed, and a willing shower of resources to provide that honing from their schools. It would be disrespectful and foolish to even hope that any of them would be weak.

The three of them teamed up together was a force to be reckoned with.

They slowed a few dozen meters away from him.

Zhao Xingying smiled at him. "Commander Li Luo, this is the Imperial Gem Sage College's commander, Zheng Fuxing, and that is the Heaven's Path Sage College's commander, Zhang Dingchi."

Li Luo gave them a slow, calm nod. He knew that Zhao Xingying was just trying to intimidate him.

Three strong commanders.

"Commander Li Luo, I'll ask but one time. Do you intend to keep the entire anima cumulonimbus for yourself?" Zheng Fuxing asked in a bassy voice that came from deep within his chest.

Li Luo nodded.

"Commander Li Luo, the fight here will attract even more schools. They might not act yet, but once the first sign of weakness appears in your defensive line, they will definitely come like piranhas for blood. Are you sure this is the wise choice?" the Heaven's Path Sage College's commander, Ding Chi, asked again.

"Ah, so I will prevent any signs of weakness from appearing in my defensive line... by attacking." Li Luo chuckled.

Zhao Xingying laughed as well. "You mean to make examples of the three of us?"

"Can't I?" Li Luo asked mildly.

"Do you really think you are on the level of Jing Taixu, Sun Dasheng, or Lu Ming? If you're really so strong, why hasn't your name been put alongside theirs?"

"Well, I guess it'll be there after today," Li Luo said with all seriousness.

The three were a little uncertain about how to respond, so they chose to act instead. Their resonant powers surged forth.

Zhao Xingying's was a dark, burnished gold, but it was wielded in a sinuous form that was not usually associated with the color of hard and metallic resonances. He had the saffron crawler resonance.

Zheng Fuxing's resonant power was black, and it was announced by an ox's bellow. This was the Demonic Battle Bull resonance.

Ding Chi had a standard fire resonance, which immediately turned the leaves under his feet to a powdery ash.

The three commanders leaped forth as one.

They were not foolish enough to "test" Li Luo's depths one by one. There was no need. Strong or weak, their only goal was to defeat him and take the anima cumulonimbus.

Besides, he was the commander of the Astral Sage College. Once he fell, the Astral Sage College would be thoroughly demoralized.

Swoosh!

Zhao Xingying struck first, his golden vines snaking forth quick as lightning.

The sharp, whip-like crack punctured the air.

Li Luo stomped a foot on the ground, awakening his wood resonant power.

"Arboreal Bindings!"

A tree sprung out of the ground, sending its vines out in answer to Zhao Xingying's attack.

Gold and brown vines twisted against each other in a wondrous arch of color.

Black light exploded from beneath. Zheng Fuxing was clutching an enormous axe. He smashed it downwards with enough strength to shake the ground.

Li Luo did not even flinch. With a quick twist, he had the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade in hand, and he used it to parry Zheng Fuxing's huge axe.

Clang!

The ring of metal sent a blast of resonant power booming out from their weapons.

"Meteoric Pearl!"

An orb of fire came straight at Li Luo's face.

Pfft!

A spout of water resonant power from Li Luo's mouth morphed into the arrow as he spat it out. It crashed into the fiery attack and neutralized it.

The three-on-one battle had gotten off to an explosive start, a furious, urgent pace that was as deadly as it was relentless.

Li Luo weaved in and out of their attacks, choosing not to retreat even when he could have.

Instead, he met all their attacks head-on and subdued them with even more power.

Within his waterlight resonant palace, the lake's water rippled as though it were vibrating. The large sun burned brightly within it.

Within his woodearth resonant palace, a lush, green tree of resonant power dug its roots deep into the soil and stretched its branches without care.

Both of them supplied Li Luo with a flood of resonant power.

Clang!

The Onyx-Elephant Blade was a slim piece, and yet it moved against the brutal ax of his opponent with quick efficiency. Coated in blue power, it thrust and parried, occasionally spilling splashes of power out from the blade. Li Luo was able to keep both Zhao Xingying and Ding Chi at bay.

He clasped both hands together, merging his resonant powers.

Dual resonances!

Weng!

A watery crescent of power slashed through the air. Li Luo's Water Edge Art had been raised to heights unheard of thanks to his waterlight resonant power. Conducted through a vessel as worthy as the Onyx-Elephant Blade, it punched way above its resonant art class.

Zhao Xingying and his allies could sense it. They had been through countless battles, and their experience told them that this attack could not be avoided. With a shout, they bunched up together and combined their strength against the attack.

Clang!

A violent clash.

Li Luo swayed on the spot, while Zhao Xingying and the others were sent stumbling back a dozen paces.

Their expressions were different now.

"Water resonance, wood resonance... What strength. So, Commander Li Luo really has dual resonances," Zhao Xingying said in a low voice.

All four of them were at the Second Changing, but Li Luo had come off better in the clash. This was something that only a true dual resonance user could accomplish.

After all, he had two resonant palaces, so his maximum resonant power capacity was much higher than theirs.

If they had not banded together, they would have been badly injured from that attack.

Li Luo did not reply. With a grim smile, he lifted his sword again slowly, holding it up above his head with both hands. His three opponents trembled.

"Commander Li Luo, you are very strong, and there is no doubt that we would lose to you individually. You might win the battle, but you will lose the war," Zhao Xingying ground out.

"Our squads are advancing along the other two routes. As long as they can punch through into the anima cumulonimbus, it does not matter that you and I are held here together.

"And I am sure you can sense that more squads are still lurking in the shadows, watching for opportunities. Aren't you afraid that we will wound each other and allow the profit to go to others?"

"This is the time when you should be making some concessions."

Li Luo just looked at him with a neutral expression.

"I trust my companions," he said simply. "It will not be so simple for you to break past them.

"Besides... I've already said that I don't care about the peanut gallery. I just have to destroy you three, and no one will dare to make another move."

Resolve crept back into their eyes.

"Well then, I guess we will find out if dual resonances are as great as they say, or if you're greater than you say!"

Chapter 0474: Two Routes

While Li Luo was fighting Zhao Xingying and the other two commanders, the other two routes saw similarly heated fights.

Qin Zhulu's golden tiger avatar was roaring at full power as he fought with bestial fury. He was in his element—against impossible odds that triggered his primal instincts for aggression.

His heavy spear twirled effortlessly in his hand as he took on three opponents at once.

All three of them were First Changings, but even with the numbers advantage, they were steadily being swatted backwards by Qin Zhulu.

His power was undisputed—he had only been overshadowed by a freak like Li Luo. Not even Zhao Xingying could have stood against him in a one-on-one battle. And now that the three commanders were busy with Li Luo, he was the next biggest fish in the pond.

The combined school forces had no choice but to assign their three strongest students to deal with Qin Zhulu.

And still, the results were not looking good for them.

Qin Zhulu was a monster on the battlefield, built for offense, offense, and then more offense. Whether in terms of moves or personality, he had committed all of his efforts into relentless attack.

However, he was not defenseless.

A glittering armor of ice sheathed him at strategic points of his body, morphing and repositioning to block any attacks that came in while leaving his movements unrestricted. It not only bolstered his defenses substantially, but the armor itself would counter their attacks with a chilling blast of power that numbed them and left them vulnerable.

It was like putting wings on a tiger.

This frustratingly useful armor had been provided by a beautiful girl in Qin Zhulu's squad. She was currently wielding a high-grade ice resonance with skill.

The three that were fighting Qin Zhulu could only grit their teeth and soldier on, doing their best to hold the line. Secretly, they prayed that the other fighters were doing better.

The other fighters were not doing better.

Yi Lisha's squad had taken the fight to their opponents as well, holding them back. Plus, Yin Yue had come from Qin Zhulu's squad to support them, and they were holding their ground easily.

Lu Qing'er was truly proving her worth. Not only was she shielding the solo Qin Zhulu, she had to face five opponents all by herself. However, this cloud had a silver lining. These five were un-coordinated, their leaders all being occupied by Qin Zhulu.

Which meant that their combined strength was probably not even at the Evolving Resonance Tier.

On the other hand, ever since Lu Qing'er's ice resonance had reached the lower eighth-grade, her cultivation speed had increased. Combined with the resources that the school provided, she was already a First Changing, catching up to the other squad leaders besides Qin Zhulu and Li Luo. In the open clearing, nothing stood between the girl and her opponents.

A tuft of snowflakes swirled around Lu Qing'er, and the dry leaves under her feet hardened and turned brittle with cold. She looked coolly at her opponents, ice-silk-gloved hands open and ready to fight.

Her five opponents trembled.

Lu Qing'er did not hesitate. Snow-white resonant power blasted forth from her elegant hands, covering the sky in ice before sending it down in a thick blanket on her unfortunate foes.

At the same time, she blew out a harsh, icy mist from her lips that obscured their vision and slowed them down.

Five on one, and yet they were forced to defend themselves, flailing helplessly in the mist.

All in all, Qin Zhulu's route was doing very well.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said about the last route, where Bai Doudou, Wang Hejiu, and Yu Lang were.

Thanks to Yu Lang's rumored status as a dual resonance user, the three schools had sent a large number of squads to deal with him.

"One, two, three... six squads?!"

Yu Lang stared at the opposing force in dismay. "We only have two squads. How are we going to fight so many?"

"Scared?" Bai Doudou glared at him.

Yu Lang shook his head. "No, no. I'm not scared. Of them. Anyway, I was just thinking that since they have so many people, they might try to slip past us. If they get into the valley, we'll be in trouble."

Bai Doudou frowned. "We don't have a choice. We must keep all of them busy."

Yu Lang chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Well, I mean... It'll be too hard to fight them all in a straight fight. We should try to even the odds a little."

Bai Doudou stared at him. "What's on your sneaky, little mind now?" Yu Lang might be weaker than them, but his brain moved like it had its own wind resonance.

Yu Lang smiled cheekily. "Why, we do sneaky things, of course. For example..." he looked over at the impassive Wang Hejiu. "We put the covers over their heads and send them poisonous farts underneath!"

"Watch your tongue," Wang Hejiu hissed.

"Now, now, don't mind my language." Yu Lang hurriedly tried to calm him. "What I meant to say was that your poison resonance could be very crucial in helping us turn the tide, with a bit of luck.

Wang Hejiu frowned. "My poison resonance isn't powerful enough to make them drop instantly. If they have wood or water resonance users in their ranks, they'll be able to nullify it easily. Besides, poison gas works best in an enclosed area."

"We can set up the environment," Yu Lang assured him. "I just want to know this: if we can lure them to a sealed environment, can your poison take them down?"

Wang Hejiu thought it over. "I have a secret art that can strengthen the poison gas temporarily," he finally said. "If you can really trap them in a closed environment, I can make them pay the price."

"Good!" Yu Lang said, satisfied.

"You're going out to be bait?" Bai Doudou asked him.

Yu Lang sighed. "I might as well... They already think I'm the second dual resonance user. Only I have the power to tempt them. When I get them where we want them, just lay on the poison. Don't worry about me. If we waste time getting me out, they'll escape," he said firmly.

Wang Hejiu looked at him doubtfully. "My poison is no joke. And you're already quite weak. When the poison gas gets into your body, you'll suffer very badly."

Yu Lang shook his head sadly. "It can't be helped. If they smell the trap, all our efforts will be wasted."

Wang Hejiu looked at Yu Lang. Until this moment, he had never paid the least bit of attention to this guy, but now he felt a bit of respect for his willingness to sacrifice himself.

Bai Doudou looked at Yu Lang a little more kindly. "Take care out there," she said softly.

She did not object to the plan. Indeed, this was a time when heroics were needed. And Yu Lang was good at this.

Yu Lang gave them a jaunty wave as he stepped forward. He looked back at the others, basking in their awe and respect for a moment. He felt like a king.

He turned back to Wang Hejiu. "Look here, mate. I don't think you think too highly of me. Just to confirm... you're not going to poison me to death, are you?"

Wang Hejiu scowled. "I don't plan on having my house wiped from the school by Vice Principal Su Xin."

Yu Lang nodded to himself, satisfied with the answer. He turned away. "Well, I'll be going."

Chapter 0475: Of Covers and Poisonous Farts

"On this back I built the mountain, and with these hands I planted the trees," Yu Lang boomed. "If you wish to pass unharmed, then pay a price to please!"

He stood fearlessly against Liu Xiao and the others, and they paused. "Careful, this is THE Yu Lang, the second dual resonance user of the Astral Sage College!"

The others looked around with trepidation. They could see the first dual resonance user taking on three commanders single-handedly and doing well. Such was the power of dual resonances.

If Yu Lang commanded similar power, then they were going to suffer for real.

But they were not scared enough to call off the attack. They had done some basic mental preparation, so they slowed their speed and continued to creep forward cautiously, intent on surrounding Yu Lang.

Even though he was a dual resonance user, they could take him down from all directions.

Yu Lang moved back swiftly, taunting them. "You think I'm a fool?"

"And let me warn you all—this route is closed to you. If you insist on this foolish course of action, don't blame me for showing you no mercy."

"Yu Lang, if you're really a dual resonance user, why not show us your power? Deter us! Running and hiding like this—you wouldn't be a fake, would you?"

Yu Lang laughed. "Oh, yes, you're right, I'm not a dual resonance user at all. You guessed it, of course. You believe me, right?"

Activating his wind resonance, he darted to and fro with ease, looking every bit the competent expert.

Liu Xiao still had no clue what the truth was. "Let's chase on. We can't back down now. But be careful. He must have teammates nearby."

The others nodded.

The chase continued for a while, and finally Liu Xiao's patience started running out. He gave increasingly aggressive fighting orders, and now resonant powers were flying.

Deadly blasts flew through the trees, seemingly sailing out of nowhere, given how obscured vision was in the forest.

Yu Lang was sweating through the top of his scalp, but he knew that this was not the time to let them know. Instead, he concentrated all his energy into dodging them, letting the patterns of the wind tell him where to move. Disturbances in the airflow could be sensed way before his eyes could detect them, and he swayed like a willow branch in the breeze to avoid them.

He was truly an agile one.

Nearby, Wang Hejiu, Duze Beixuan, and the others were watching from their hiding spots. "This guy's actually got skills!" They were astonished.

"That's Mentor Mi Er's Classical Wind Art. Yu Lang's progress is the furthest in our squad," Bai Doudou told them.

Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan were silent. Learning such a resonance art proved that this guy really did not fear death.

"They're entering the zone," Xin Fu reminded them. They all jumped when he spoke. They had forgotten he existed.

All of them prepared themselves.

Nearby, Yu Lang executed another daring dodge, avoiding a barrage of resonant power attacks. A powerful puff of wind resonant power helped him float back another ten meters, until he was in a particularly dense patch of forest in sunken terrain.

Liu Xiao and the others chased grimly.

As they rushed in, Qi Luozi struck. Her vines joined the trees together, pulling them tight and sealing the gaps between them. Before the pursuers knew what was happening, they were trapped tightly in a vine enclosure.

Wang Hejiu struck from the high ground. Digging deep, he summoned forth roiling plumes of poison gas.

It sank down rapidly within the enclosure, withering the leaves as it descended.

Behind him, Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo sent swirling gusts of wind to help hasten the poison gas' circulation.

The attack was effective, and Yu Lang's vision blurred immediately. He was giddy and disoriented.

Behind him, Liu Xiao and the others sensed that something was wrong. "Quick, break through the vines!"

In their panic, their formation started to falter.

Not all of the students were affected. There were plenty of water and wood resonance users in their ranks who were able to quickly purify the poison and turn their attention to breaking them out.

"Wang Hejiu, your gas doesn't have enough poison!" Bai Doudou cried.

He scowled. "It's hard to push it through empty air. Poison weakens when used this way!" he was sweating profusely from his efforts.

"I saw Duke experts use poison resonances before," Xin Fu interrupted. "They could gas out an entire city. You're really weak."

"Duke! You said it yourself!" Wang Hejiu snapped. "This is all a Resonant Master can do, damn it!" Still, he knew that he was not delivering on the crucial part of their plan. After a few moments of hesitation, he suddenly pulled out his dagger and cut a few gashes across his body, allowing his blood to flow.

He slapped his palms together and injected the blood into his poison, turning the purple a deeper shade of red.

The poison gas also grew stickier.

Yu Lang could barely move now, blindly stumbling onwards. He was starting to lose feeling in his limbs. But he knew that he was the weakest in terms of resonant power, which meant that those behind him were not even this affected.

"This little poison birdie sucks balls," he muttered to himself.

"It's not enough!!" Bai Doudou shouted at him.

Wang Hejiu turned to her, ready to give her a piece of his irritated mind. He was shocked to see her with a knife in hand.

"Bai Doudou, what the hell are you doing?"

"Blood strengthens it, right? Look at you! Those measly cuts couldn't feed a damn mosquito! Are you even a man?"

"If you can't do it, I'll help you!"

She slashed Wang Hejiu across the back, cutting him deep. Fresh blood gushed out. "I-what the F*CK! Bai Doudou, have you lost your mind?!" Wang Hejiu screamed, arching his back from the pain. He couldn't even care about his image right now as he twisted and squirmed pathetically. He just wanted to get her off his back. Desperately.

"Duze Beixuan, hold her!!" he cried.

Duze Beixuan looked a little embarrassed. He had been caught off guard by Bai Doudou's sudden move, and now, given the dire situation they were in, he was not too willing to hold her back.

He chose to pretend he had not heard Wang Hejiu screaming.

"Shush now." Xin Fu comforted him. "Just use all that lovely blood, that's a good boy."

Wang Hejiu dearly wanted to slap them all across their faces, but he knew that this was not the time for blame games, so he hurriedly boiled his blood with his resonant power and injected the blood vapor into his poison gas.

This time, the poison finally turned from a pale, lavender color into a rich, royal purple.

Now the poison hit Yu Lang like a truck. "Son of a b*tch, this poison birdie heard me and went the other extreme—now he's trying to kill me!"

Fortunately, it was not just Yu Lang. His attackers were starting to crumble as well, some of them fainting.

Only the stronger ones like Liu Xiao could hold on, and they finally managed to break out of the enclosure of poison.

Their numbers were heavily diminished.

They broke out into fresh air, gasping gratefully.

Bai Doudou swooped down to Yu Lang. She was relieved to see him still on his knees and conscious.

"Our turn," she said grimly.

Duze Beixuan, Xin Fu, Qiu Luo and the others followed her.

Taking point, she shot forward like a rider of the wind, straight and true at Liu Xiao and the others.

Chapter 0476: One Attack

The trees on the mountainside were a verdant coat that softened the craggy, harsh surface of the rock beneath, but they were being stripped apart from below by fire, glowing lanes of power in the dim blue of night.

Intense fights were raging on along all three routes to the anima cumulonimbus.

As time ticked on, more squads from more schools were converging. They were also eying the grand prize, and their thoughts turned to the battles that they might have to join.

They did not immediately join the fray.

Firstly, the squads that had rushed here first were still waiting for the rest of their schools to arrive. Secondly, entering the fray blindly might cause the current fighters to team up against them. They chose the smarter, prudent way: watch and wait to see how the battle would develop.

Ideally, they would swoop in when both sides were injured.

Most of the eyes were on the main battle, where the Astral Sage College's commander had revealed... dual resonances.

They were stunned. No one had known that the Astral Sage College would hide an ace like this.

It was a one versus three, yet he was holding his own. That was stupendous power indeed.

But as the number of watchers and backup arrived, an extended battle was not in the Astral Sage College's interests.

They would want to end things quickly and decisively with overwhelming power that declared their strength to the watchers and dissuade any further attacks.

But did the Astral Sage College have such power?

A blast of power rocked the trees nearby, and they all bent obediently in one direction. Leaves and grass billowed in a wave of green.

All four combatants were locked in the ebb and flow of the battle.

As the battle continued, they slowly began to level out the forest around them.

"Saffron Crawler Palm!"

Zhao Xingying slammed his fists into the ground, and bright, yellow vines sprouted forth, bunching up and twisting themselves into a giant palm print that pushed forward at Li Luo.

The Onyx-Elephant Blade twisted out in response, delivering a keen, diagonal slice.

Swish.

The Saffron Crawler Palm was sliced into two and dissolved into golden sparkles.

Zhao Xingying grimaced. He stared at the blade in Li Luo's hand and gnashed his teeth.

His Saffron Crawler resonance was supposed to be resilient! Yet all of his previous attacks had been cut by Li Luo's weapon as easily as a sharp scythe through wheat. His blade was magical... it wasn't just Li Luo!

He could see that it was a gold-eye treasured artifact, and a good quality one at that!

Li Luo's dual resonances were hard enough to deal with on their own. Wielded in conjunction with this godly weapon, he was a real terror.

Zheng Fuxing and Ding Chi appeared by Zhao Xingying's side, looking just as frustrated and concerned. Now they knew just how strong Li Luo was.

Even combined, they could not find a single bit of advantage over him.

No matter how much power they poured, how well synchronized their attacks, Li Luo dealt with it all.

Besides, they could feel that Li Luo was looking for a way to take them down. None of them were his match in a one-on-one, and all of them knew it. The moment they were split up, he would take them down faster than they could blink.

Although all three were fighting together for the first time, their years of battle experience helped them quickly form a working rhythm that kept them alive and fighting.

Still, they knew that the three of them could not take Li Luo down.

Zhao Xingying's eyes flicked to their surroundings. "Friends from other schools," he shouted, "if you're interested in the medium anima cumulonimbus, come join forces with us. We can split the loot!"

They were locked in a stalemate with Li Luo, and perhaps some chaos would break things wide open again.

He believed that even Li Luo would not be able to hold on if one more school joined the fray.

Zhao Xingying's shout echoed around, and some squads stirred restlessly. With his invitation, they now had a clear side to enter the battle on. Zhao Xingying had chosen his moment well.

However, they were still locked in a moment of hesitation.

Li Luo was surprised by Zhao Xingying's straightforward approach. "Any more helpers, and you'll barely have a drop of anima dew for yourself," he laughed.

"A bird in hand," Zhao Xingying said coolly.

"Commander Li Luo, more squads are amassing, and the situation is chaotic. Will you not reconsider our offer? Split the anima cumulonimbus with us, and we can have it peacefully," he pressed.

Li Luo shook his head with a smile.

"It's almost there," he said.

Zhao Xingying's eyes narrowed. "What? What's almost there?"

"Why, the number of people, of course," Li Luo said.

"What do you mean?"

"You see, there weren't enough people just now," Li Luo said patiently. "Even if I beat you all then, it wouldn't have generated enough reputation for me. I thought more people would make for a better show."

Zhao Xingying barked a laugh. "Commander Li Luo, you mean to say you weren't fighting us with all your strength?"

"Fighting? That was barely warm up, you pompous fool."

Ignoring their outrage, he wrapped his fingers anew on the grip of the Onyx-Elephant Blade.

His Resonant Bubble Art could already produce 11 bubbles, just one away from maxing out the art.

Although right now, two of the eleven had poison in them, and Li Luo wouldn't dare to touch those.

He popped seven out of the nine resonant bubbles for now.

The rush of resonant power flooded his two resonant palaces.

He combined them swiftly before they faded.

Dual resonance power!

It burst from his hand and leaped to the Onyx-Elephant Blade, which shimmered with rippling water and the vitality of wood.

The Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade began to hum from the power charged within it.

The sword itself was reacting, satisfied with the power that it was getting.

At the same time, a halo of teal power surrounded the blade.

"Becoming One level?!" Zhao Xingying and the others' eyes almost popped out.

"I guess I'd be happy to give the anima cumulonimbus away to whoever can take this one attack," Li Luo said lightly.

It was not an offer. He didn't let them say yes or no—he simply delivered the attack.

"Thousand Watery Knives Art."

His quiet voice was followed by a thunderous roar, and their vision filled with blue.

Countless blades of water flew towards them in a swarm.

They covered the entire forest.

The forest was shaken, the watchers thrown into a stunned silence.

Chapter 0477: Badass

The watery knives flew out in a wide arc like a wave against the beach, a silvery-blue attack that stretched out across the horizon. And on said beach were Zhao Xingying, Zheng Fuxing, and Ding Chi, facing the tsunami.

The three felt a chill run down their spines.

Li Luo's attack was terrifying.

This was the true power of dual resonance users?

Both sides should have been Second Changings, with similarly high-graded resonances. That was as it should be, as they were all their respective schools' representatives. And yet this single attack from Li Luo was cutting through any illusion they might have about being on the same level.

"Join forces!"

"Block this, and he'll have nothing left!"

"All the schools are watching! We have to represent our schools well!"

In the end, it was Zhao Xingying who rallied them with a cry, summoning his golden power first.

"Saffron Crawler python!"

His vine power now banded together into a thicker coil that took on life. A golden vine python hissed and snaked out towards the attack.

Zheng Fuxing and Ding Chi gritted their teeth and committed as well, suppressing their terror.

"Bull Demon Cleaves the Mountain!"

Zheng Fuxing bellowed as he raised his ax high, bringing it down. Behind him, the demonic battle bull did the same, its malevolent, red eyes smoking with ashy power. Midnight-black light flooded Zheng Fuxing's ax, then it was released in a powerful swing.

Ding Chi cupped his own hands around his mouth and lifted his head high, blowing out scarlet flames that rose into the sky in the form of a fiery sword.

It was reverse sword swallowing. The flaming sword blazed through the sky like a comet.

All three had used their strongest attacks.

The four attacks met in mid-air.

All eyes were on the impact.

This would determine the battle between the commanders.

Boom!

It exploded like fireworks when all four collided at the exact same moment. Even the mountain winds were changed, blowing outwards in different directions as they bowed to the attacks. The shockwave shook the trees with a rippling effect outwards.

There was now a crater several meters wide at the center of the impact. All of the trees at ground zero had been completely uprooted.

Li Luo was sent skidding back a dozen paces, although most of the impact had been absorbed by a waterlight coat that flowed across his skin.

The Heavy Water Toga.

He steadied himself, then he looked over at his three opponents.

They were in bad shape. Zhao Xingying had revealed a chest piece of dark-gray battle armor. It was a powerful defensive treasured artifact, but it now had a deep gash on it.

Zheng Fuxing was propping himself up with his ax, fresh blood bubbling out of his mouth at frequent intervals.

Ding Chi clutched at his throat, gurgling on his own blood.

All three were completely roughed up. Their resonant powers were sparking chaotically, their control unstable.

The outcome was clear as could be.

The schools who had flirted with the idea of fishing in this pond packed up their fishing rods. Li Luo was way too strong for them.

One man alone had taken on three commanders and won!

What sort of sorcery was this?!

Was he on the level of Jing Taixu, Lu Ming, and Sun Dasheng?

No one had told them that the Astral Sage College had such a trump card!

"Gentlemen, if we keep this up, someone's going to be eliminated," Li Luo said with a smile.

Zhao Xingying's group was completely subdued now. They had truly underestimated Li Luo, and overestimated themselves.

"So this is dual resonance power..."

Zhao Xingying muttered to himself angrily. They were all Second Changings. Why was the difference so huge?

Zheng Fuxing and Ding Chi were looking uncertain as well. They knew that with this, Li Luo's reputation would soar within the Hall-level competition. It looked like the three hot favorites were about to have a new member in their ranks.

"I... still can fight!" Zhao Xingying grunted painfully.

Zheng Fuxing sighed. "The other two routes are not going well either."

Zhao Xingying was alarmed. He struggled to reach higher ground and peered over at the other routes.

On the left, the disadvantage was largest. Two Astral Sage College squads were winning easily, mostly due to the brute that was probably as strong as any one of the three commanders. No one else could stand up against him.

The right was where they had committed most of their forces, but somehow their forces seemed to only be half of what they should have been. Although they still held a modest numbers advantage, they had not broken past the defenses into the anima cumulonimbus yet.

Zhao Xingying's hopes faded away.

Stuffed on three routes. Their plan to take the anima cumulonimbus had completely failed.

If they continued fighting, they would not only walk away empty-handed, but also too injured to even contest other anima cumulonimbuses.

The three came to the same conclusion, so they pulled out their whistles and sounded the retreat.

The shrill signal rang out over the forest, and the side routes immediately stirred with a different energy. They were full of disbelief. Had they lost?

Everyone looked over, but their indignant expressions quickly turned to concern when they saw how badly beaten up their commanders were. Finally, they sighed and complied.

Was the Astral Sage College's Li Luo really that awesome?

Helping their teammates, the three schools retreated.

The Astral Sage College squads were too tired to chase. And even though the first three attackers had retreated, there could be more schools watching and waiting for opportunities.

Zhao Xingying and the other commanders slunk back quietly with their schools. They knew that they had no more cards on the table that could be used to negotiate with Li Luo.

They had lost thoroughly, and there was nothing to say about it.

It had been a three-on-one, and they had lost. Any insults to him would only brand them as sore losers.

Li Luo was silent too as he watched them go. And then he waved to Qin Zhulu and Bai Doudou, signifying that they should take some time to recuperate.

He himself remained on his tree top, sword in hand as he scanned the trees. He drew in a deep breath and shouted.

"This anima cumulonimbus is claimed by the Astral Sage College. Anybody have something to say about that?" The mountain winds and echoes of the valley carried his voice far and wide.

A badass move.

All the while, the three schools were limping away from him. Nobody dared to answer the challenge of the silver-haired youth!

Chapter 0478: Chats in the Night

The enduring silence in the wake of the battle was tentatively broken by the chirping of crickets, and the forest gradually resumed its natural pace.

Li Luo stood perched on his tree top, a silent sentinel with both palms resting on his sword.

An aurora of colors flashed and danced in the valley behind him.

It was not enough to tempt the greed of any.

Although an anima cumulonimbus was a big prize, there was no realistic way they could obtain it, and it was just not worth sinking the entire school just for this.

The Astral Sage College had already played a powerful card, one on the level of the best in the game. Ordinary sage colleges could not compete.

Night deepened even further, covering the mountains in midnight blue.

In the darkness, only the valley continued to glow and shine like a jewel in the night.

Qin Zhulu was sitting in the lotus position on the left route, eyes closed as he recovered. Others were speaking in low voices.

Lu Qing'er was sitting with Si Qiuying. The two girls had not been close before, but this battle had helped them bond. While idling away the time, they often turned to chat with each other.

Even while they chatted, Lu Qing'er's eyes occasionally darted towards the top of the large tree, where Li Luo stood.

There was a soft look in her eyes. Li Luo had fought the three commanders alone, and even though the battle was over, he was not resting, instead standing guard against the hungry wolves that still prowled.

Si Qiuying sensed that Lu Qing'er's heart was not in the conversation. "Qing'er, are you... close with Li Luo?" she asked, immediately sensing what was on her mind.

"I've known Li Luo for many years. We've been schoolmates since Southwind Academy. Of course we're friends," Lu Qing'er answered.

Si Qiuying did not believe her regarding the friendship. "Do you... you know?" She hesitated.

"Like him?"

Lu Qing'er froze, then she smiled and blinked. "Why? Can't I?" If Yu Hongxi had asked her, she would never have admitted it, knowing her mother would never agree.

Si Qiuying was shocked. Lu Qing'er was one of the more famous girls in the One Star Hall. She was top class in every aspect—status, looks, and talent. Many of the One Star Hall guys had tried to make moves on her, and even seniors from other halls kept an eye and ear out for news of her.

But over the course of the last year, no one had managed to make any progress with Lu Qing'er. She had developed a reputation as an iceberg—beautiful but cool. Only now had Si Qiuying learned that there was a fire in that iceberg after all.

"But-but Li Luo's engaged," Si Qiuying blurted out.

Lu Qing'er nodded. "I know."

"Do you think Senior Jiang actually likes Li Luo?" Si Qiuying asked piercingly. "Likes him romantically, I mean." She was reeling a little from the developments. She was on good terms with Jiang Qing'e, and she worshiped the very ground she stood on. In her mind, Jiang Qing'e was as good as a girl got. Her talent eclipsed all of theirs, and even a highborn like herself felt inferior in comparison.

This was the reason why she had been so resentful when Li Luo first appeared on the scene, and why she had gone to meet him at the city outskirts to make trouble for the Tianshu bumpkin.

One of her more shameful memories.

But whether Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo were romantically involved was a question she didn't really have an answer to. Although Li Luo was very awesome in his own right, it was hard to imagine Jiang Qing'e getting worked up over a guy at all.

Still, she felt a need to defend Jiang Qing'e. "Li Luo and Senior Jiang's relationship can't be doubted. Li Luo is the most important person in her heart."

"I don't doubt it," Lu Qing'er agreed softly. "They spent their childhood together. Even though they're not blood-related, surely they must be closer than most sisters and brothers."

Si Qiuying felt that it was a little strange to label them as brother and sister.

Still, she had no idea as to the real nature of the relationship between the two either. After all, many had thought that the engagement was in name only, and they had assumed that Jiang Qing'e objected to it. She had been one of those people. But later on, they realized that the two were indeed very close.

Whatever it was they had, it was enough to prove the engagement was more than a formality.

But was it really romantic? It was hard to say sometimes.

"The engagement is unfair to both Li Luo and Senior Jiang," Lu Qing'er said serenely. "I have told Senior Jiang this as well."

Si Qiuying's mouth fell open. "Y-you spoke to Senior Jiang about it?" she repeated dumbly.

"You did what?! Lu Qing'er always looks cool, calm, and collected. Why would she do something so rash? We're talking about Jiang Qing'e, for goodness' sake. Some people go their entire school lives without mustering the courage to even say hi to her."

"If the engagement is cruel to both of them, why would I not say something?" Lu Qing'er asked casually.

Si Qiuying kneaded her forehead. She had a newfound respect for Lu Qing'er's guts. She might well be the only one in the Astral Sage College who had the courage to challenge Jiang Qing'e.

"Well... what did Senior Jiang say?" she asked, burning with curiosity.

How would the great Jiang Qing'e respond to a challenge like that?

Lu Qing'er did not reply. She recalled the day that Jiang Qing'e had given her a brazen and blazing repartee, and she still blushed at the memory.

At the same time, she had to admire Jiang Qing'e for being a strong rival.

That said, she, Lu Qing'er, was not about to back down just because her rival was strong.

Wrongs needed to be righted. Lu Qing'er looked up at the tree again, and her eyes hardened. "Li Luo, I will definitely save you from that loveless engagement."

The midnight blue gave way to the predawn sky of pinks and oranges, and day was almost upon them.

When the first ray of morning light broke through the thick clouds, an answering light from below reached back up to the heavens, and an alluring fragrance filled the air.

Li Luo was the first to open his eyes from his perch on the top of the tree. He was as vigilant as ever.

Everyone knew that the time of the anima dew's completion was upon them. This was the time of maximum danger.

After a good rest, Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, Wang Hejiu, and the others were all equally vigilant.

Luckily, no one had made a move on them since the end of the last battle.

Several long minutes later.

The rainbow-colored light behind them faded.

Bai Mengmeng ran towards them, waving her arms happily at Li Luo, her cute, little face glowing with pleasure.

She had managed to harvest the entire anima cumulonimbus.

Li Luo smiled brightly as well, the tension falling away from his shoulders. Their first anima cumulonimbus in the Hall-level competition.

26 drops of anima dew.

They needed 99 to be able to send one person to Dragonbone Island.

They would have to continue searching.

Li Luo gave the signal, and Qin Zhulu and the others all closed back in towards the valley.

Li Luo joined them last, and he cupped his fist to each of the four directions and then let loose with a piercing whoop.

Their first battle to defend an anima cumulonimbus had gone well, but they all knew that this was just the beginning.

As the competition progressed, more and more intense fights would continue to break out.

All to win the golden resonant tree brooch awarded to the strongest student.

Chapter 0479: Anima Storm

The Hall-level competition was in full swing.

A full week passed in the blink of an eye.

All sorts of fights had broken out throughout this period. Each time an anima cumulonimbus was discovered, it attracted plenty of schools.

The nonstop fighting was starting to wear the students down, and this was where the stronger ones were starting to pull ahead. The students began to get a sense of who was truly strong too.

Foremost in many of their minds was the Astral Sage College's dual resonance user, Li Luo.

Those optimistic of his chances even grouped him up with the top three favorites.

The man himself did not care though. Li Luo couldn't care less about being in the top four. He was here to be number one.

His reason was simple: he wanted the Golden Resonant Tree Brooch.

Of course, he had the mission from Qing'e as well.

Spank Jing Taixu, that naughty boy.

This concerned the honor of the young lord of House Luolan.

Li Luo's team had not been slacking off. They had found a total of four small anima cumulonimbuses and one medium. They now had successfully filled an anima gourd with 99 drops of anima dew.

Which meant that the Astral Sage College could now send one person to Dragonbone Island.

This was not enough at all—Li Luo was aiming to send at least three or four people.

He was the commander after all. He couldn't very well just send himself over and ditch the rest. Besides, the more friends they had in Dragonbone Island, the easier a time he would have. The Hall-level competition was about having a team, and he would be much happier with Qin Zhulu and Bai Doudou by his side.

However, that was easier said than done. They had spent a full week just to get their first batch of 99 drops. At this rate, they would need a full month just to get three or four people's share.

The Hall-level competition would not last that long.

This method was setting too slow a pace for his taste.

He wanted to fly ahead. And only a large anima cumulonimbus could give him wings.

Unfortunately, large anima cumulonimbuses were notoriously hard to find; Li Luo and the others had not even heard of any discoveries in the last week. But Li Luo was not worried. He knew that as the competition moved on, large anima cumulonimbuses would definitely appear.

As he predicted, they received some rousing news on the ninth day.

...

"An anima storm has finally appeared?"

Li Luo thought to himself when he noted the pace that Yu Lang was running pell-mell towards him with. When he delivered the news to confirm Li Luo's suspicions, the rest of the group sprang to their feet in surprise, joy and excitement in their eyes.

An anima storm was not just a single anima cumulonimbus, but instead an entire region that had many anima cumulonimbuses.

There would definitely be large anima cumulonimbus within an anima storm, and perhaps not just one.

Anima storms usually appeared deep in the competition terrain. This was the Academic Federation's way of announcing to the students that they were reaching Dragonbone Island.

It would bring a rousing finale to the first half of the Hall-level competition.

All schools that heard the news would definitely converge on the anima storm's location at full speed.

This was the news that Li Luo had been waiting for. Of course, every single school had been waiting for such news.

If he wanted to send more people to Dragonbone Island, the anima storm was his only chance.

Yu Lang nodded. "We met another school ahead and exchanged information. It probably checks out, because such information travels very quickly. And the anima storm will cause a huge commotion that cannot be concealed."

"According to the directions they gave, it's not too far from us—about a day's journey."

The Astral Sage students were very happy to hear that.

"Finally, our meal ticket's arrived," Li Luo said, rubbing his hands in glee.

Compared to the anima storm, the medium anima cumulonimbus was like a tiny appetizer at best.

"But I hear that anima storms are very special. I wonder what the challenge mechanic will be for this iteration," Bai Doudou wondered aloud.

Li Luo shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

"All rested, you all? Let's go, then."

The others nodded and then they packed up their scant supplies and headed towards the location at full speed.

Along the way, they spotted many other schools headed in the same direction. Both sides ignored each other, intent on reaching the anima storm as soon as possible.

Perhaps because of the rule that anima dew could not be stolen the moment it was secured in the anima gourd, the schools were quite friendly with each other outside of battle around the anima cumulonimbuses, and there was not much reason to be on guard. After all, no one would want to fight a battle over no rewards.

This was a refreshing change of pace from the competitions up to now.

Or even reality itself.

However, ever since the Astral Sage College had staked its claim in the early days of the Hall-level competition, their reputation had spread like wildfire. This was especially so for their commander, Li Luo. Many teams watched them curiously along the way.

And at the same time, they kept a safe distance.

Their journey was smooth and unhindered, which meant that they arrived at the anima storm's general location the following morning.

It was an extremely vast lake, perhaps the size of a small sea. All across it were islands scattered like pieces on a chessboard. The schools that had already arrived had staked their flags on the islands, and various designs were waving gaily in the morning breeze.

The loud bustle of people had the atmosphere of some sort of water festival instead of a fighting competition.

Still more teams were arriving, and they each took up position on a small island.

Li Luo looked out towards the middle of the lake. It was presently covered in deep fog, but there seemed to be buildings of some sort within them. It was from that vicinity that worldly natural energy seemed to be rippling outwards across the lake.

There were four especially large palaces in the middle, where the energy accumulation was colossal. Li Luo guessed that they were large anima cumulonimbuses.

He had to wipe his mouth to check for drool. The greed in his eyes was unmistakable.

They were in an anima famine, and now there were four large anima cumulonimbuses...

The largest cake there was to eat in the Hall-level competition.

If he could take a large bite, all of his dreams would come true.

Chapter 0480: Stairway to Heaven

The Astral Sage College quickly set up camp on one of the small islands as well, unfurling their flag and staking their claim.

The moment they did, they could feel the crystal compass in their hands quiver as information began to stream into their minds regarding the anima storm.

There were a few quiet minutes while everyone processed the information.

And after they were done, all of them started frowning.

"This is going to be messy as hell," Lu Qing'er said softly.

Li Luo nodded with deep feeling. He looked up again at the buildings half-hidden in mist. The information had shared that this entire event was divided into four smaller anima storms. Each anima storm would have a large anima cumulonimbus at its center, and several medium anima cumulonimbuses as well.

In terms of resources, it was rich enough to have them all salivating.

After all, a week of slogging could yield just a medium anima cumulonimbus sometimes. And perhaps a few more small anima cumulonimbuses.

Then again, taking these ones was going to be difficult too, just in a different way.

The first problem was the Stairway to Heaven.

The Stairway to Heaven was a series of steps that they would have to clear before they could access the four large anima cumulonimbuses.

It was the only way forward, and not optional.

Only after they passed the Stairway to Heaven could they ring the anima bell and begin harvesting the anima dew.

Passing the Stairway to Heaven was not going to be easy.

Because of the sheer number of anima cumulonimbuses, the worldly natural energy here was out of this world. They would spontaneously form waves of pure energy that pulsed out, sweeping down the Stairway to Heaven and washing away anybody trying to climb it. Besides, only one person could get on the Stairway to Heaven. This meant that they would have to be extremely strong to withstand the energy waves.

That said, others could support from the sides. It would be foolish for one person to try it with no external help, even if they were as strong as Jing Taixu.

Others had to share the burden.

And one person helping was not going to be enough. Far from enough. The whole school would need to help, and then more.

The information had revealed that there were four floating stone platforms around the Stairway to Heaven. Each one needed an entire school's strength to support it. With about a dozen members in one school, the entire thing would take about 50 to 60 students to support!

That was how powerful the energy in large anima cumulonimbuses was.

Put simply, there were two fundamental conditions to open up the anima storm.

Firstly, one would have to find a candidate strong enough to scale the steps and ring the bell.

Secondly, one would have to find three other schools who were willing to share the support burden.

The first was definitely the more difficult of the two. There were plenty of potential helpers, but the person would have to first gain their footing on the staircase alone in order to activate the challenge. Only then could the assistants reach the four platforms to provide energy support.

Which meant that this first person would have to be able to stand up against the energy waves alone. Although the first wave was the weakest, it was not easy to bear alone.

The second condition was easier. Everyone was already here, and they had to get on with this somehow.

In other words, satisfy the first condition, and the second would fall into place easily enough.

"Now the question is, how strong does that person need to be?" Bai Doudou wondered aloud.

They all shook their heads. Still, it would not be long before they found out. Many schools were already itching to try their hand at it, and then some of the commanders from the decent schools stepped forward.

"That's the commander of the Black Light Sage College, Qian Yiming. I heard he defeated many other commanders." The whispers went around as the first challenger stepped up.

Commander Qian Yiming flew up majestically like a crane and then landed solidly on the first step.

Boom!

The moment he landed, they could hear a crystal tinkling sound at the top of the staircase, then a rush of rainbow-colored energy came down.

POOM!

The wave of energy hit Qian Yiming, who was pouring in every last bit of his resonant power without holding back.

In just a few scant seconds, Qian Yiming cried out painfully. Spitting a mouthful of fresh blood, he tumbled off the stairs into the lake.

Everyone was alarmed.

Was the energy from the Stairway to Heaven really this strong?

Even Qian Yiming couldn't last one wave? If you could not withstand the first wave, the challenge could not even begin. You were stuck.

Everyone's enthusiasm cooled off now.

Although an anima storm was a tempting phenomenon, it clearly was not for everyone.

This state of affairs did not last for very long. Soon, another person stepped out of the crowd jauntily, taking to the skies without care.

When he appeared, everyone immediately recognized him, and they stared with a mixture of admiration and wariness.

Even Li Luo took an interest.

This time, it was... Jing Taixu!