

Resonance 161

Chapter 0161: First Team Clash

Training field.

Six people from two squads were currently lined up—Li Luo and Bai Doudou's teams.

Their mentors, Chi Chan and Mi Er, were watching from the sidelines.

"Mentor Chi Chan, how's Li Luo's dual resonance cultivation coming along?" Mi Er asked.

"He hasn't grasped it yet." She shook her head.

"That's to be expected. Dual resonances are a highly advanced skill. Li Luo's only at the Resonant Master Stage. It won't be easy."

"Which means," he chuckled, "chances are that I'm going to win this practice match. You don't have anyone to stop Bai Doudou."

It was true enough. Bai Doudou was already a First Pattern, Pattern Genesis Tier. She was far stronger than Li Luo and Xin Fu, and her speedy wind resonance was quite decent on offense and speed as well. She would decimate them like a hurricane through dry leaves.

Qiu Luo was an Upper Flowering, while Yu Lang had just managed to reach Lower Clear.

On Li Luo's side, the theoretically strongest was Xin Fu. Like Qiu Luo, he was an Upper Flowering, while Li Luo was a Lower Flowering. Bai Mengmeng was an Upper Clear.

Overall, Bai Doudou's team was much stronger.

Chi Chan smiled over her teacup. "I'm very interested in seeing how far your three winds have come."

Indeed, Mi Er's team of Bai Doudou, Qiu Luo, and Yu Lang were all wind resonance cultivators. They were known collectively as the three winds. Agile, speedy, and suited to closing the battle cleanly.

On the field, the six were finishing up their respective warm ups.

"Li Luo, you had better take care of my sister, or else.... hmph," Bai Doudou said loftily, spear in hand.

"Well, just leave her alone, then," Li Luo said.

Bai Doudou shook her head with a smile. "Not a chance. This is a battle. No sisterly affection here."

Bai Mengmeng stuck her tongue out at her sister.

"So cute!" Yu Lang groaned.

Bai Doudou shot him a withering look, her spear twitching in his direction. He was scared back into soberness.

The two mentors declared the start of the battle.

Boom!

All six called forth their respective powers.

Li Luo stepped forth, swords in hand. Bai Mengmeng took a mirrored step backwards, her palms glowing with an astral power. Xin Fu simply vanished.

The three had already built some basic synergy through their training. Just as their mentor, Chi Chan, had suggested, Li Luo was the main offense and anchor. Xin Fu would lurk and pounce on opportunities, while Bai Mengmeng hung behind in support, also providing a second pair of eyes on the battle from a distance.

None of this divide-and-conquer tactic was to be seen on the other side. From the starting gun, all three streaked forward like identical arrows, charging over at full speed.

"Attack Li Luo, finish him off!" Bai Doudou ordered. They had no fancy battle plan. Li Luo was the core of the opposing team, so they would focus on taking him out first.

With Li Luo gone, the other two were destined to fail.

And their setup was suited for lightning-quick battles, keeping up wave after wave of relentless offense until their opponent crumbled.

Whoo!

Wind howled as three different attacks screamed their way towards Li Luo.

An answering blast of astral light from behind Li Luo filled their view with phosphorescent light.

"Careful! That's Mengmeng's resonance art, it can cause hallucinations!" Bai Doudou shouted. Yu Lang and Qiu Luo saw that Li Luo's figure blurred and then two more identical Li Luos appeared to his left and right.

All three Li Luos attacked as one.

Bai Doudou's eyes narrowed. Her green resonant power flashed out on her spear, sending three green-tipped prongs of power lashing out at them.

All three passed through the figures.

"They're all fake!" Qiu Luo exclaimed.

Bai Doudou had realized it at the same time. Her spear whirled around to face Yu Lang in one sure movement, and she stabbed behind him.

DING!

It was blocked by a pair of shortswords just as it was about to hit Yu Lang.

Li Luo, cloaked in his waterlight, shimmered into view.

His sneak attack had been intercepted. She had read that he would seek an opening with their weakest teammate, Yu Lang.

Yu Lang broke out in cold sweat. "Damn you, Li Luo!" he yelled. "Still picking on the soft persimmons. I'll fight it out with you!"

He raised his knife and bellowed.

In the next moment, he was running away as fast as he could. "Get him!" he hollered.

Li Luo snorted. The guy was slippery, and he wanted to get him out of battle first. But Yu Lang knew him too well and ran away immediately.

He couldn't afford to chase. Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo were flanking him fast, spears at the ready, glinting coldly.

They had guessed that he would prioritize Yu Lang too and had purposely left him out as bait. When he showed himself, they were ready to strike.

Li Luo was still getting used to this high-paced fighting, which he had never experienced before.

Team battles were a different kettle of fish.

Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo were closing fast.

He lifted a hand, his already-prepared resonance art bursting forth.

"Tiger-general resonance art..."

"Dendrical Intervention."

Green light poured from his palm, snaking out in coils towards the attackers.

His power coalesced into wispy vines that wrapped everywhere, sprouting flowers and leaves as they grew, bringing new life onto the battlefield.

When exposed to sunlight, they grew rapidly. The tender stems roughened into bark, and soon, large trees were standing all around them.

The snaking, green power was disruptive, shifting the terrain all around them. Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo cut down the vines as quickly as they could.

But from the first cut, their expressions turned guarded.

There was something odd about the plants.

Chapter 0162: Mistral Knights' Charge

Thunk!

Both Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo were looking apprehensive as they sliced through the vines. There was a special hardness to them, and the wood resonant power imbued within was especially vibrant and full of life.

This was no ordinary Dendrical Intervention!

DING! DING!

Soon enough, the vines outgrew the pace of their attacks, and the two were slapped several dozen times.

Bai Doudou stood her ground, spear darting and weaving like a swift needle, undoing Li Luo's weave of vines. Qiu Luo, however, was steadily being forced back.

Bai Doudou glanced over but was too occupied to help. Instead, she leaped forth swiftly, spear lancing straight for Li Luo.

First, to the root of the problem.

Li Luo slapped his palms together, and the vines responded immediately, focusing their attacks on the approaching Bai Doudou.

At the same time, the flowers on the vines withered away, funneling all of their stored energy into the green wood.

Just as Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo had realized, this was no ordinary Dendrical Intervention. He had included light resonance power in it, and it strengthened his plants with a resilience not normally seen with Dendrical Intervention.

It was a special skill that Li Luo had spent a long time thinking up, specially to counter their tiger-general resonance arts.

The green vines lashed out with the speed of striking snakes.

Bai Doudou stood her ground in the face of the rapidly expanding overgrowth. She gripped her spear in both hands and stepped forth, pulling her entire body taut.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Peregrine's Cry!"

A falcon's shriek accompanied a flash of green light on Bai Doudou's spear, and suddenly it was cutting through the green wood like a hot knife through butter.

Li Luo was alarmed. Bai Doudou was even stronger than he had anticipated, enough to overwhelm his Dendrical Intervention with brute strength.

He retreated.

However, there was no way he could get away from the lower eighth-grade wind resonance Bai Doudou. In a flash, she closed the distance between them, spear thrusting towards Li Luo.

A shadow loomed over her as her hand darted out. A short dagger, so dark with shadow resonant power that it seemed to absorb light from around it, contorting its exact shape.

Xin Fu.

Bai Doudou was forced to give up her attack, moving her spear to defend.

DING!

A flash of green on black burst outwards when the spear answered the dagger. She was shaken, while Xin Fu was painfully thrown backwards. There was a flash of shadow resonant power, then he was gone again.

He had bought the few precious seconds that Li Luo had needed to pull his shortswords, now gleaming with blue Water Edge power.

He leaped at Bai Doudou, eager to see just how strong a Pattern Genesis Tier cultivator was.

Bai Doudou's eagerness mirrored his own. She wanted to see how strong a dual resonance user was.

Both went at it with all they had, blasting towards each other with their powers fully unleashed.

DING!

A clash of steel and resonant power.

Bai Doudou staggered back half a step, Li Luo several.

So the lower eighth-grade resonance and Pattern Genesis Tier Bai Doudou was still a cut above him.

Things did not just end there. The two leaped again, their resonant power bubbling forth through their weapon conduits. Sparks flew from their furious fighting.

Again and again, they came together and separated in a blistering blur of weapons.

In such a direct clash, Bai Doudou was inching ahead, while Li Luo was being forced back step by step. Yet Li Luo did not break. His resonant power reserves ran deep, and with the endurance of his water resonance, he continued to deny Bai Doudou a convincing win.

The stalemate irritated Bai Doudou, an irritation that grew with each passing moment. Li Luo was clearly only at the Lower Flowering Tier, a full tier below her.

"Helix Gust!"

Bai Doudou took careful aim and made her move. The spear in her hand spun out, the rifling effect stabilizing its thrust and lending extra velocity as she attempted to punch through Li Luo's block.

DING!

Another clash of metal. Li Luo was sent skidding back, and the Water Edge power on his shortswords flickered out for a long while before flaring back up.

He felt the shock of the blow all the way up to his shoulders. Bai Doudou was scary.

Li Luo glanced over at Qiu Luo. She was already free of his previous attack, and was now stalking him again, conserving her strength and biding her time.

And Yu Lang, that sneaky boy...

A jolt of realization. Yu Lang had not stopped running since just now. In fact, he was running around like his life depended on it, his tongue even hanging out from exhaustion.

"Is he spasming?" Li Luo thought.

No, something felt off.

But there was no time to pursue that mystery. Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo were coming for him again.

He sensed a threatening aura from them, an attack deadlier than before.

Both of them were charging him like knights on horses, their auras and strength at their peaks.

Li Luo tensed, retreating as quickly as he could.

Luckily, he was not alone. At the same time, a fey light spewed forth to cover his retreat, and his surroundings melted into a swamp. From its murky depths, vines came snaking towards Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo.

"Ignore them! It's Mengmeng's illusion!" Bai Doudou shouted, her eyes firmly fixed on Li Luo and nothing else.

Still, Qiu Luo could not help but slow down a fraction. Despite knowing it was an illusion, every single one of her senses was screaming at her that she was riding into a swamp.

Li Luo could feel them gathering their strength. They seemed to be maintaining some sort of formation, although there was a gap in it.

Yu Lang.

A brainwave flashed through his mind. "Xin Fu," he yelled, "stop Yu Lang!"

Bai Doudou's eyes flickered in panic. She hesitated no longer. "Now!" she yelled to Qiu Luo.

"Mistral Knights' Charge!"

Wind resonant power armored the pair, and they were like horsemen in a stampede, intent on trampling every obstacle in their path.

Li Luo felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand in dread.

"Leader, watch out!" Bai Mengmeng cried out from behind him, sending a cool shower of glowing light that washed his paralyzing dread away.

Li Luo tightened his grip on his shortswords, keeping his body limber yet ready for anything.

At this time, the yelling and running Yu Lang started to steam. Resonant power was rising from his body, and his speed suddenly increased to superhuman levels. All of a sudden, there was a sharpness to his aura that had not been there before.

He carelessly plucked a spear from the air, never once breaking his quickening stride. He seemed to be running on air.

Once he linked up with the other two, their formation would be complete. Three riders in an armor of wind, a wedge to tear through them.

He was still a few paces away when a pitch-black shadow tripped him up. A shining dagger sheathed in tenebrous power flashed in his path, a well-calculated trajectory aiming for his weak point.

Yu Lang hurriedly turned to deal with it. Even with his newfound power boost, he was pressed hard by Xin Fu, who was much stronger.

The disruption succeeded. Yu Lang failed to complete their team formation.

Bai Doudou assessed the situation clinically and then pushed forward without hesitation. Their formation might've been lacking one corner, but she and Qiu Luo together were enough.

Li Luo alone could not stop their attack.

Two beams of green light roared forth as twin, green dragons of fury.

Li Luo was strangely calm. In the face of great danger, his mind clarified.

He stopped moving backwards. His knuckles whitened as he gripped his shortswords.

A memory flashed before him. He saw Mentor Chi Chan forcing his two resonant powers together. The bizarre melding clicked in his mind.

Just like a green flash in the quiet gloom of dawn that announced the rising sun.

He moved on instinct but with certainty. He planted his feet and sprung, not backwards but toward his attackers. His two swords struck out savagely at the two green spears of light.

Bai Mengmeng clapped a hand over her mouth in horror.

Chi Chan's own resonant power surged forth, ready to prevent serious injury to Li Luo.

Blue on green, each sword snapped against a spear.

Time itself seemed to stand still as the wood and water resonant powers dancing along Li Luo's blades merged in glorious harmony.

Resonant power bubbled, then it overflowed like a cauldron of hot oil. Raw, unstoppable—a relentless escalation of power roaring forth through an intangible floodgate that was now broken.

Li Luo seized the moment with grim determination.

DONG!

A shrill explosion rang out, a harsh, deafening sound.

Like thunder, a tremendous rumble of resonant power swept out across the entire training field.

Chapter 0163: Wind Harvester

Tang!

Ripples of resonant power pulsed out from the epicenter of the clash.

The ripples carried the three fighters with them, sending all of them flying. They painfully crashed on the ground outside of the training area.

All three lay inert, clothes tattered and torn.

Bai Mengmeng looked between Li Luo and Bai Doudou, then ran towards Li Luo. After all, they were still in battle. She belonged to Li Luo's team.

Bai Mengmeng carefully helped him up. Dark blood was dripping from all ten of his fingers. "Leader, are you alright?" she asked anxiously.

His rapturous smile was a jarring contrast to her worried frown. He looked down at his hands. He had felt it. In that moment, his two resonant powers had melded.

It was brief, it had hurt him as well, but it had succeeded. His dual resonance cultivation had made another step forward.

Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo were crawling to their feet as well, looking stunned.

"That's... dual resonance power?" Bai Doudou was appalled. Li Luo's resonant power was clearly weaker than hers. Yet in a straight clash against the combined strength of her and Qiu Luo's Mistral Knights' Charge, both parties had suffered equally.

The burst of power at that crucial moment had been incredible!

"He did it?" Qiu Luo said in disbelief. Dual resonances should be the right of Duke experts, for goodness' sake! How could a puny Resonant Master like Li Luo get it so fast?

"No way."

Bai Doudou shook her head. "If he really mastered it, the fight wouldn't even have lasted this long. He must have squeezed it out by luck at that crucial moment."

She looked over at Yu Lang, who was sprawled on the ground. She nudged him with a foot. "Are you alive?"

He was lying in a steam cloud of his own sweat, his skin ruddy from overheating.

"Doesn't feel like it," he wheezed.

"What's up with him?" Li Luo had walked over as well, puzzled. Yu Lang had been running non-stop since the start of the battle. It made no sense.

"A unique art of Mentor Mi Er, the Wind Harvester. It's said that when our mentor only had a sixth-grade resonance, he used this unique resonance art to make up for the disparity between himself and the other talents of his generation.

"The art requires the user to constantly channel wind resonant power while running. Through continued friction between wind and skin, a powerful energy is built up for a very short period of time..."

"But intense agony accompanies the friction. Each use of the move is torture. Mentor Mi Er asked us who was interested in learning it. Qiu Luo and I didn't choose it. Yu Lang alone did."

Li Luo fell silent. Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo had no need for such an art. They were naturally talented and therefore had no need to kill themselves during each battle for such brief power. Yu Lang had chosen it because he had no other choice.

If he wanted to stand on the same stage as other skilled fighters like Bai Doudou and Qiu Luo, he had to pursue power in every way he could.

Mentor Mi Er's Wind Harvester was indeed well suited for him.

Although Yu Lang showed a slovenly face most of the time, there was an inner steel in him that could match the best of them.

This might well be his only real advantage. His skills were painfully inferior to the other Violet Vibrance students.

Li Luo stretched out a hand to the boiled lobster on the floor, who groaned. "Li Luo, I haven't mastered Wind Harvester yet. When I do, I'll show you my prowess."

"I don't know why you're insisting on this. Look at you. You're not fit to be in a Violet Vibrance squad. Don't kill yourself. Go to a Gold Gleam squad, where you can be comfortable. Staying here will tire you out. It tires all of us out," Qiu Luo snapped.

"Woah," Li Luo frowned. "That's a little harsh, isn't it?"

"Am I wrong?" she asked acidly. "If he didn't drop the ball today, our Mistral Knights' Charge would not have lacked a wedge point. Even with your clutch dual resonance skill, you would have lost without question."

"Don't you dare call me out just because he's your friend. He's not on your team. You're not the one paying the price for his weakness."

"I just think there's no need to hate on Yu Lang just because he's weaker," Li Luo said mildly. "No one knows the future. What if Yu Lang overtakes you someday? If that time comes, should he kick you off the team for being a burden?"

"That will never happen. Your fantasy example holds no weight."

"Hey, forget it." Yu Lang hastily interjected. "I did drag my team down. She's right that I'm barely scraping by in a Violet Vibrance squad. So..."

"... I will use this chance to improve myself here as much as I can, and live up to the expectations of a Violet Vibrance student!" he vowed.

Qiu Luo had been hoping that Yu Lang would realize the disparity through this battle and give up. But his sudden change in attitude slapped her smugness right back at her.

Li Luo grinned. Yes, this was the shameless rascal he knew. As if he was going to let some words get him down. That was a severe underestimation of just how durable his ego was.

"Enough! All of you shut up!" Bai Doudou shouted, seeing Qiu Luo ready to argue.

"Yu Lang's skills are unusable at the present," she said to Qiu Luo. "But that doesn't mean you can slight his efforts up till now. You and I both know the agony of cultivating Wind Harvester. But whether Yu Lang is qualified to stay or otherwise is not our decision, it's Mentor Mi Er's. So stop talking about useless things."

She turned to Yu Lang. "You are the weakest link in the squad, no doubt. But I hope you can turn that shame into drive and catch up quickly."

Yu Lang nodded with some shame, quailing before her anger.

Li Luo was seized with a sudden urge to laugh. Yu Lang's impudence had the tenacity of a hydra, but it had been totally quashed by Bai Doudou's temper. There was always someone stronger out there.

Outside the training field.

"Seems like we can roughly call it a draw," Chi Chan said.

Mi Er nodded. "Li Luo's quite something. Already touching the power of dual resonances? It might be volatile and brief, but it's a good start."

"When he really masters the beginner level of dual resonances, he will put on a real show in the monthly battle. The son of Li Taixuan and Tan Tailan really lives up to their reputation."

"Your side is doing well also," Chi Chan replied. "They got the Mistral Knights' Charge down quickly. But I must say, the one that surprised me most was Yu Lang..."

"Wind Harvester is not something that just anyone can bear. I know that some students have tried it, but I don't recall any who didn't give up. Will Yu Lang be the first?"

Mi Er smiled and shrugged. "Who knows... but Yu Lang has a tenacity that surpasses his talent. In a way, Wind Harvester is perfectly suited for him. He should know what a precious chance this offers him. I believe he won't give up easily."

"His performance is quite unstable. It's a bit like panning. You never know when a bit of gold will show up."

Chi Chan nodded.

The monthly battles would be the time for these young talents to show off their accomplishments.

A donkey or a stallion? It would all be clear on the racetrack.

"Oh yes..." Mi Er suddenly said. "I heard that the Umbra Cave is about to open."

Chi Chan nodded gravely.

"A little early this time, isn't it?" He frowned.

A look of foreboding flashed past her eyes, and she sighed deeply.

"It means the principal's seals have been broken early."

The two sat for a moment in a dark and worried silence.

This was not good news at all.

Chapter 0164: Governor Squad

Before they knew it, a month had passed at the Astral Sage College.

In this month, they had started to ease into the rhythm of school. Things were starting to look less foreign and more familiar. Now getting into their respective grooves, their natural optimism was making them look to the future again.

As the end of the month neared, things started to get lively in anticipation of the battles.

At the end of each month, the ranking battles were fought, squad against squad, to determine where each of them stood.

The ranking battles were a highlight at the Astral Sage College, spurring students on against each other. The generous rewards were also a major source of school points for many students.

School points were extremely important in the Astral Sage College, and this alone was incentive for students to prepare as best they could.

Which made the ranking battles always interesting to watch.

...

Astral Sage College, a window seat in the canteen.

Li Luo was seated with Yu Lang, while Zhao Kuo, Zong Fu, and a few others were also nearby.

"Just three more days to the ranking battles."

Yu Lang looked around grandly. "Well," he said, carelessly examining his nails, "hopefully none of you will be unlucky enough to meet me. I don't show mercy."

"Just leeching off Bai Doudou, aren't you?" Zhao Kuo pointed out shrewdly.

The others heaped scorn on him accordingly.

Li Luo was about to join in when he spotted Lu Qing'er in the distance. He waved her over.

She looked at him with a contemplative look, but she eventually joined them.

"Why do I feel like you've been afraid to see me these days? You're always slow to reply to meal invitations," Li Luo said in suspicion.

"N-no idea what you're talking about," Lu Qing'er said, lowering her head for a nervous sip of water.

"Really?" Li Luo said doubtfully, but he did not pursue. He turned back to Yu Lang and Zhao Kuo.

She blew bubbles into her glass, disturbing the reflection of her beautiful face. Her mind was full of the encounter with Jiang Qing'e the other day.

Especially that wantonly bold statement... Did Jiang Qing'e know how many restless nights that had cost her?

"She's wild."

Lu Qing'er flushed as her imagination started to run wild. She was starting to feel a little hot.

"Are you sick?" Li Luo asked, noticing.

"No!" She turned her head away from him.

Li Luo was about to press, but Zhao Kuo interrupted him. "Brother Luo, actually, I asked you to meet here today because I need to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"You remember Shi Huang?"

Li Luo nodded. Of course. His biggest rival in the Tianshu Province. Although, he had not heard anything about him since entering the Astral Sage College. There were thousands of newcomers after all.

"Is he up to something again?"

Zhao Kuo wouldn't mention a guy like Shi Huang for no reason.

He nodded. "Brother Luo, the Violet Vibrance squads are at the top, so your eyes are firmly set only on the other Violet Vibrance squads. I don't think you know how intense the fighting is at the Gold Gleam level."

"In this month, there have been countless clashes between Gold Gleam squads, and there's one team making a huge reputation for itself. It's called the Governor Squad."

Li Luo started. "Governor Squad? What kind of name is that?"

"Others gave them that name because all four of them have a common point. Their fathers are all provincial governors in the Xia Kingdom," Zong Fu told him.

In the Astral Sage College, Violet Vibrance squads had three members, while Gold Gleam squads had four. Silver Spark squads had five members.

"And Shi Huang is in this squad?" Li Luo caught on.

Zhao Kuo nodded. "The leader of the Governor Squad is called Shen Ya. He's quite strong, actually. Ranked 10 on Yu Lang's newcomer rankings. Everyone thought he would be chosen by a Violet Vibrance mentor, but he ended up being left out."

"Quite unfortunate." Li Luo agreed with sympathy. Five Violet Vibrance mentors, choosing 15 students. You'd think tenth place would get in easily enough.

"Besides Shen Ya, the other two in the Governor Squad are called Feng Ze and De Xiyan. Both also placed in the top 20..."

"A very strong squad. Rumors say their goal is to defeat a Violet Vibrance squad," Zhao Kuo said solemnly.

"You mean... me?" Li Luo grinned.

They nodded seriously.

"What, they think our team is weak?" Li Luo said unhappily. "Isn't there a bottom scraper called Yu Lang out there as well?"

"How dare you!" Yu Lang cried. "You think you can compare to the might of Great Leader Doudou?"

"They chose Brother Luo's team probably because of Shi Huang," Zhao Kuo continued. "But they are well prepared. From what we hear, the Governor Squad is not just intending to do it alone. They've coordinated with one more elite Gold Gleam squad."

Li Luo frowned. Two elite Gold Gleam squads? This couldn't be taken lightly. These were strong opponents. With numbers, he could very well be taken down.

"That was important information, lads. I owe you one," Li Luo said seriously. Without forewarning, this double ambush might well have turned things against him.

Zhao Kuo snickered. "Actually, that's not even the main thing we came to tell you today."

"There's more of them?" Li Luo said, aghast. Was he that hated? Who else was coming for him?!

"No, no..." Zhao Kuo assured him. "It's like this. We just happen to have some beef with that elite coalition the Governor Squad has formed. Also, we want their points. So..."

"... so we also formed our own coalition and plan to end them." Zong Fu finished.

Li Luo stared at them in surprise. The mantis intent on hunting the cicada does not notice the oriole behind. Was this the level of scheming going on among students nowadays?

"Well, I approve," Li Luo said. He was always happy to see trouble headed the way of his enemies.

"But... there's a problem," Zhao Kuo added. "Even with our squad alliance, we might not be able to take down that elite group."

"....."

So it wasn't an oriole behind the mantis. It was a drooling locust.

"Then what the hell was the point of this conversation??"

"Well, we were thinking... Maybe Brother Luo could send one person from your squad to support us for a bit? If you could just delay the Governor Squad a little, we could swallow them whole." Zhao Kuo grinned.

Their audacity left him without words. "Well. Aren't you guys real geniuses."

So in the end they were asking him to help them get a big feast of points.

Still, their plan was workable. If he had to lend them one person to attack, it would have to be Xin Fu. Bai Mengmeng wasn't strong enough. Which left him and Bai Mengmeng to hold off the Governor Squad for a time?

Li Luo considered it while they all looked at him expectantly. Finally, he nodded.

"Let's do it."

The others whooped. "We knew you'd say yes, Brother Luo. We even gave the plan a name."

"There's a name? What is it?"

"Operation Protect Us Brother Luo!"

Li Luo sprayed their faces with a mouthful of rice.

Chapter 0165: Squad Names

After working out the details with Zhao Kuo and the others, they split up. Li Luo walked back with Lu Qing'er and Yu Lang.

Li Luo was brought to a sudden stop at the foot of the stairs.

Four people were approaching, one of them a familiar face. Li Luo's greatest rival in Tianshu, Shi Huang.

In the few months since, Shi Huang had lost much of his keenness. His face was haggard, and there was a sunken look about his eyes.

The other three with him were new faces to Li Luo. One among them walked like their leader. He had long, parted hair, which gave him an unkempt look exacerbated by his fierce, bushy eyebrows.

The coarse-looking youth smiled.

"Li Luo, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Li Luo regarded him for a moment. "Shen Ya?"

Since he seemed to speak on their behalf, Li Luo assumed he was the Governor Squad's leader.

Shen Ya nodded with a grin. "What an honor, Li Luo knows my name. I guess that means you know our plan too?"

"It's good for kids to have ambition," Li Luo told him earnestly.

"Thanks for your encouragement. We'll do our best to take you down," Shen Ya said with a lolling smile.

"Good luck. But you should know your own strength. It wouldn't do to go hunting tigers and ending up mauled. That would be a joke." Li Luo nodded to them and then left with Lu Qing'er and Yu Lang.

He did not speak a word to Shi Huang.

Losers warranted no attention.

Shi Huang sensed it. He stared hollowly after Li Luo.

"Forget it. He's not the useless young lord he was back at Tianshu anymore." Shen Ya shook him encouragingly by the shoulders. "He's a dual resonance user, a genius who can even defeat Duze Beixuan.

"But if we can cause trouble for such a giant, it's something to celebrate."

Shen Ya led the three away to the door of a posh suite. They knocked and entered.

Within were Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan. "You're here," they said, looking up at the four.

"We just met Li Luo." They sat down. "Riled him up good and proper." Shen Ya grinned.

"We don't need you," Duze Beixuan said stiffly. "We can destroy Li Luo and the others in the ranking battles, barring accidents."

Shen Ya chuckled. "Didn't such an accident happen to you once already? Would it be so strange if another happened this time?"

Duze Beixuan's eyes went flat.

"Shen Ya, do you think I would take the so-called strongest Gold Gleam squad seriously at all?"

Wang Hejiu quickly opened his fan between them. "Now, now. We can talk nicely. No need to get prickly."

Shen Ya snatched up a cup on the table and took a drink. "Of course, we'll do our best to cause trouble for Li Luo. We've offended him already. What I want to know is: will we get our reward?"

He stared at the pair. "Next year, will Mentor Shen Jinxiao choose a new Violet Vibrance student from our group?"

"Mhm.

"And now," Wang Hejiu smiled. "Never bring it up again. We will deny it anyway. Got it?"

Shen Ya glowered at him, but he finally nodded.

...

When Li Luo returned back to their tower, he went looking for Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng to discuss the situation. Especially Xin Fu, whom he needed to dispatch to help Zhao Kuo and the others.

He might be the leader, but he had to respect his squad's opinions as well.

"The Governor Squad is after us probably because Shi Huang and I have history. You guys are being implicated."

Bai Mengmeng smiled as brightly as a flower. "Leader, we're a team now," she said encouragingly. "If they come and find trouble with you, they're after all of us. You don't need to feel sorry about it."

Li Luo felt very comforted.

"Xin Fu? Regarding helping Zhao Kuo and the others?"

Xin Fu made an unenthusiastic grunt of assent.

Li Luo rolled his eyes. Time and again he was discouraged by the sheer absence of fighting spirit or opinion from the guy.

"Well then, we're decided. Xin Fu will help Zhao Kuo and the others, Mengmeng and I will keep the Governor Squad busy."

"Also, I hear that the five Violet Vibrance squads will be dropped into separate locations in the battlefield, so there's no need to fear outside interference in the early phases."

"Leader, can the two of us hold out? I've heard of that Governor Squad also. They're very strong. We can't let a Gold Gleam squad lower our guard.

Li Luo rubbed his chin. "Of course we won't. I'll make preparations."

Bai Mengmeng nodded. "Oh, today Mentor Chi Chan said that we have to register for the ranking battles, so we should give our team a name."

"My sis called theirs the Wind Rider Squad. Qin Zhulu's team is called the Clear Moon Squad, while Yi Lisha's team is called the One Autumn Leaf Squad. Wang Hejiu's is called the Golden Gate Squad..."

One of the names puzzled him. Clear Moon? It didn't take much brains to realize that the two girls had made the name. But their strongest fighter, the leader, Qin Zhulu? Was he not even allowed to put his name in?

What was going on in their team?

And Wang Hejiu. Could they lick boots any more passionately?

"Well, I've had an idea on my mind for a team name since a while back," Li Luo said, fixing them with a bright, knowing smile.

They looked at him in surprise.

"From hereon, we'll be called the Fairness & Justice Squad! Because our looks are super fair, and fairness is justice," Li Luo said seriously.

It couldn't get any lamer.

Xin Fu fought a spasm on his face, and he opened his mouth.

"Anyone who objects," Li Luo continued, "has no confidence in their looks. That's a sad, sad thing."

Xin Fu swallowed his comments back down. He did not care about looks that much, though he didn't think of himself as ugly.

Bai Mengmeng blinked innocently with her large, liquid eyes. "I think Leader's name is very well thought out."

"Mengmeng, your taste is impeccable," he praised.

"Well, since no one objects, then I'll have Mentor Chi Chan sign us up with that name tomorrow."

Li Luo stood up and stretched out his hand. "Let's celebrate the birth of a legendary squad. The future trembles because it knows we are coming."

Bai Mengmeng obediently put her little hand on top of his.

Xin Fu indicated that it was too childish and lame for him.

Li Luo smiled at him in a fatherly way. "Mengmeng, Xin Fu looks very tired from cultivation. If he's too tired, maybe you could make a few more meals for him so he doesn't have to go all the way to the canteen."

A hand quickly slapped down on top of the other two. Xin Fu forced a smile from under his hood.

"Leader, there's no need to bother Mengmeng."

Li Luo smiled back at him understandingly.

"That all depends whether you're on board."

Chapter 0166: The Ranking Battles Begin

The roar of the crowd of the ranking battles was a crescendo that began many days in advance. Whispers and excitement sprouted from individual hearts and minds, sparking off against each other to start little fires of tension, fanned on by the flames of inexorable time marching them all on towards the day of reckoning.

A rousing drum beat sounded in the morning, booming out to every last corner of the school.

As new students, Li Luo and the others were assigned to fight in the west of the Astral Sage College. The undulating mountains and complex terrain made for a good battleground.

The thousands of newcomers were dispersed to various entrances in all directions, awaiting the start.

Li Luo stood in the crowd, looking around. Each squad leader was wearing a badge on their chest reflecting their squad's status, either gold or silver.

As long as the leader's badge was taken, the team was considered eliminated.

Violet badges were worth 500 school points, gold badges were worth 100 school points, while silver badges were worth 20.

More importantly, the victors were also entitled to a third of the defeated team's winnings as an additional prize.

For example, if you defeated a team that already had three badges, then you could take one of them away.

Which meant that all these students around him were no longer students. They all looked like walking badge stands to him. If he could take all of their points, he would have tens of thousands of school points!

He would treat himself to TWO Royal Saps, not just one. One for making potions, one to sip and enjoy the taste.

Energy liquid, 300 points? Pfft, peanuts.

"Leader, you're staring. And drooling," Bai Mengmeng reminded him helpfully.

Xin Fu was looking at him strangely as well. Li Luo looked like a hungry ghost admiring the roast chickens.

The squads around them sensed it, and they started to inch away uneasily.

Li Luo smiled sheepishly.

"Keke, I was, er, missing food from home," Li Luo said.

"Hmph. Does your food at home look like people?" someone asked aggressively. Li Luo looked over to see a youth with ashen skin.

"Hey, you look familiar... Oh, I remember! You're the stone resonance user who tried to do me in during the Choosing. What's your name?"

Two people had tried to hold him up, and this guy was one of them.

What Li Luo did not know was that after this guy failed, he had met Duze Beixuan and pointed him the wrong way after taking a dislike to Duze Beixuan's attitude.

"My name's Ye Hua. And you better remember it!"

"I'll definitely become a Violet Vibrance student in the future," he declared stoutly.

Li Luo nodded encouragingly. "You look like a promising young man. I'm sure you can do it."

He turned away. The guy looked a little slow in the cognition department.

Li Luo looked at a high platform to the right of the area. There sat the five Violet Vibrance mentors. Below them were the Gold Gleam mentors.

Clearly, they were also the facilitators for the newcomers' ranking battles.

"The other Star Halls' battles are today as well, I guess... I wonder how Qing'e is doing?" Li Luo wondered to himself. The school was vast enough to host various halls' large-scale battles at the same time.

In truth, there was little to be worried about over there. Jiang Qing'e had long dominated the Three Star Hall. Each ranking battle was probably just a formality for them to transfer her school points.

That was awesome.

He wanted to be farming chives without a care in the world too.

The Violet Vibrance mentors' magnified voices interrupted his daydreaming. "All students, prepare. The ranking battle will end at sunset. Before then, fight to your hearts' content. As long as your badge is not taken, the fighting continues!"

"At the first bell, Silver Spark squads will enter. Ten minutes later, Gold Gleam squads will enter. Violet Vibrance squads enter last."

This was a protective measure for the weaker teams, so they wouldn't be instantly wiped out by stronger teams in the first few moments.

After all, these ranking battles were a case of big fish eating small fish, and small fish eating shrimp.

And they, the Violet Vibrance squads, were, without a doubt, the undisputed apex predators.

He smiled dreamily to himself as the first gong sounded.

There were mad yells as Silver Spark squads rushed in, squeezing through the passage and quickly vanishing into the battlefield.

Li Luo stared after them forlornly. It somehow felt like his school points had grown legs and were running away.

Dong!

Ten minutes later, the Gold Gleam squads entered as well.

Compared to the first chaotic wave, the Gold Gleam squads entered with much more poise and determination. They were all excellent fighters, placed highly among the newcomers. Some were even stronger than the Violet Vibrance students.

They had simply not been chosen for various other reasons.

After the Gold Gleam squads entered, only Li Luo's squad was left now, in a peaceful silence.

"Does anyone feel like, er, ring-of-swords, got-each-others'-backs, impenetrable-defense kind of vibes?" Li Luo said, looking around him.

"Leader, stay focused," Bai Mengmeng said softly.

"Low-profile." Xin Fu agreed.

Li Luo sighed. He himself was a master of the low profile, but after meeting Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu, he was starting to feel like this mastery could reach many levels deeper.

Dong!

The third bell rang.

Li Luo waved them on. "Let's go! Leader here will lead you into a banquet of slaughter!"

Leading the way, he charged into the battlefield.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng followed. Their field of vision expanded greatly after they passed through the tunnel. Not a single squad was to be seen.

"Wow, they legged it really hard," Li Luo said, disappointed. It looked like their job was going to be to flush out some Gold Gleam and Silver Spark teams to at least get some points.

"Let's go cut the chives!" he sang, picking a direction and hurrying along. They were going to have to hit the road hard to catch up to the 20 minute head start.

They didn't go too far before they spotted a Gold Gleam team of four waiting just outside a forest.

"Oh, it's you, stone boy," Li Luo said with surprise. The team was led by that stone resonance user.

"Who are you calling stone boy!?" Ye Hua yelled.

"You wouldn't be here to feed us, would you?" Li Luo smiled.

"Li Luo, I don't believe you're worthy of being a Violet Vibrance student. I'm going to finish you off! Come get us if you dare!" Ye Hua declared.

Li Luo smiled and was about to step forward, but Xin Fu stopped him.

"Leader. Something's off. There are a lot of people in the forest!" Xin Fu warned him urgently.

Li Luo's eyes narrowed in concentration. "Indeed. Hey, stone boy. You ignominious igneous, I wasn't even planning to beat you up. Don't you think you've bitten off more than you can chew? I underestimated your ambition." Ye Hua stiffened. It seemed like their plan was going awry, all thanks to Xin Fu.

"Well, since the ambush is foiled... CHARGE!" Ye Hua yelled, smacking his hands loudly together. The forest behind him shook, and people started to appear.

By rough count, there were no less than ten Gold Gleam squads.

"Li Luo, your Violet Vibrance squad is the strongest here. If we let you have your way, the Gold Gleam squads will be eaten up one by one. We've decided to work together to polish you off first!"

"Too bad not everyone thinks this way. This is all I have," Ye Hua said with some regret.

Li Luo stared at the dozens of hungry shadows in the trees and sighed to himself. This Ye Hua wasn't just promising, he was a bloody genius. The other Gold Gleam squads would be avoiding Violet Vibrance squads, but not this guy. He was going to hunt them instead.

Ye Hua's read of the situation was good too. It was indeed rationally the best choice. The Violet Vibrance squad in the area was always the greatest threat. Before they could establish dominance, it was easier to get other teams to join up.

As time passed and the Violet Vibrance squads built up a reputation for themselves, the other teams would start to fear them, and it would be hard to form alliances like that.

Ye Hua's timing here was perfect.

Well, Gold Gleam members were thinkers too.

If they got all high and mighty just because they were Violet Vibrance students, they were bound to get the tables turned on them.

"Let's go! Show the Violet Vibrance squad our might!"

Ye Hua exhorted them. He himself led the charge.

Behind him, a swarm of Gold Gleam students joined in.

"Leader, what now?" Xin Fu asked tensely. Bai Mengmeng's fists were tight with tension.

"What now?"

"Run now!!"

Chapter 0167: Surrounded

By the time Li Luo's cry to run had finished echoing around the woods, he was already long gone. Bai Mengmeng hurried after him, while Xin Fu vanished with a quick twist, streaking ahead of them like a wraith.

Their clean escape had thrown Ye Hua off. This Violet Vibrance squad thought really quickly...

"Where's your pride as a Violet Vibrance squad, damn it?!" he yelled after them.

Shouldn't Li Luo be puffing out his chest and yelling that 30 wasn't enough to take him down or something? Could he have them all for himself or something?

"Pride, my ass! Is pride worth any school points?!" Li Luo's voice came floating back to him.

Ye Hua gnashed his teeth in frustration. "Let's chase them! If they escape, they'll come for revenge. None of us can stand up to that!"

The other Gold Gleam squads nodded vigorously. They had already made their move, so now they had no other choice but to see it through. Besides, if they could eliminate a Violet Vibrance team, it would give them bragging rights for a year. And wouldn't the Violet Vibrance mentors think them worthy of being taken in?

The dozen Gold Gleam squads gave chase in Li Luo's direction.

Seeing the dust clouds behind them, Li Luo cursed. "Damn, haven't these guys heard of respect for Violet Vibrance squads?"

Xin Fu's voice came back to him. "Leader, what about that banquet of slaughter you were mentioning?"

Li Luo focused on putting one foot in front of the other, but he did make a mental note against this highly contrary squad mate. He would have Mengmeng prepare this guy a real banquet indeed.

Bai Mengmeng was the one who explained kindly. "You can't blame Leader, they have too many people. We might be able to take down a few, but they would wear us out. Besides, we don't know how many more reinforcements they have. That's why leaving was the smart choice. Isn't that right, Leader?"

"Er..."

Li Luo was stunned. Had he put that much thought into it? He had just felt overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and decided to avoid it.

"Erm, hem, yes, Mengmeng, you're absolutely right. As the leader, I have to display foresight. After all, our goal isn't just a few measly gold badges," Li Luo stated casually as he nodded. All was well, he pretended.

"Leader, you're so clever," Bai Mengmeng praised.

Xin Fu was a little suspicious. "Are we going to just keep running?"

Li Luo kept an eye behind them. "Perhaps not... That's, like, over a thousand school points right there. Since they've kindly gathered themselves, wouldn't you say that's a chance?"

Xin Fu almost ran into a tree. Was Li Luo thinking of taking on a dozen Gold Gleam squads?

Their pursuers had an overwhelming numbers advantage, and there were some quality fighters among them as well. Even though their squad was individually stronger, they would be dragged down by the shoal of piranhas in such conditions.

"Xin Fu, use your cloaking skills. Go ahead and scout the terrain. If you see any place with both a forest and a creek, let me know immediately," Li Luo ordered.

Xin Fu was silent this time. With a quick twist of his body, he sped ahead as a shadowy blur. His speed far outclassed Li Luo's own.

"Shadow resonance, eh."

Li Luo marveled. Xin Fu was really assassin material, a born scout. Shadow resonance was the perfect lurk role, striking from the shadows at defenseless opponents. Its only weakness was a full frontal assault.

"Mengmeng, make an illusion of Xin Fu so they don't know we're one short.

"Also, let's slow down a little. Give them the impression they're gaining on us."

Bai Mengmeng immediately complied, her starlight power twinkling forth to create a shadowy figure by their side.

They took off again.

All of this was watched by the five Violet Vibrance mentors on the high platform.

Of course they would be interested in the Violet Vibrance squads.

"This Li Luo. I feel like I've seen him present his bum to his opponents more often than his face," Cao Sheng hooted mirthfully.

"Well, it's not his fault. Ye Hua is a capable one, being able to persuade so many Gold Gleam squads to follow him in such a short time. There's potential right there," Chu Zi said appreciatively.

Chi Chan shook her head, bothered. Li Luo's team was unlucky. The other four Violet Vibrance squads had free reign, facing no united opposition.

She glanced over at Shen Jinxiao, who was sipping his tea with a satisfied expression.

He had not said anything, but Chi Chan knew that he was watching. Perhaps he was waiting for Ye Hua's army to take out Li Luo's squad.

She turned back to watch the battlefield.

"Li Luo, do your best! I'm still waiting for you to get the 12 Step Weave and throw it in Shen Jinxiao's face. If you let me down, I'll let you have it real good."

...

Li Luo had been running for about a quarter of an hour.

Ye Hua and gang were being very patient about it. Or rather, perhaps they understood that once Li Luo and the others got away, their alliance would quickly crumble and internal fighting would start. That would be the perfect time for Li Luo to swoop in and take them all down.

So there was no other way but to commit. They had to get Li Luo's Violet Vibrance squad eliminated first!

They chased grimly. Finally, they saw the trio ahead vanish into a patch of forest, probably intending to lose them in the confusing terrain.

The other Gold Gleam squad leaders called out to him. "Ye Hua, what should we do?"

He thought about it for a few moments. "We can't give up now. Chase on. This patch of forest is not very wide. We can surround them inside."

"I suggest we form groups of three Gold Gleam squads. Keep within distance to support each other. If we hold to our formation, they don't stand a chance to break us!"

"If they want to attack, we just need to hold them off until the others come to cut them off!"

The others nodded.

All the Gold Gleam teams who had managed to chase this far were clearly quite strong, and they had ambition. They would not pass up on the chance to defeat a Violet Vibrance squad.

Most importantly, if they gave up now, it would be an open invitation for Li Luo and the others to descend on them like a vengeful spirit.

Decision made, they fanned out quickly and rushed into the forest ahead.

They spread out into smaller groups and weaved swiftly through the trees.

Very quickly, Ye Hua's group found the tracks of Li Luo's squad. He immediately gestured, and a dozen resonance art attacks flew out towards the position of the three.

Boom!

Head-sized craters peppered the ground.

Ye Hua stared in dismay. Their attacks had passed clean through the three figures.

Which then vanished.

"An illusion?" he croaked.

"Where are they?!" At that moment, another squad raised the alarm.

"They're there!" Ye Hua cried. "Quick, let's go!"

The Gold Gleam squads swarmed over.

A moment later, their surround was complete. They stealthily crept towards the vegetation ahead, but they only spotted a draining puddle of water.

Another group to the west raised the alarm.

Ye Hua and the others rushed over.

But when they arrived panting and out of breath, it was only to see three more disappearing figures.

"Damn it, they're toying with us!" Ye Hua shouted.

Thanks to the repeated false alarms, their surround formation had now been properly shaken up.

"That cunning Li Luo!"

Ye Hua was starting to feel uneasy. Their surround was looking rather shaky.

Suddenly, more and more teams started raising the alarm around them. Which meant that all of the teams had met with illusions as well and had sent up the signal for support before confirming things.

It was hard to blame them for panicking. Without an overwhelming advantage in numbers, the Gold Gleam squads were food.

"We're losing it!"

Ye Hua watched his orderly formation start to fray. The Gold Gleam squads were not listening properly now.

Finally, he made his decision.

"Retreat! Don't linger here, our encirclement has failed!"

Not caring about the other Gold Gleam squads, he led his own squad out.

Meanwhile, in a secret location, Li Luo listened to the sweet sounds of false and panicked alarms being raised all around him.

He looked at his squad and cracked his neck and loosened his limbs.

"Well then, next up is us..."

Chapter 0168: Counter Attack

Two Gold Gleam squads hurried out of the forest.

"Let's go. The whole plan got flipped upside down out there. Li Luo has cooked up some mummery—there are illusions flying everywhere. He can't be caught."

"Let's run far away right now, escape the revenge."

The two teams scurried away in fright.

But they scurried straight into Li Luo, Xin Fu, and Bai Mengmeng.

The two teams made noises of disgust.

"Damn, this must be the fourth or fifth set of illusions we've seen already."

"Yeah, you recall the first ones? We were begging on our knees for minutes, but then they vanished on us."

"We've been fooled!"

"Ignore them," one leader said irritably. "Let's get out."

They nodded and sped up, aiming to pass through.

Li Luo and his squadmates were a little shocked. Were Gold Gleam squads so brazen nowadays? Just going to walk straight past them?

This was a little humiliating, Li Luo felt.

So just as they walked right past him, he yelled, "GET 'EM!"

Sneaky Li Luo had already attacked by the time he shouted. Green resonant power burst forth from his palm. "Dendrical Intervention!"

The two Gold Gleam squad leaders were immediately mummified by vines.

Their teammates were sent flying.

The two leaders cussed in terror and disbelief. "Fuck, they're real?!" They would have continued hollering, but a few vines stuffed their mouths shut.

While Li Luo was dealing with the two leaders, Xin Fu's shadow resonant power scythed out, making deft work of the others.

Bai Mengmeng used her illusionary powers, and three Gold Gleam students stared at her fey lights in abject terror.

Xin Fu finished up his three Gold Gleam students as well.

In a short two minutes, the two Gold Gleam squads were down for the count.

Li Luo was pleased, holding up two medals.

"200 school points!" he cheered.

"Congratulations, you're eliminated." Li Luo tossed them to the ground. Relieved of their gold badges, they were now forbidden from moving or interfering with the competition.

The two leaders scowled at him. "Li Luo, you're pathetic!"

"How so? You guys strolled right before me as if I didn't exist. I was about to chide you for not respecting yourself!" he said.

They wanted to cry, but no tears came. This was a classic case of "boy who cried wolf." How were they supposed to know this time it would be real?

Li Luo pocketed their gold badges and ignored them, leaving quickly with Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu.

After all, there were still other Gold Gleam squads waiting. They wouldn't let them get away so easily. That would waste their chase.

Their squad began to hunt down the others quickly.

Having lost their numerical advantage, the Gold Gleam squads tasted the pain of facing a Violet Vibrance squad first hand. If they did not have at least three teams grouped together, they withered before the trio's onslaught.

Not a single team escaped unscathed.

In a short 20 minutes, nine teams were eliminated.

900 school points in the bag.

...

"They're counterattacking."

Ye Hua cowered in the forest, hearing resonant power booming out all around him. His plan was theoretically perfect. Maintain the formation, don't let Li Luo's team break back out. Once they had the trio surrounded, there was no way they could take on a dozen Gold Gleam squads at once.

Even though many of them would be wiped, the ultimate victory would have been theirs.

Li Luo's cunning had thrown him off. The illusions had scattered them into chaos and thrown them off their rhythm.

He had tried his best to maintain order, but he had failed.

The plan was screwed.

He saw that they were the only team left now. The other Gold Gleam squads had either scarpered or been scuppered.

The temporary alliance was over.

"Forget it, let's go. We have to get out of here."

Ye Hua shook his head sadly. They were at the edge of the forest already, and were almost clear.

He increased the pace. Sunlight shone through ahead, at the treeline.

They were so close to the exit. But they froze dead in their tracks when they saw Li Luo leaning casually against a tree, grinning at them.

"Leaving?" he asked.

Behind him, Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu were nowhere to be seen. They had to be lying in ambush.

"Stone boy, I underestimated you. You almost got me."

Ye Hua's jaw tightened. "Stop giving me weird names! I'm Ye Hua, not 'stone boy'!"

Li Luo waved it away carelessly. "So, what's your plan now?"

Ye Hua sniffed. "I've lost. Nothing much to say. But I don't plan on handing over my badge lying down."

He stepped forward, his resonant power turning him ashy white as a stone skin formed.

His squadmates looked resigned to their fate, but they showed no signs of surrender. They too readied themselves.

Li Luo chuckled at their ready stances. "Hey, I'm just taking a badge, I'm not out for serial homicide."

His eyes twinkled at them. "Hey, stone boy," he suddenly said. "Want to not get eliminated?"

Ye Hua was so hopeful that he ignored the nickname. "What do you mean?" he ventured warily.

"I can let you go. I'll even give you two gold badges. But after that, you'll have to complete a task for me. How's that?"

Ye Hua exchanged looks with his squad. They had no idea what he was talking about, but anything had to be better than elimination.

"Can we know what it is?" Ye Hua asked carefully.

"Nope. But it can't be worse than losing here, right? What am I going to ask for? Your lives?"

Ye Hua pondered. This made sense, but...

"How about four gold badges?" he asked tentatively.

Li Luo drew his shortswords with a menacing grin.

"Stone boy, if your head is harder than my blades, I'll give you four badges. How's that?"

Chapter 0169: Encounter

Ye Hua grumbled as he pocketed the two gold badges and stomped off.

"Will they do as you say?" Xin Fu asked as they watched his squad go.

"That Ye Hua's a clever guy. He was enterprising enough to get a group together. No hard feelings—it's just part of the ranking battle system. He was good to get that many together, so I don't hold it against him."

"But now I've let him go and even made a deal with him. I paid him upfront as well. If he reneges, then he'll have really crossed us..."

"So I think he'll make the right choice," Li Luo said cheerfully.

Xin Fu nodded. Li Luo was the leader. He had decided, and that was that. The Xin Fu brain could kick back and chill. Besides, if he were to suggest something and it went badly, wouldn't that mean he would have to bear the burden?

With the leader taking responsibility, he could sit back.

Li Luo ran the gold badges through his fingers. They had nine before, and he had paid Ye Hua two. Seven left. 700 school points.

"700 each is not a bad start," Li Luo said brightly. The chase had given them quite a rocky start, but these 700 points made up for everything.

Xin Fu was smiling in a pleased way as well. School points were all an Astral Sage College student could ask for. 700 was enough for two vials of energy liquid.

"Leader, you're awesome." Bai Mengmeng dimpled, happy as well.

"Well, the MVP this time was Mengmeng. Without her illusions running interference, we wouldn't have cracked them." He gave her a big thumbs up.

This was no empty praise. Her Nightmarish Water Butterfly resonance might be weaker offense-wise, but its utility was formidable. When used well, it could be just as strong as other powerful resonances.

Xin Fu nodded in agreement, and Bai Mengmeng blushed.

"Let's push on. The ranking battle has only just begun. There are still plenty of bunches of chives for us to harvest." Li Luo sprung up and led the way deeper into the battlefield.

...

As time wore on, the battles grew more and more intense.

Over 1,000 squads fought it out with any means they had. It made for quite a spectacle.

On a high dais outside of the battlefield.

The five Violet Vibrance mentors watched intently, no fight escaping their eyes.

"Mentor Chi Chan, what's the score looking like now?" Cao Sheng asked. She was tasked with recording the points.

She answered in a clear voice.

"Bai Doudou's Wind Rider squad is in the lead with 1,700 points.

"Second: Qin Zhulu's Clear Moon squad, 1,600 points.

"Third: Wang Hejiu's Golden Gate squad, 1,500 points.

"Fourth: Li Luo's Fairness & Justice squad, 1,480 points.

"Fifth: Yi Lisha's One Autumn Leaf squad, 1,400 points.

"There are some promising Gold Gleam squads, but none have broken the 1,000-point mark yet."

"The Wind Rider squad has three wind resonance users. They're best suited to quick mowing," Cao Sheng observed. "No Gold Gleam squad that crosses their path really stands a chance of getting away. Their point lead is to be expected."

Shen Jinxiao smiled calmly. "No need to worry. The big fish are busy feeding on small fish for now. It's about to be over though. When the big fish meet, that will be when things get interesting."

"I hope things get interesting," Chi Chan replied. "After all, Mentor Shen Jinxiao has very kindly forked out 3000 school points to get the 12 Step Weave as an extra prize. If things are boring, his money's wasted."

The other three Violet Vibrance mentors let their amusement show. Of course they could hear the sarcasm in her tone. They also knew the backstory.

Still, everything that Shen Jinxiao had done was within the rules, both taking the 12 Step Weave and making it an additional prize. It was why he had been allowed to proceed, even though his agenda was clear to everyone.

Shen Jinxiao remained unfazed. "Whatever spurs the students on. I'm perfectly willing to pay."

"I sure hope that stands when the battle is over," Chi Chan said.

He looked over with a drawling smile. "Is Mentor Chi Chan implying that I would not be willing to cough it up if Li Luo won?"

"Let me put that fear to rest. A mere 3,000 points? If Li Luo can earn it, it speaks of his efforts in cultivation. I will be happy for him."

"However..."

His voice turned menacing. "I'm very afraid that Li Luo will not meet Mentor Chi Chan's expectations."

"We'll know at the end," she said with a frosty smile.

The two continued to fence with words, lexical stabs delivered between false smiles. The other mentors were more or less used to it.

...

"I say, Brother, are you guys the rabbit squad or something? I chased you guys for a full ten minutes for this badge!"

Li Luo panted, grumbling as he snatched the badge from a defeated Gold Gleam squad.

"It's not very polite to run from the moment we meet, right?"

The leader just stared at him. "Damn, we're a humble Gold Gleam squad plodding along. What are we supposed to do when demons like you appear? Find a silver platter and lie down on it?"

Li Luo stashed the gold badge away. "That makes 1,680 points now." He smiled at Bai Mengmeng.

He did some quick math. The 12 Step Weave was 3,000, the Royal Sap was 5,000... He was so far away.

"This sucks."

Li Luo sighed. As time wore on, the Gold Gleam squads were getting craftier and craftier. Some even ran the moment they were spotted, and chasing them down always took some time. It made him think back fondly to the squads that Ye Hua had delivered up to them.

Although their start had been a little shaky, the feast had been awesome.

Li Luo bent down next to the creek to wash his hands, preparing to continue his hunt.

A gust of wind blew in on the other side of the creek. Three figures walked out into view.

Li Luo looked up to see that they were looking at him.

Things got quiet.

Their leader was a young guy in thin clothing. His skin was sallow, while his eyes had an unusual gleam to them. He had a dull-yellow sash tied to his forehead and was clad in shorts and a pair of flip flops.

An unusual getup.

He had a guy and a girl with him. The guy was unfamiliar, but Li Luo recognized the girl immediately.

Si Qiuying!

Which made the identities of the other two clear.

Yi Lisha, Qian Ye.

Li Luo's eyes tightened. So this was the first Violet Vibrance squad he would face.

Chapter 0170: Merger

The two Violet Vibrance squads faced off on opposite banks while the creek burbled obliviously in between.

Li Luo stood up slowly. "Hello there, friends. Fancy seeing y'all here."

Behind his back, he made a fanning gesture.

Some distance away, Xin Fu faded into the shadows.

Bai Mengmeng took a few steps back as well, positioning herself behind Li Luo and preparing her resonant power.

Yi Lisha and the others regarded Li Luo briefly, then the members looked to their leader for a cue. Yi Lisha's smile was forced. "Fancy seeing you here, Li Luo and team."

The friendliness on both sides was as genuine as a three dollar bill. One almost expected the creek to freeze over with how cold the atmosphere was.

Yi Lisha rubbed his cheek. "Would you believe it," he ventured, "if I said we were just passing by?"

Li Luo regarded him for a few moments. "Understood. So... we part ways?"

"Good!"

Yi Lisha eased up a little. He was very wary of Li Luo's team. After all, Li Luo had even beaten Duze Beixuan before, and he was a dual resonance user. He was definitely a formidable foe.

His squad was busy farming Gold Gleam and Silver Spark squads. If they lost against Li Luo here and now, not only would their earnings halt to a stop, they would even have to give up a third of their

points. And even if they won, Yi Lisha couldn't see them escaping unscathed. They might even be picked off by Gold Gleam squads in their weakened state. That would be a crying shame.

So this was not the time to be fighting Violet Vibrance squads.

He believed that Li Luo was of the same mind. Besides, neither had any grudge to settle. There was really no good reason to duke it out here.

As they both tentatively felt each other out, the relief on both sides was apparent.

Li Luo's eyes flicked over to Si Qiuying. Her eyes had never once left him since they met.

Li Luo threw her a friendly smile, then slowly backed away. Both teams made sure they were out of each other's attack range before turning their backs.

Yi Lisha breathed out. "Phew. We almost went and did it there."

"I don't mind fighting them. I'm curious to see how strong Li Luo's dual resonances are," Qian Ye said recklessly.

"Once we fight, there's no stopping. You want points? Or brief, petty satisfaction?" Yi Lisha asked exasperatedly.

Qian Ye paused. "Points it is."

"There will be more chances. But not right now." Yi Lisha smiled back at him.

Si Qiuying kept silent throughout. She was pretty well acquainted with just how strong Yi Lisha was. She knew that although he was placed slightly lower than Duze Beixuan on the newcomer rankings, Yi Lisha was not necessarily weaker, and she knew both of them quite well.

As the young mistress of House Jinque, Si Qiuying had seen many experts before. Even so, Yi Lisha had her respect. This leader was no ordinary fighter.

But today, this leader that she had acknowledged had treaded very carefully around Li Luo's squad. Timing aside, it spoke of Li Luo's prowess.

Which troubled Si Qiuying. A mere few months ago, when she had met him on the way into Xia City, she would never have dreamed that this young lord from the remote Tianshu Province would so quickly be leading a pack as elite as the Astral Sage College's.

Jiang Qing'e had said that he might well become the best of the newcomers.

She had turned her nose up at that, dismissing it as Jiang Qing'e's defensive retort. But now... she wasn't sure.

"Qiuying, we're leaving."

Yi Lisha's voice broke her reverie. She saw that her two teammates had already gone on ahead.

She pushed her feelings aside. With one last look back in the direction of the river, she turned and followed her squad.

Perhaps this ranking battle would be enough to test if Li Luo could become first among the newcomers.

...

After parting from Yi Lisha's squad, it had been smooth sailing for Li Luo's squad.

They had fortuitously stumbled across two Gold Gleam squads and three Silver Spark squads, scooping up another wave of points.

And just about this time, Li Luo noticed some special markings, which he had agreed on with Zhao Kuo and the others.

If he just followed these marks, he would meet up with them.

According to their plan, Zhao Kuo and the others would find a way to tail the Governor Squad. Which meant that both would be close.

The Governor Squad was quite strong, and they were out for his blood. If the final showdown was going to be with the Golden Gate squad, then this tumor had to be eradicated first.

The squad picked up speed.

In a dense forest.

A large crowd was lounging about, some standing, some sitting, while some were posted on lookout. It was a sizable group of eight—two Gold Gleam squads.

Four of them were Zhao Kuo's team, while the other four were helpers they had enlisted.

"Zhao Kuo, is Li Luo's squad really going to help us? You wouldn't be exaggerating your relationship, would you?" the other leader couldn't help asking, impatient with how long they had been kept waiting.

His squad was starting to have doubts as well. Although Zhao Kuo was also from Southwind Academy, he was extremely average in strength.

Still, he had sworn that Li Luo would show up to help. Then again, could they really take his word for it?

"And Zong Fu, and you others. Say something," the leader grumbled.

He couldn't really figure out what was up with this team. Out of the four, Zhao Kuo was probably the weakest. In fact, he was so weak that it was surprising he was even a Gold Gleam student. And yet he was somehow the squad leader.

This, and many other reasons, made him and his squad unable to take Zhao Kuo's squad seriously.

Zhao Kuo was calm. "Don't worry. Wait a while longer. They're a Violet Vibrance squad, they must be harvesting points along the way. Of course it will take a while. If they find the markings, they'll definitely come."

Zong Fu backed him up. "Yup. Don't worry, Squad Leader Xu Ge."

"We can't help worrying," the leader called Xu Ge complained. "We're stuck behind the Governor Squad and the Sky Blade Squad. If they rumble with us, we'll be screwed. We won't even be able to escape."

"I'm just saying that if you're not sure Li Luo's coming, just admit it. So we can prepare ourselves."

Zhao Kuo wasn't too happy about their lack of confidence, but he kept his cool.

Just then, he saw Zong Fu suddenly stand up. With a jolt of excitement, he turned to see three people walking over.

Who else but the man of the hour, Li Luo.

"We met a few teams along the way, spent some time finishing them off," Li Luo said to them with a smile.

He smacked Zhao Kuo across the shoulder blades. "Your drawings are seriously ugly," he complained. "You could give Xin Fu a run for his money."

He smiled a greeting at Zong Fu and the others before turning to the other squad.

"Sorry we kept you waiting."

The Gold Gleam squad leader Xu Ge was all smiles now, bobbing his head agreeably. He could tell that Li Luo was much more familiar in tone when he spoke to Zhao Kuo. So Zong Fu had been telling the truth when he said Zhao Kuo was the only one who truly had Li Luo's ear.

And now he understood why Zong Fu and the others were content to have Zhao Kuo as their leader. It was probably not that he was the most capable, but rather he had the connection to Li Luo.

"Brother Luo, how do you do? No, no, your timing is just perfect. Brother Zhao here set everything up," Xu Ge hastily said.

Li Luo nodded. After a short briefing, he was up to speed, and there was nothing else to be said.

"Well, we're all ready now. Let's go."