

Resonance 171

Chapter 0171: It's A Trap

"Brother Luo, the Governor Squad and the Sky Blade Squad were spotted moving together an hour ago. From their movement, it looks like they're moving deeper into the battle arena, looking for your tracks," Zhao Kuo told them.

"The leader of the Governor Squad, Shen Ya, is an Upper Flowering, while the other three are Lower Flowering.

"All four members of the Sky Blade Squad are Lower Flowering cultivators. The two squads are counted among the best among the Gold Gleam squads. They should not be underestimated."

Li Luo gave a small nod of acknowledgment. The two squads were much stronger than any squad he had met so far. If they were jumped unprepared, the eight would pose a threat.

"Our two squads will take on the Sky Blade Squad," Zhao Kuo said. "They're stronger than us, so we'll bring numbers, and even then, we might not be able to win. We'll need some strong firepower from you guys."

"As planned." Li Luo nodded.

"But the catch is if Xin Fu comes to help us, it might just be Brother Luo and Mengmeng taking on the full brunt of the Governor Squad," Zhao Kuo said, raising his eyebrows at Li Luo.

"Don't worry, I'm good." Li Luo assured him easily.

Zhao Kuo dropped it. He knew Li Luo well through their years of friendship. He wouldn't say such a thing lightly.

...

Somewhere in the forest.

Shen Ya was sitting under a tree, tossing a fruit up and catching it again, taking bites in between. Shi Huang and the others were lounging around as well.

A group of four others walked into their clearing, all with blood-red swords strapped to their hips.

"Let's get moving if you're done resting, Shen Ya. The faster we catch Li Luo, the faster we can end them," the burly youth said peevishly.

"You talk like you're just slaughtering a pig." Shen Ya snickered.

"We're not afraid of Violet Vibrance squads. Not like the others." He snorted.

"Okay, then." Shen Ya got to his feet. At his casual gesture, the two squads moved off.

They fanned out quickly, without a word, forming a defensive perimeter that proved their battle experience.

They moved like this for several minutes until Shen Ya's eyes flickered. He sensed that something was off. He turned around to the Sky Blade Squad and shouted, "Liu Que! You guys alright?"

There was no response from the other team as they continued moving forwards.

Shen Ya frowned. With a flick of his sleeve, he sent several resonant power shots towards the Sky Blade Squad. They passed through their bodies harmlessly.

"Illusions?" Shen Ya raised a hand and halted their advance. They grouped up immediately for safety.

"Li Luo's squad must be using Bai Mengmeng's power," Shi Huang said urgently. He brought his lightning resonant power crackling forth.

"Quite a canny guy. He knows we're attacking him, so he thought to get the jump on us?"

Shen Ya smiled. "Li Luo, if you have any pride as a Violet Vibrance student, how about not sneaking around?"

"That's the most obvious taunt I've ever heard, but I guess it works," a cheerful voice replied. Shen Ya swung around to see Li Luo perched on a nearby tree.

"You separated the Sky Blade Squad from us? Heh, as a Violet Vibrance squad, you're scared of just two Gold Gleam squads?"

"If I can finish off my opponents using an easier method, why not do it?" Li Luo replied.

Shen Ya's lip curled upwards. "What an honor, to be so highly regarded by Leader Li Luo. But I only see two here... Xin Fu has gone to help Zhao Kuo and the others finish off the Sky Blade Squad quickly, I expect?"

Li Luo's eyes narrowed.

"Surprised we know your plan?" Shen Ya gloated.

Li Luo's cheerfulness sloughed off his face. "The team that joined Zhao Kuo... you arranged it?"

"Impressive instincts, Leader Li Luo," Shen Ya said with some surprise.

"Indeed, we set it all up. This whole plan was Shi Huang's idea. He knew about Zhao Kuo and you, so we cooked this up..."

"Do you still think Xin Fu and Zhao Kuo's squad will make it back?"

...

BOOM!

Blasts of resonant power ricocheted off the tree trunks.

More than 10 people were locked in a chaotic melee. Zhao Kuo and Xu Ge's squads were taking on the Sky Blade Squad.

The Sky Blade Squad was clearly not up to the task. Harried on two fronts, they were constantly on the back foot.

"Xu Ge, don't let up now. Full steam ahead! Brother Luo's side must be suffering too!" Zhao Kuo urged him loudly.

Xu Ge appeared by his side, nodding seriously. "Alright, all out!"

He channeled his resonant power to his palm and then thrust outwards.

But this attack was not aimed at the Sky Blade Squad, but Zhao Kuo's unprotected back.

Right before it landed, a shadowy wave of energy dispelled the palm attack, sending him flying.

Xu Ge's three squad mates had turned on Zong Fu and the others at the same time.

Their faces were white with horror.

"Xu Ge! What are you doing?!" Zhao Kuo shouted at him.

"Can't you see? It's all a setup. You've been hooked!" The Sky Blade Squad's leader, Liu Que, laughed loudly. He drew his blood-red sword and chopped vengefully at the shadow, a fiery trail of resonant power flashing out.

"Xin Fu, you might have saved him, but I see you now!"

Dagger on sword, the inky darkness triumphed over the crimson. However, the light of the clash lit Xin Fu up clearly.

The other three Sky Blade Squad members had come to surround Xin Fu as well.

"Haha, so what if you're a Violet Vibrance student? We're still going to get you good!"

Xin Fu was rigid with tension, his dagger in a defensive position before him. They had been played.

...

"Li Luo, you're a member down. Still think you can take on the full might of our Gold Gleam squad?" Shen Ya chuckled.

"Well..." Li Luo considered it. "Why not?"

Shen Ya nodded. "Yes, it's possible..."

"...which is why, to express my profound respect for you, I have prepared three more Gold Gleam squads in this forest."

He fired a signal high into the air, which screeched as it left a clear smoke trail.

Shen Ya watched it with a smug smile.

He turned back to Li Luo and rolled his shoulders lazily.

"So tell me, Li Luo... How are you going to get out of this one?"

Chapter 0172: It's A Counter Trap

"Prepared three Gold Gleam squads, eh..."

Li Luo's eyebrows went up, and apprehension started to set in. Only he and Bai Mengmeng were left here, and they were outnumbered. Another three Gold Gleam squads would put them in serious trouble.

"You've really planned this out well, I see," Li Luo said slowly.

They must have purposely let Zhao Kuo know about their plans and then set up Xu Ge's squad with him. A secret alliance. They already knew all about Zhao Kuo's plan from the start.

Even after separating Xin Fu, they had taken the extra precaution of getting three Gold Gleam squads to lie in ambush.

Layer after layer—it was a meticulous plan indeed.

"Of course. Against you, prudence is the best course of action. Our first strike has to be decisive so we, the Governor Squad, can make a name for ourselves. No matter the price, we will not fail."

"Naturally, many of the suggestions came from Shi Huang. Li Luo, you have to admit that sometimes your enemies know you even better than yourself," Shen Ya gloated.

Shi Huang spoke up coldly. "Li Luo, I swore to you I'd take my revenge! Ever since that day I lost at Tianshu!"

"That's a very blatant declaration of war," Li Luo said.

Shen Ya trembled with charged resonant power, but he did not attack yet. "Li Luo, I know that your dual resonances are fearsome. You even beat Duze Beixuan. I'm not so foolish as to attack you yet." His smile turned into one of mockery.

"I intend to wait for the cavalry to arrive. With three Gold Gleam squads as reinforcements, you'll know what it means to be caged. Sorry, Li Luo, your first taste of failure in the Astral Sage College will be at my hands."

...

Boom!

Three squads were locked in a furious fight in the forest.

The Sky Blade Squad completely ignored Zhao Kuo's squad, leaving them entirely to Xu Ge. The four of them were entirely focused on attacking Xin Fu.

Xin Fu was an Upper Flowering, while the four Sky Blade Squad members were Lower Flowering. Individually, they were weaker, but against their combined might, it was Xin Fu who was in trouble.

Their combination of attacks could only be dodged, not countered. Occasionally, he sent back an attack that met with a well-prepared defense, easily blocked.

His only option was to use the unique prowess of a shadow resonance and play for time.

"Haha, Violet Vibrance students are nothing much. Scampering up and down like a monkey." The Sky Blade Squad's leader, Liu Que's, voice dripped with scorn.

Xin Fu ignored it. He knew that they were trying to goad him to fight head on. And then he would lose badly.

A good shadow assassin had to be patient enough to wait for an opportune moment.

Seeing Xin Fu immune to his goading, Liu Que gave up the approach, falling silent and concentrating on attacking.

On the other side, Zhao Kuo and his squad were locked in a heated battle against Xu Ge's squad.

"Xu Ge, you mutt! How dare you betray us!" Zhao Kuo shouted at him. He was burning with anger and guilt at having let Li Luo down.

He had spread the information about the Governor Squad to Li Luo. And yet he had played straight into their hands.

The grubby hands of a willing and eager ally, Xu Ge.

The leaked intel had definitely put Li Luo and the others at risk.

"Keke, don't blame me, blame yourself for not being careful enough." Xu Ge snickered.

"Both our squad and Brother Luo's squad will remember you," Zhao Kuo promised ominously.

Xu Ge squirmed a little. He wasn't afraid of Zhao Kuo, but of Li Luo's Violet Vibrance squad... that was still a presence to be feared. Still, he had already committed so much. No backing out now.

"Oh, and what does that remembrance do? Are you going to kill me?" Xu Ge asked.

"All we have to do is sink you both today, and Li Luo's group will be the first Violet Vibrance squad to lose their place!"

"Quickly, finish them off!" he shouted to his squad.

They obliged, doubling down on their resonant power and forcing Zhao Kuo and the others backwards. The situation was on the verge of tipping.

But just as they were pressing forward for the final blow, a few more people darted out of the trees ahead.

Xu Ge and the others hesitated, then they quickly fell back to a safe distance.

"Who dares?!" he yelled.

Zhao Kuo and the others were surprised as well, unsure of who the new intruders were.

A Gold Gleam squad walked out into the open. Their leader was the one who had met with Li Luo—Ye Hua.

Ye Hua cracked his neck experimentally.

"Excuse me, was it you guys who ordered a Handsome Hunk's Beating?"

...

Three Gold Gleam squads were hurrying through the woods.

"Quick, quick, Shen Ya's already given the signal. Go and surround Li Luo!" The three leaders urged their teams.

"If we beat a Violet Vibrance squad, we'll be famous!"

"Wooh, can't wait!"

Their advance was jerked up short by a sudden hailstorm of arrows. The sudden attack forced them to duck down for desperate cover.

"Who's that?!" a squad leader shouted.

Four Gold Gleam squads walked out of the woods.

"Friends, we're all minding our own business here. What are you doing?" the three attacking squads demanded.

One leader of the four squads grinned. "Going to attack Li Luo and his friends?"

The three squads were silent, their hearts sinking.

"Sorry, but we took a reward too. We just need to keep you here to earn a nice, sweet amount of school points. So do us all a favor and just wait right there."

The leader waved, and his four Gold Gleam squads jumped them.

...

Deep in the mountains.

Li Luo made himself comfy on his tree, peacefully looking down at Shen Ya and his squad. Time ticked on, and he showed no intention of attacking.

Shen Ya was starting to feel uncomfortable. Once their reinforcements arrived, Li Luo's chances of winning would evaporate. Why was he not more worried?

If he was not worried, then Shen Ya was worried.

It was a worry that only grew steadily with each passing moment.

His reinforcements were late...

Li Luo suddenly burst into laughter. "Well?" he said mildly. "Tardy reinforcements?"

Shen Ya and the others looked at him with dismay. "What did you do?!" Li Luo laughed gaily, his hands resting lightly on his swords. "I didn't underestimate you at all... but you underestimated me.

"Did you think that Li Luo was just a handsome face to make you feel better about yourselves, ugly boys?"

A vein pulsed on Shen Ya's temple, but he took a deep, calming breath.

"The reinforcements were just for backup. Even without them, do you really think our full complement will lose to the two of you?"

"Li Luo, I'll finish you today!"

Shen Ya's resonant power flared up.

"Get them!" he growled. All four shot towards Li Luo.

Chapter 0173: I Like It Too

Swoosh!

Four simultaneous attacks from Shen Ya's squad swept out with choreographed precision, cutting off any retreat from Li Luo on all sides.

Li Luo stood his ground calmly, letting them do as they pleased.

Shoosh!

Their attacks all passed harmlessly through him.

And then he faded away from sight.

"An illusion!"

Shen Ya shouted, panicking.

Was this Bai Mengmeng's power? My God, it was frustrating.

"Watch out! Don't get separated!" he barked. As long as they could stay together, even Li Luo would pay a heavy price to take them all down.

Just as he spoke, a light blinded him with a flash, and he raised a hand instinctively.

Li Luo appeared in the next instant, blade chopping down at him.

Panicking, he unleashed his resonant power in a desperate blast to repel Li Luo.

Again, his power passed through, connecting with nothing but air.

"Another damned illusion?!" he seethed.

Suddenly, bursts of light were erupting all around them in the forest. Each spawned a Li Luo that came running at them.

Soon enough, there were a dozen Li Luos charging them.

"Impossible! How can Bai Mengmeng summon so many illusions?" a Governor Squad member cried out.

Shi Huang squinted against the constantly dazzling lights and spotted a puddle of highly reflective water.

The water mirror was strategically reflecting the lights to create more illusions of Li Luo.

"It's Li Luo's water resonant power! He set up water mirrors everywhere to multiply Bai Mengmeng's illusions. We're... in his trap," Shi Huang said urgently.

"Be careful! One of these illusions must be real!"

They were more or less expecting that, conserving their resonant power in each attack as they continued to test each illusion.

But the illusions were relentless. More and more "Li Luos" came at them from all directions in the trees.

They were starting to sweat now. Was this Li Luo's plan? To tire them out with illusions? But they didn't dare to let the illusions get close. What if the real deal was hiding among them?

They were stuck.

Focused on clearing the Li-illusions, they did not notice that the ground beneath their feet was starting to turn slushy.

"Look out below!" Shen Ya yelled in fright as he suddenly felt a coolness around his feet.

Too late. The ground beneath their feet gave way, becoming a swamp that sucked their feet in.

"Damn it, he softened the ground with his water resonant power!" Shi Huang shouted. But how could Li Luo pull this off so quickly? Ah. Earth resonance power.

Boom!

Combining their powers, they prepared to blast the swamp to bits and escape.

But just at that instant, a green light interrupted their concerted attack, vines snaking out to bind them.

They hurriedly turned their attention to this new threat, but the series of attacks had worn down their response. One member fumbled, and the vines wrapped him up tightly. With a final, choked scream, he was dragged down into the swamp, and not heard from again.

The other three were panicking now, desperately trying to get away.

Which meant that they were starting to spread out.

"Get back! Back away from this place!" Shen Ya commanded them.

Finally, he was starting to understand why Li Luo was so hard to deal with. The combination of two resonance arts opened new possibilities that slipped through their defenses.

Shi Huang and the other remaining members fled without hesitation.

Too late to flee.

A "Li-illusion" raised its hand, sending little pellets of light forth that popped right before the last member's eyes.

"Argh!"

The guy screamed, clawing frantically at his eyes. His spear ignited with fire resonant power and he swept it out before him in a wild, blind swing.

Useless. Water Edge-reinforced steel met his weapon, sending his spear flying away with a deft twist. At the same time, a sword hilt rapped him sharply on the shoulder.

The guy went down with a heavy grunt of pain.

Boom!

Having finished off another member, Li Luo whirled around as thunder boomed. Shi Huang had his own spear in hand, already charged up with electrical power and writhing like a live dragon.

Li Luo smiled and lifted a palm.

"Dendrical Intervention!"

More vines flew out to lash against Shi Huang's spear attack. Splinters were sent flying, but the lightning could not penetrate his defense.

Bong!

A flash of leafy-green light connected with Shi Huang, throwing him violently.

Shi Huang was seized with bitter despair. Back at the Tianshu Province, he had lost to Li Luo, but it was because of that one trick arrow that he had not been careful about. But now Li Luo was crushing him at every turn.

There was no use in despairing now. Li Luo had already turned to him again. Surely Li Luo was planning to take him out with his next move, leaving Shen Ya alone.

His electrical energy crackled to life around him as he prepared to pull back.

Behind, Shen Ya could read his intention as well. His own golden resonant power propelled him forward in a blur as he raced to Shi Huang's rescue.

Shi Huang turned to flee, but he found himself face to face with an ethereal curtain of pollen. A demonic butterfly fluttered in and out of the curtain. Shi Huang's mind went blank.

Rumble!

His lightning power lapsed with a muted boom, jolting him back to the present. The demonic butterfly was gone.

"Bai Mengmeng!" Shi Huang spotted her smiling sweetly nearby behind a tree.

"She doesn't deserve your ugly gaze. Our gem of a sister is beyond you louts."

A voice said in his ear. In his peripheral vision he saw a heavy fist, then he was brained.

Bonk!

He felt a sharp pain on his skull, then his vision faded to black.

Li Luo's voice came to him as he sank down. "You failed again. It's alright. Try harder next time."

Shi Huang down, Li Luo turned to the last man standing, the Governor Squad's leader, Shen Ya. He grinned.

"I hear you like two-to-one odds."

Li Luo's two shortswords dragged against the ground. Behind Shen Ya, Bai Mengmeng had stepped out as well. Li Luo's grin widened when he saw Shen Ya's bleak expression.

"I'm afraid I like it too..."

Chapter 0174: Feeling Better Yet?

The forested area was a woeful scene of splintered trunks and churned soil.

Shen Ya had lost all hope. In a mere ten minutes, their entire squad had been totalled by Li Luo.

Three out of four were down, and he alone was left.

If it were a raw competition of resonant power, he would win. After all, Li Luo was only a Lower Flowering, while he was an Upper Flowering.

But Li Luo's dual resonances had proved incredibly unpredictable to deal with, thanks to the combinations between water and wood. Plus, Bai Mengmeng's unique powers had nullified their numbers advantage quickly enough.

No wonder this guy could take Duze Beixuan down.

He sighed heavily. The dazzling reflection from the water mirrors were fading. That had to mean that they were drying up, the water resonant power consolidating back with its user.

He lifted his glittering, golden longsword, pointing it at Li Luo. "You're good. Really good. I thought my plan was perfect, but still you beat it."

"I have nothing else up my sleeve, but at the end of my sleeve is a strong wrist holding a good blade. I want to know how strong a Violet Vibrance student is. If you want to truly convince me of your strength, come fight me one on one."

Li Luo looked at him as though he was speaking bird language. "Why the hell would I care if you're utterly convinced?"

"I just want a third of your badges. Does utter conviction get me any more?"

Shen Ya shut up now. His last thread of hope evaporated when Li Luo refused to take his bait.

Take more of their badges? Don't make me laugh...

Out of words, he let his golden resonant power envelop his body. The longsword in his hand shone brighter than before.

Shen Ya was a metal resonance user.

Li Luo looked at his metal resonant power and recalled the traitor of House Luolan, Pei Hao. Damn, metal resonances really liked to manifest themselves in losers!

Shoosh!

Shen Ya made his opening stab at Li Luo.

Li Luo did not shy away, answering with his reinforced shortswords. The sound of crashing waves could be heard.

Blue on gold, their weapons crackled loudly as each sought the upper hand.

A dozen rounds later, Shen Ya's face was even bleaker than before. Clearly, his resonant power was better than Li Luo's. But why did he not feel any advantage at all?

His offense was relentless and strong, but Li Luo's water resonant power never once wavered off his blades. Inexorable and timeless as the tide, the sharp edge of his metal resonance offense was blunted.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Blade Whirlwind!"

Out of ideas, he resorted to his best resonance art. With a gleam of gold, a hundred blades seemed to appear out of nowhere, glittering menacingly in the sun as they began to spin together.

They flashed out at Li Luo in a flurry of yellow. He stood his ground, legs apart, movements unhurried.

His water resonant power brought his shortswords to life. They leaped like fish breaking the waves, smacking the golden blades away.

He smiled to himself.

This was a tiger-general resonance art he had been practicing recently. It was called Dancing Pisces.

His blades danced and leaped like fish. They seemed gentle, but they had hardened at the perfect time and pushed away the blades coming from below.

They put up a flawless defense against the torrent of blades.

Shen Ya was completely broken now, his fear and panic showing.

From start to finish, Li Luo had only fought him with water resonant power. His dual resonances had been held in reserve.

Such was the difference between the two.

Li Luo was too strong.

"If you're spacing out even at this time... I'm not going to hold back," Li Luo quipped.

He stepped out, waterlight pooling beneath his feet and lending him speed.

The two dancing fish locked tails, forming a pair of watery scissors.

Li Luo struck him with a running blow as he passed.

Shen Ya looked down at his limp hands, blood trickling down from between his fingers.

Unable to grip his sword any longer, it fell to the ground with a clatter.

He was screwed. He made one last desperate run away into the forest.

Shoosh!

A fey light held him, then a thin blade landed lightly on his throat. It was as delicate as a butterfly's wing.

A beautiful girl in blue smiled angelically back at him.

"If you run away, how are we going to get badges?" she said almost shyly.

Shen Ya sighed. The resistance leaking out of him, he sat down on the floor.

Li Luo sheathed his swords a little grumpily. "That's it? You've a problem with perseverance." Shen Ya scowled at him. "You're a problem yourself. Your cultivation level is lower, so how are you stronger than me?"

Li Luo grinned in reply. Although he had yet to master dual resonances, two resonant palaces gave him a deep reserve of resonant power. How could Shen Ya hope to compete?

By his estimation, those at the first-tier of the Resonant Master Stage would need at least an upper eighth-grade resonance to compete with him.

Although those with that criteria were already at the second tier of the Resonant Master Stage—Qin Zhulu, Wang Hejiu, Bai Doudou—he wondered how he would match up against them.

"My woodearth resonance is already a fifth-grade, but it's still a little low. After the ranking battles, I should try to get it to the sixth grade as quickly as possible," Li Luo thought to himself. If he couldn't get his sixth-grade waterlight resonance to rise to the seventh grade just yet, then he would focus on the easier upgrade.

With two sixth-grade resonances, he could take on an upper eighth-grade opponent!

Caught up in his thoughts, Li Luo sat down opposite Shen Ya. He seemed to be in no hurry to take his badge.

"Are you still hoping the Sky Blade Squad shows up?" Li Luo chuckled.

"Can't I?" Shen Ya said stiffly. "I'm about to be eliminated, but seeing something, anything, not go your way would make me feel better."

Li Luo shook his head and waited with him in silence.

About ten minutes later, the sound of urgent footfalls could be heard.

Shen Ya looked up hopefully.

The newcomers walked into sight.

Shen Ya looked down sadly.

Li Luo inclined his head at the group, led by Zhao Kuo, and then smiled at Shen Ya.

"Feeling better yet?"

Chapter 0175: Loss-making

Shen Ya's last vestiges of hope evaporated as soon as Zhao Kuo and the others strolled into sight. So the Sky Blade Squad had been decimated.

His plan—utterly broken.

He slumped against a tree trunk. "You win, Li Luo," he muttered.

Li Luo ignored him, instead going to shake hands with Zhao Kuo.

"Brother Luo, have you tied things up on this end?" Zhao Kuo and the others hurried over. They looked over at the listless Shen Ya. His face told them all they needed to know.

It was a shocking result—the strongest Gold Gleam squad had been taken down by just Li Luo and Bai Mengmeng.

Incredible.

Zong Fu and the others looked at Li Luo with profound respect.

"Looks like you tidied up your end as well," Li Luo said cheerfully.

"Brother Luo," Zhao Kuo said with shame in his voice, "I'm sorry I compromised us and put you in danger."

If not for Li Luo's contingencies, Xu Ge's betrayal might well have been enough to turn the tide on them.

Li Luo waved it off casually. "Don't mention it. If you hadn't alerted me at the start, I might have been done in by them as well."

If he hadn't been told about the Governor Squad's evil intentions, he might not have made such preparations, and subsequently would've fallen to the combined onslaught of the Governor Squad and the Sky Blade Squad. Then again, he might not have lost, but it would have been a very close fight.

Li Luo didn't like close and risky knife fights. He much preferred bringing guns to knife fights.

There was rustle behind them, then more people walked into view. It was Ye Hua.

"Stone boy." Li Luo waved.

"Stop calling me that!"

"Thanks a lot for this, stone boy," Li Luo beamed.

Li Luo had not only let him go after fighting him, but had even given him some points. He had asked for Ye Hua to watch for his signal, and also to gather some Gold Gleam squads just in case.

Back then, he had just made standard contingencies, unaware that Xu Ge would end up betraying them. He had simply felt that the information that he was being targeted had spread too easily. There had to be more to it.

Still, results-wise, Li Luo's response had been spot-on.

Ye Hua stared at the recalcitrant Li Luo helplessly. "Ah, forget it. But our business is done. Time to settle up."

He indicated the four Gold Gleam squads that had helped with the ambush.

"I've gotten my reward, but I promised them a gold badge each just for showing their strength."

Li Luo flinched visibly. Well done, stone boy. Made free with my purse, eh? One gold badge per team. Four teams, four gold badges, 400 points!

A sizable sum indeed.

"Hey, you wouldn't run out on the bill, would you..." Ye Hua accused. "It's slightly steep, but it can't be helped. It cost good gold to get them to overcome their fear of the Governor Squad, you know. They're the best Gold Gleam squad after all."

Li Luo shook his head exasperatedly, then he took out four gold badges and threw them down. Although it had cost him dearly, he couldn't be ungrateful.

Ye Hua handed out the badges, saying, "Leave quickly, before he changes his mind and wipes you all out."

The four Gold Gleam squads were happy. "If you need to hire us again in the future, be sure to let us know, Brother Luo." They left in good cheer.

Li Luo watched them glumly. After hustling for so long, he had just been working to get points for others.

400 freaking points.

"Well, if there's nothing else, I'm going too." Ye Hua waved. He sensed a strangeness about Li Luo that he felt was better to avoid. The guy wouldn't be ready to rob him back, would he?

He decided to beat it.

"Well, thanks," Li Luo said with no thankfulness whatsoever. "Come find me if you're in trouble next time. But I will charge a fee at that time too."

"I wouldn't be able to afford you," Ye Hua called from a distance as he hurried away.

Li Luo turned back to Shen Ya and took a third of his badges.

It only added up to slightly over 300 points.

Damn, he was still short.

Life sucked.

"Brother Luo, we took down the Sky Blade Squad and Xu Ge's squad. We got slightly more than 400 points there. Let me give you some," Zhao Kuo said apologetically.

Li Luo glared at them. It was out of the question. Zhao Kuo's squad was only middle of the pack among the Gold Gleam squads. It was definitely much harder for them to get points.

How could he possibly take that away from them?

"Seems like you made a loss on this one." Shen Ya smirked.

"That's not how losses are calculated," Li Luo said calmly. "Now that you're out of the picture, there'll be no more annoying mice to deal with when the fight with Wang Hejiu rolls around. If I just finish off the Golden Gate Squad, there'll be no shortage of points."

Shen Ya snorted. "You're that confident you can defeat the Golden Gate Squad? I'll be waiting for the, er, good news."

Li Luo stood up and stretched lazily. "In any case," he yawned, "none of that concerns you anymore. Your ranking battle is over."

Shen Ya was regretting his choices now. If only they had not crossed Li Luo. Given how strong his squad was, they could have gone much further, gotten many more points.

Li Luo looked up at the sun inching down towards the horizon. The battles would end when the sun set.

Xin Fu and Bai Mengmeng moved up behind Li Luo.

He smiled at them.

"Well then, the small fry has been dealt with.

"I think we're ready for the main course now."

Chapter 0176: Curtains Rising

Li Luo's squad had gathered 2,800 points, and the sun was well on its way to setting, harsh yellow fading into a soft, rosy orange.

With it came a proportional increase in the sense of danger. Towards the end was when the most intense battles were fought.

The squads that were left must have triumphed in many battles and were all experienced.

Weng!

Suddenly, five columns of violet light shone down from the sky.

They indicated the positions of the five Violet Vibrance squads.

This was intended to hasten the ranking battles, and also to create chances for Violet Vibrance squads to fight.

After all, they had been farming Gold Gleam and Silver Spark squads so far, but at the close, they had to provide a good show, right?

Besides, each violet column of light was different. The one tinged with light green had to be Bai Doudou's Wind Rider Squad, and the dark green one should be Wang Hejiu's Golden Gate Squad. Yi

Lisha's One Autumn Leaf Squad had a yellow sheen to it, while a maroon light marked Qin Zhulu's Clear Moon Squad. The last one, a bluish light column, indicated Li Luo's Fairness & Justice Squad.

It was also a sort of indicator for the Gold Gleam squads. If they had the guts to take on a Violet Vibrance squad, this was their chance. Of course, it would be an incredible bounty if they won.

Naturally, not many Gold Gleam squads were that ballsy. Reckless courage was seldom rewarded.

The appearance of the violet light columns heralded a change in the game.

...

"The show's about to start."

The five Violet Vibrance mentors watched from above, finally showing some interest.

"Wowee, those two Violet Vibrance squads are very close to each other." Mi Er laughed.

Chi Chan looked. "It's Qin Zhulu and Yi Lisha's squads... They'll probably fight."

Although Yi Lisha was probably not too excited about fighting Qin Zhulu, the latter's personality would probably see him charging towards the nearest Violet Vibrance squad in his vicinity.

"Poor Yi Lisha," Chu Zi said sympathetically.

Cao Sheng shook his head. "You're too humble. Qin Zhulu is the carry of his team, while Lu Qing'er and Yin Yue support him. Yi Lisha's team has three balanced fighters. They'll do well, regardless of the outcome."

As the two mentors exchanged niceties, the other mentors looked at the other pillars. The other three Violet Vibrance squads were rather spaced out. However, the Fairness & Justice Squad and the Golden Gate Squad would probably clash. Probably. As if even mountains and seas could keep those two squads apart.

Which meant that the Wind Rider Squad was going to be left out.

What would they do...

Shen Jinxiao looked over at Cao Sheng. "Can I get some wine?" he asked lightly.

Cao Sheng pushed the jug towards him with an agreeable smile.

Shen Jinxiao filled his cup to the brim. "A good show needs a good drink."

His meaning was as obvious as could be. "You're really setting yourself nice and high, aren't you?" Chi Chan said with a frosty smile. "The height will come in handy when you hang yourself later."

His eyes narrowed. Opening his mouth to retort, they were suddenly all surprised by a loud bang. They turned to see firework-like words floating in the air.

It was a squad name.

Black Swan squad.

"Looks like the Three Star Hall ranking battles are over already," Cao Sheng said appreciatively. "The Black Swan Squad again."

"Jiang Qing'e's there. There are many talents in the Three Star Hall, but none can compare." Mi Er agreed.

"Her ninth-grade light resonance is legendary. I hear that she's aiming for the Seven Astral Pillars this year... If she wins, she'll have broken the Astral Sage College record to become the youngest Seven Astral Pillar ever," Chu Zi remarked.

The other Violet Vibrance mentors all sighed. That ninth-grade resonance was truly awesome.

Shen Jinxiao was silent, looking at his wine cup instead of the fireworks. Suddenly, the taste seemed a little sour.

Hff.

He turned back to the One Star Hall battlefield.

Hopefully, the results on this side could stop it from going completely sour.

"We have two choices now. One, we go and find the One Autumn Leaf Squad. Two, we go and hunt Gold Gleam squads. In this phase, they must be flocking to us."

Lu Qing'er conferred with Yin Yue nearby, and also an irate Qin Zhulu sitting a good ten meters away.

"What do you think, Qing'er?" Yin Yue asked with proper courtesy.

"I don't think it's a bad idea to play it safe and hunt Gold Gleam squads, if we just want points. The One Autumn Leaf Squad is strong, and their fighters are balanced. We might not come out ahead if we fight them."

Yin Yue nodded. "I agree, Qing'er."

Both girls turned to Qin Zhulu. After all, he was the leader.

Qin Zhulu shifted uneasily. "No use in fighting Gold Gleam squads," he muttered.

"We just want points. It doesn't matter how we get them, right?" Yin Yue said. She didn't actually like confronting others, especially when they were much stronger.

Ordinarily, Qin Zhulu would have run far away from a confrontation with the two girls, but he wasn't about to pass up on the opportunity to fight a Violet Vibrance squad. "No, I can't let them go. They're challenging me," he growled.

Lu Qing'er's eyebrows shot up. "Er, how are they challenging us?"

"They're so close to me. That's a challenge!"

Lu Qing'er and Yin Yue stared at each other with exasperation.

Give a dog a bad name and hang him.

But in the end, they both agreed. He was their leader and their strongest fighter. They had to respect his opinion.

...

While Qin Zhulu's squad was deciding on their target, two violet columns were racing towards each other.

To nobody's surprise, it was Li Luo and Wang Hejiu's squads.

"Well, it seems like no one dares to cause trouble for the Wind Rider Squad," Yu Lang said with some regret, hands on his hips.

"Leader, I suggest we team up with Li Luo and go beat up the little poison birdie." He craned his neck around to face Bai Doudou.

She toyed with the spear in her hands absently. "Two on one, what's the point?"

"I'm worried that Mengmeng will be injured by Wang Hejiu and the other baddies."

She glared at him. "Injuries are normal in battle. Besides," she continued, "if they really hurt Mengmeng, I'll deal with them next time. Both squads have looked forward to this for a long time. I think even Li Luo would frown on intervention."

Yu Lang held his tongue. Given what he knew about Li Luo, he would only be too happy to welcome a two on one.

Still, Bai Doudou didn't look sold at all, so he gave it up.

"What then? Are we just going to wait here?" Yu Lang said glumly.

"We'll go hunt Gold Gleam squads," Bai Doudou said. "Seems like the light pillar allows us to send out messages as well. If you use resonant power, you can make simple words."

She looked over at Yu Lang. "How about you do something? See if you can attract some Gold Gleam squads over, and we'll bag them."

He started. "Me?"

"Qiu Luo and I aren't good at this," she said impatiently.

Yu Lang nodded. "Well then, I guess I'll have to show you my unique strengths."

He walked up and poked a finger into the light column, sending a thread of resonant power upwards.

A few moments later, words appeared in their violet column, shining brightly for hundreds of miles.

Bai Doudou looked up and gulped nervously.

A line of bold words hung proudly over them.

"THIS IS YU LANG. TRASH GOLD SQUADS, COME FOR MY ASS!"

Chapter 0177: The Battle Begins

In the rapidly dimming sunlight, Li Luo's and Wang Hejiu's light columns moved rapidly towards each other before finally halting.

They met at a long, narrow gorge between two enormous mountains, the singular passage through.

Waterfalls roared down the geographical marvel, spitting froth and water over greenery that bloomed in the humidity.

"Nice place. Hopefully, its beauty takes the sting out of your first defeat."

Wang Hejiu remarked to Li Luo and Bai Mengmeng as he looked around at the water-coated boulders. Xin Fu was already well-concealed.

"Normally," Li Luo said brightly, "once the villain says something like that, they lose."

"Villain?"

Wang Hejiu chuckled. "Do you think you're a hero?"

"His looks are very noble," Bai Mengmeng squeaked.

Wang Hejiu was taken aback. Were all these girls equally shallow? What did it matter if a guy was handsome? Was his nose not equally fragile before a fist?

"Enough," Duze Beixuan snapped. "Time for payback for the Choosing."

He stepped forward, and his resonant power surged forth, a tremendous force that made Li Luo's eyes widen.

"Pattern Genesis Tier?"

That was unexpected. He had thought that Duze Beixuan would need a little more time to get there. Seemed like his pure spite and fury after the Choosing had spurred him on really hard.

"That was too obvious. I told you to conceal it and lure him in," Wang Hejiu said tiredly to Duze Beixuan, his own poisonous, green power seeping forth. That had the toxic strength of a Pattern Genesis Tier cultivator too.

"Li Luo, we have two First Pattern cultivators here. Your strongest is the Upper Flowering Xin Fu. And you are a Lower Flowering..."

He smiled wide as a Cheshire cat. "Please tell me. What gives you confidence to fight this?"

"Don't waste our time. Hand over your badges quietly. Wouldn't that be better?"

Shing.

His response was a quick unsheathing of Li Luo's shortswords, twin aqueous weapons of death gleaming with the keen, watery silver of Water Edge.

"Back off, Mengmeng," he said with an uncommon gravity. Taking on two Pattern Genesis Tier opponents wasn't going to be easy.

Xin Fu could only wait for his chance. He could not reveal himself casually, and even less so Bai Mengmeng, who would instantly be done in by the deadly pair.

Li Luo stood alone, the first and final bastion of his team.

That was his determined role.

"Leader, be careful!" Bai Mengmeng called out, her voice thick with worry. She knew how crucial he was. Perhaps no other Upper Flowering cultivator would be brave enough to stand against these two formidable opponents.

Li Luo nodded wordlessly. He shot forth with suddenness, spraying gravel behind him that skipped and hissed over the shallow waters.

Neither Wang Hejiu nor Duze Beixuan held any grand illusions of single combat. Both moved as one.

The three figures collided with incredible power on both sides, shaking the gorge walls with their impact.

Boom!

The nearby creek was shaken so hard that it slopped, sending pearly droplets of water spraying upwards.

Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan were left unmoving, while Li Luo was sent flying backwards, skidding across the watery surface.

He had been outclassed in this first clash.

Expected. He might have dual resonances, but he was facing two resonances as well, wielded by superior cultivators. This would be an uphill struggle.

Neither Wang Hejiu nor Duze Beixuan slowed. They pressed their advantage, closing in on Li Luo with their attacks.

He used his Dancing Pisces move, concentrating on defending against their furious onslaught. The battle was white-hot in intensity.

Ding! Ding!

The clear peal of ringing steel rang out.

Ding!

Li Luo's blade turned Duze Beixuan's spear aside, redirecting the power into a nearby wall that shuddered and groaned. Another seaweed-green blast of power hissed out at him, its foul, acrid stench sharp in his nose.

Vicious and calculated.

But just at this moment, a shadow loomed behind Wang Hejiu. A slash of saturnine light on a dagger blurred from its speed struck out towards the back of his skull.

Wang Hejiu frowned but dealt with it matter-of-factly. After all, both he and Duze Beixuan had been on guard against the lurking Xin Fu this whole time.

His fan snapped open, flipping behind him to block the menacing dirk.

Toxic, green energy hissed and ate away at the shadow resonant power, finally even leaping for Xin Fu himself.

Xin Fu twisted. There was a dark implosion of energy, then he disengaged, vanishing again.

"Annoying."

Wang Hejiu clicked his tongue irritatedly. Xin Fu might not pose too big a threat, but he was keeping them on their toes, unable to let their guard down. He was also a constant disruption to their planned attacks.

Wang Hejiu did not linger on the retreating Xin Fu, instantly turning back to attack Li Luo in concert with Duze Beixuan.

All the heat was on Li Luo now. As long as they could take him down, the battle was as good as over.

While the battle raged on, Qi Luozi summoned her own dark-green power. She clapped her hands together, funneling her resonant power into the gravel shores. Vines started to sprout rapidly.

Suddenly, a fey light made her vision blur and whirl. The battlefield was swimming in her eyes, vague shadows in the distance that she could not focus on, no matter how hard she tried.

"Bai Mengmeng..."

She frowned. Bai Mengmeng stood close by, a slim rapier pointed at her.

"Leader's under enough pressure," she said quietly.

Qi Luozi snorted. "You think you can stop me? You're just an Upper Clear cultivator. I'm a Lower Flowering."

Bai Mengmeng suddenly gave her a pure, winsome smile. "It doesn't matter. If you hurt me, my sister will beat you black and blue."

Qi Luozi only stared silently.

Then she sighed. Her eyes went flat, and the gravel under Bai Mengmeng was suddenly writhing with green vines that bound her legs.

"I'll just have to test that out, then."

Her words echoed emptily around her as the vines passed through thin air. The illusion wavered, then faded.

"An illusion?" Qi Luozi frowned.

"I might not be able to beat you, but I can keep you occupied. That's enough."

Bai Mengmeng's voice came at her from all directions.

"A competition to see who falls first? You or Li Luo." Qi Luozi sneered.

"Leader says his best trait is endurance."

Qi Luozi snarled about her and cursed again.

"Li Luo, you wretch!" she shouted, looking around at the many illusions of Bai Mengmeng with uncertainty.

Chapter 0178: Resonance Art Combinations

Ding!

Li Luo blocked another thrust of a spear, the impact knocking Water Edge off his sword, making it boil away into mist.

Li Luo staggered back another step.

Another toxic-green blast of energy from the fan, striking out like a viper, punctuated by the foul odor of decomposition.

Li Luo's other blade parried it. "Waterlight Demon Mirror!"

The fan hit the mirror of water, sending the poison resonant power spraying outwards. The fan almost slipped in Wang Hejiu's grip, and Li Luo ducked away.

Both were attacking with everything they had, and they were starting to score. Li Luo's hands were bleeding from the repeated abuse, and his arms were stinging from the pain.

Fortunately, his waterlight resonance and wood resonance were three recuperative elements. Each time he was injured, the three regenerative sources kicked in to heal him quickly.

This was the reason why Li Luo could hold out against the combined attacks of Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan for so long.

His tenacity alarmed both opponents. They had pushed themselves hard and were panting heavily, yet Li Luo was still grimly holding on. He showed no signs of yielding.

That was sick. Surely not even the famed endurance of a water resonance user could last this long?

They exchanged looks and saw their own determination mirrored in the other's eyes. Li Luo's strong front had to be on the verge of breaking. They just had to keep up the offense.

Both stepped forward as one.

Li Luo sensed it, and he moved several steps backwards in response. One of his short blades glowed with wood resonant power.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Arboreal Bindings!"

The trees around them seemed to spring into life, thick vines burgeoning forth to bind Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan.

These vines were covered in little flowers that absorbed light energy from around them, reinforcing the vines.

Li Luo had added his light resonant power into it to strengthen the tiger-general resonance art.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Heavy Water Art!"

After Arboreal Bindings, Li Luo followed up with a well-prepared water resonance art. Navy-blue liquid splashed over the vines.

They instantly grew even more ponderous and powerful, weighted vines that smashed rather than lashed.

Moreover, if one observed carefully, one would see that the heavy water also had grains of sand floating within it.

This was no ordinary Heavy Water Art. Li Luo had injected some earth resonant power into it to increase the weight.

Li Luo's two resonance arts were even more polished than when Duze Beixuan had last faced them during the Choosing of the Mentors.

While he was grimly tanking the attacks, he was also charging up for this devastating counterattack.

Shing!

The vines screamed through the air, whistling powerfully.

Both guys answered head-on with their resonant powers.

Bong! Bong!

The spear and fan took on defensive positions, bracing themselves against the sturdy vines. When the attack landed, both showed identical expressions of shock.

"What power!"

Wang Hejiu frowned deeply. The vines were heavy as battering rams. Each smash from the vines left his hands numb from the impact.

"It's Li Luo's combined resonance art!" Duze Beixuan shouted. He was scared now, having lost once to it already.

And this time, he could feel that Li Luo's combined resonance art was much stronger than before.

"The power of dual resonances. This isn't even dual, just combined, yet it's already so hard to deal with," Wang Hejiu marveled.

"But Li Luo, did you think we weren't prepared to face your combined resonance arts?"

"It's quite surprising the first time, but without that element of surprise, it isn't so effective."

Wang Hejiu sucked in a deep breath. Bluish-green patterns of light appeared on his cheeks, gathering at his lips.

He then blew out, "Tiger-general resonance art, Corrosive Wind!"

Woo, woo!

The wind howled from his lips, an alien, eerie gust that ate away at the power on the vines, corroding them.

Duze Beixuan made his move at the same time. Aquamarine resonant power bloomed forth. "Tiger-general resonance art, Kun's Roar!"

Woo, woo!

A dark-blue sonic wave rippled out from his own mouth, reinforcing Wang Hejiu's corrosive wind. The wave swept up all the limp vines and sent them bowling back towards Li Luo.

He desperately scrambled backwards, caught off-guard by Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan's well-coordinated resonance art combination. It had completely broken his offense.

As expected of elite Astral Sage College students. After a period of adjustment, they were starting to develop combined powers. It quickly wore away the advantage of Li Luo's combined powers.

Eyeing up the expanding sonic wave with trepidation, Li Luo faltered.

"Xin Fu," he called softly, "can you block this one?"

A shadow shimmered into view beside him. "I can," Xin Fu said, even more impassive than usual. "But I can only block an attack of this degree once. And then I will be out of the fight."

"Are you sure you can handle it alone after that?"

Li Luo smiled. He could feel the two resonance seeds within him vibrating violently in his resonant palaces. He nodded.

"Alright," Xin Fu said simply.

Li Luo retreated.

Dark shadows gathered before him, spreading like ink in water.

Xin Fu put his palms together. "Sable Veil!"

The dark shadows exploded into reality, creating a new world of darkness that cast the entire gorge into gloom.

The wave of sound and poison was swallowed up inside Sable Veil.

Boom!

The energy tore and shredded away at the darkness.

The violent struggle persisted for half a minute, then the black veil was ripped apart, shredded and riddled with holes.

The devastating wave had sundered it.

From within the darkness, Xin Fu's body flew out, smashing against a tree. He stirred weakly, wiping away the blood from his mouth. His entire body was covered in dark-green gashes. He shook his head.

If the ranking battles were just a little later, he might have reached the Pattern Genesis tier, mitigating their advantage.

He looked at Li Luo. "All yours, Leader," he mumbled.

Chapter 0179: Jiang Qing'e and First Princess

Li Luo's and Wang Hejiu's squads were locked in an exhilarating battle, and many of the mentors' attention was with them.

Even further away, a sparse group of people were sitting on a high wall, watching. It was a good position that allowed them a limited view of all three battlefields.

There were light screens that also showed footage from the various battlefields.

Since the One, Two, and Three Star Hall students were fighting it out, the only ones free enough to sit back and watch were the Four Star Hall students.

They were also the strongest and most experienced students in the Astral Sage College, holding themselves with a confidence befitting their training and elite status. Once they graduated, generous offers would be extended to them from the five Great Houses, the royal court, and other esteemed families.

These Four Star Hall students were lounging around and offered their commentary to each other.

Suddenly, a tall figure landed elegantly on the tall wall, and all eyes shifted over.

They looked at the person with a mixture of surprise and passion.

Gold eyes, a long ponytail, and beauty that was nothing short of divine. Who else but Jiang Qing'e?

Even though she was only a Three Star Hall student, none of the Four Star Hall students present dared to take her lightly. After all, it was no secret that she planned to challenge the Seven Astral Pillars soon.

She was just awesome!

Even Gong Shenjun had only won the title as a Four Star Hall student. If Jiang Qing'e succeeded, she would set a new record.

Jiang Qing'e ignored the looks that had turned her way, walking straight to the One Star Hall side and locking on to a screen.

She heard light footsteps behind her and turned, sensing a shift in the crowd's mood.

The First Princess.

She was not in royal garb today, instead choosing a snug, off-white trouser and blouse combination that looked much more practical. Still, her busty curves strained from below the neckline, and so she had chosen a lavender covering as well, for modesty.

The two women had very different charms. The First Princess had the cold, authoritative bearing of royalty, while Jiang Qing'e had a fresh, straightforward appeal. A stately elegance versus a sinuous one.

The First Princess had a reputation and popularity that matched Jiang Qing'e's, especially among the Four Star Hall students, who respected the two equally. She was the whole package: beauty, brains, and station.

"Junior Jiang, have you finished the ranking battles before the time limit? That's astounding," she said in a friendly manner.

There was a hidden mechanic in the ranking battles. When a squad reached a certain number of points and secured first place, the battle would be declared over even if the deadline of sunset had not yet arrived.

However, it was a mechanic that was rarely activated. After all, the number was not an easy one to reach, requiring an almost perfect clean sweep that included elite squads in the mix.

Jiang Qing'e met her gaze. "We were lucky. Two of the strongest squads didn't cross paths with us, so we were able to end things."

"Ah. I thought Junior Jiang might perhaps be anxious to see how the One Star Hall side was faring," the First Princess said with a half-knowing smile.

Jiang Qing'e matched her half smile and nodded. "I am indeed interested in Li Luo's situation."

The First Princess was a little surprised by the honest answer. "You care deeply for him."

"Of course."

The First Princess changed the subject. "I hear Junior Jiang is challenging the Seven Astral Pillars this year."

Jiang Qing'e nodded.

"This might be a sensational new record... But I hope you won't be challenging me," the First Princess said with quiet humor.

Jiang Qing'e laughed. "One would pick at the softest persimmons. No matter how you look at it, Your Highness is not that. I'm not that irrational."

"Well, I'm relieved," the First Princess said.

Jiang Qing'e smiled along with her. She could sense that the First Princess had come over with good intentions. She did not mind, and sensed no ill will from her. A working relationship between the two was mutually beneficial.

She sensed a new pair of eyes on her. She looked over, and he smiled back and nodded.

Gong Shenjun.

He was surrounded by many Four Star Hall students. They hooted as Gong Shenjun said hi to Jiang Qing'e.

Gong Shenjun ignored them, turning away after greeting her.

"My royal brother seems to have a special interest in you, Junior Jiang," the First Princess said lightly.

Jiang Qing'e's golden eyes were like miniatures of the setting sun. "We can be friends. And nothing more," she said neutrally.

The First Princess' eyes flickered, then she turned back to the screen. "How do you think Li Luo's fight will turn out? He's already down a teammate, it doesn't look too good."

"Don't underestimate Li Luo, Your Highness. When he's involved, miracles can happen any time before the final outcome."

The First Princess smiled as she heard a hint of pride in that remark.

It was surprising because Jiang Qing'e had ended her own battle early without showing any pride at all in her staggering achievement.

The First Princess leaned forward on the railing, her ample chest on full display forward, where there were no eyes.

"Well then," her red, phoenix eyes turned to the silver-haired youth. "Let's see what miracle today brings..."

Chapter 0180: Dual Resonances

The gorge was in a woeful state, as though every natural disaster in the book had just passed through.

Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan walked out from the smog, smiling as they looked at Xin Fu's slumped form.

"One down, Li Luo," Wang Hejiu said. Xin Fu might have stopped their attack, but he had paid a heavy price. He was out for the count for the rest of the battle.

Without his interference, they could run more concerted attacks against Li Luo. A powerful advantage for them.

"Anything else that can turn the tables?" Duze Beixuan sneered.

Li Luo looked at them calmly. "You know what? Turning the tables is, like, the most classic of classic plots for the hero."

Wang Hejiu snorted. "Still living in your sweet, summer dreams? Li Luo, every single student in the Astral Sage College fancies themselves a hero. They were all elevated above the rest around them, hailed as geniuses.

"Only after arriving at the Astral Sage College do they realize that they're merely better than average. Here, they see greatness above them.

"You... should realize that too."

Li Luo shook his head. "I guess you still don't believe in me." He sighed. "I guess I'll have to show you another special quality a hero has... breakthrough in battle."

He took a long, shuddering breath, and the flow of worldly natural energy warped around him. Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan jumped back, alarmed.

Water resonance and wood resonance energy!

The two aspects flowed deep into Li Luo's body, resonating deeply within him. His resonant power suddenly jumped to the Upper Flowering level.

A sub-tier improvement.

The two of them stared in disbelief at the newly improved Li Luo.

"Believe me now?" Li Luo said with a smug grin.

"You purposely withstood our attacks to stimulate the resonance seeds within your body," Wang Hejiu said clinically. "The great pressure of battle forced the resonance seeds within you to the point of breakthrough.

"Li Luo, that was ballsy. If it hadn't gone well, your internal organs would be exploding right about now, and your resonance seeds would be shattered."

Li Luo grinned. "Well, they're looking very unshattered at the moment."

"And don't get ahead of yourself. You're pressuring us well, I'll grant you that. But beat us? I think that's more than you can handle."

Duze Beixuan was of the same mind. "One small step, from Lower to Upper Flowering. You think that changes anything?

"We've dragged this out enough. Let's finish him," he said to Wang Hejiu.

Wang Hejiu nodded. The two shot forth like identical cannon bursts. Toxins and the Kun's sonic attack came at Li Luo again, with a terrifying magnitude that declared the resolve of the two attackers.

Li Luo faced the roiling mass of venom and vibrations, searing the picture into his mind. He closed his eyes and gripped his swords.

Two different-colored resonant powers covered a blade each.

He pressed the swords together, scraping blade against blade.

Screech!

The shrill grating sound echoed against the gorge walls.

From the instant the blades touched, Li Luo's two resonant powers began to resonate with each other, creating a blinding light!

A terrifying burst of resonant power.

Weng!

He sent out two crescent slashes of resonant power from his shortswords, far more powerful than anything his resonant powers could have individually produced.

They cut through the destructive wave easily, both poison and sonic attacks vaporizing upon contact.

A rare moment of silence gripped the gorge as rocks quietly fell apart, cleanly sliced in two.

Duze Beixuan and Wang Hejiu stared in shock.

Their combined resonance arts, defeated by one slash from Li Luo?

"That power..."

Wang Hejiu's face was twitching. "It's beyond a First Pattern," he whispered hoarsely.

"Dual resonances." Duze Beixuan spat these words like a curse.

"But his control is probably unstable. He might not be able to use it a second time..."

Before he finished speaking, Li Luo sent his blades slashing down again, and two more identical slashes of energy fanned out.

Weng!

They were headed straight for the pair.

Their fear showed, and they answered with their best resonance arts.

Daaaang!

A hollow, metallic ringing, then their resonant powers were brushed aside.

Wang Hejiu's folding fan and Duze Beixuan's spear shuddered from the impact, and both were forced a dozen steps backwards.

Desperation and anger.

This was the power of dual resonances? Li Luo had only just reached the Upper Flowering Tier, and yet he was stronger than two First Pattern cultivators combined?

"Dual resonances are finicky in control. He must be faking it somehow. Surely not a third..."

"Quiet." Wang Hejiu interrupted Duze Beixuan. "Li Luo must be in the zone, a temporary high after getting his dual resonances for the first time. It will definitely end. Don't force the issue now. We retreat, play for time, and wait for him to lose focus. He'll be weak then."

Duze Beixuan was prickly at being overruled, but he swallowed it. Defeating Li Luo was the priority here.

"Let's back off."

The two began to move away as quickly as they could.

A black curtain fell upon them, and they lost their sense of direction for the moment.

Xin Fu's hood fell off his face, exposing his gaunt face, which was even paler than usual. "Leader," he groaned. "There's really not a drop of power left in me..."

"Damn, it's Xin Fu!" Duze Beixuan snarled. Hadn't they wiped him out already?

Wang Hejiu was frustrated too. The black veil was harmless enough, but it confused their orientation. They might well be walking straight into Li Luo.

As they stumbled around in panic, a familiar rumbling came from the ground, and they felt something grab their ankles.

"Don't panic, it's Qi Luozi!" Wang Hejiu hurriedly stopped Duze Beixuan from snapping them in two.

Shoosh!

The vines swept them off their feet, dragging them out of the black veil.

They landed heavily beside Qi Luozi. "Retreat!" Wang Hejiu shouted.

The three turned around, but instead of the singular passage of the gorge, there were now dozens of paths before them.

"An illusion." Bai Mengmeng's doing.

It was just about useful enough in slowing them down.

Li Luo closed his eyes and crossed his swords, this time digging deep into the shining points of light within him and channeling his twin powers down into the ground.

The ground split open, and a jade tree began to grow at super speed, sprouting leaves as it grew. After a few moments, it was already a tree of resonant power about two meters tall.

Wang Hejiu and Duze Beixuan stared at it warily.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Warrior Cultivar?"

"How did it grow so fast? What's he up to now?"