

## **Resonance 251**

### **Chapter 0251: Flowing Shear**

Boom!

The eight-limbed Other pawed at the ground, raising clouds of dry dust as it tensed up, ready to spring.

The corrupt energy it was radiating left the three with no doubts about its strength.

At least a Fourth Pattern!

In a direct clash, they would be trampled flat.

They hurried out of its way.

Dong!

The eight-limbed Other landed and whirled, springing again. Its eight legs (but actually hands?) adroitly maneuvered it around.

The three hastily deployed their escape skills to dodge again.

All three were prepared for overwhelming power, and they knew all too well that the twisting vortex of corruption would take them in a trice if it contacted them.

The desperate fleeing continued for quite a while.

On a nearby tree, Jiang Qing'e's squad watched with tense faces.

"Leader, they're in trouble," Tian Tian said.

Qiu Bai nodded. "Close to Fifth Pattern for sure. Pretty dangerous for them."

Jiang Qing'e remained silent, her golden eyes closely following the battle, but her squad could sense her light resonant energy building.

Preparing to attack.

A pity. One more step and Li Luo's squad would have been able to purify an entire tower by themselves.

Still, there was no need to beat them up over it. They had already performed very admirably for newcomers.

The eight-limbed Other redoubled its attacks, fleshy limbs thundering forward towards the three.

It headed straight for Li Luo. It could sense that he was the greatest threat among the three.

This time it was even faster than before, and it was all too clear that Li Luo wasn't going to make it. An ominous shadow loomed over him.

Jiang Qing'e's heavy sword came up, light resonant energy gathering.

Whoosh!

The ground beneath the Other gave way, revealing a pit. Li Luo was just on the edge.

The Other was not. It fell in with a heavy thump.

"What-" Qiu Bai sputtered.

"They must have dug it before. There's water inside too, probably water resonant power. But for what?" Tian Tian mused.

A little dunking wasn't going to take down a white eroder.

Jiang Qing'e's hand loosened up. She had no idea what they were up to, but knowing Li Luo, it would probably be good.

Surely he had something up his sleeve?

Li Luo sprang up before the Other could claw its way out.

"Fluttering Star!" Bai Mengmeng cried out. Her astral resonant power formed a butterfly of light that caused the thrashing Other to freeze up as it faced unknown illusions.

It reasserted itself very quickly, smashing through Fluttering Star with its corruptive powers.

"Blight Bindings!" Xin Fu cried. Long, black shadows extended out from him, the lines wrapping themselves across the Other before solidifying. They managed to stop it from climbing out of the pit.

"Leader, I can only do it for five seconds!" Xin Fu said through gritted teeth.

"Xin Fu! Language! You vulgar animal, Mengmeng's here, bless her heart," Li Luo cried out.

Xin Fu almost spat blood at him. Was this the time for joking?!

Still, Li Luo was actually moving his feet as fast as his tongue. He was busy unleashing a resonance art that he had been preparing for quite a while now.

"Tiger-general resonance art, Flowing Shear!"

Swoosh!

The water in the pit formed a huge sphere of water, the Other still struggling within.

The water began to spin, picking up tremendous velocity as it squeezed and tore at the Other's body.

The enormous pressure was starting to peel the white skin away.

Underneath, red flesh showed, and a strange roar sounded. The other Other had shown back up!

Li Luo's Flowing Shear had forced it out again.

Human Skin howled in misery and fear. It was facing a two-pronged attack now, both the external, shearing water sphere attack and an internal war as the fleshy Other tried to claw its way out.

No matter how it struggled, there was no way it could fight this.

After a few tense moments, there was a high-pitched keening, and the eight-limbed Other split into two.

"Leader, it worked! You're a genius!" Bai Mengmeng squealed, clapping her hands.

Xin Fu gasped as well.

He had had his doubts about Li Luo's plan, a violent, forceful separation of the two Others. He wanted to stop Human Skin's evolution and cause them to fight among themselves.

Li Luo's brain sure worked in different ways...

Their leader was a real gem.

Xin Fu felt his respect rise for the brain under that head of silver hair.

Li Luo took their success a little more calmly. He alone knew that he had strengthened his Flowing Shear significantly.

Other cultivators might just circulate water around, and there was a limit to the speed they could reach. But his water was sharpened by his light resonance, forcing it to far greater speeds that could even harm the human skin Other.

He had much higher chance of success than others might think.

Shing!

The water sphere burst, and two creatures tumbled out.

But both of them were significantly diminished now. Clearly, the separation had taken a heavy toll on both.

They stared at each other with blatant hate, ready to tear each other to bits.

But they did not. Both turned and ran.

They might not be too intelligent, but they had an instinct for survival. They knew that they were too weak to remain here.

Run.

Straight into Li Luo and Xin Fu.

Li Luo drew circles in the air with his swords. "Trying to get your skin out of the game? Stay a while, I promise I'm only going to cut you... skin deep."

In their weakened states, both were roughly only First Pattern in strength. It was the best time to finish them off.

Xin Fu didn't bother with bad jokes, instead choosing actions over words.

Li Luo followed, irritated.

This time, the fight went down very differently.

The three seniors stared numbly at the turn of events.

The solution had come out of left field...

This guy had cooked up some 200 IQ moves right here. Squeeze the food back up and make it fight the eater?

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian shared a look. "Well, today was a real eye-opener."

Jiang Qing'e just sat there, smiling to herself.

Li Luo's performance was perfect.

### **Chapter 0252: With Flying Colors**

The fight in the forest was over sooner than expected.

Two weakened white eroders stood no chance at all against the combined power of the three. They were cleaned out before the purification tower was even fully up and running.

Still, they were thoroughly worn out, and they sank down to the ground, not wanting to move another inch.

The battle with the eight-limbed Other had been the most harrowing. If it hadn't landed in the pit, their plan would have been screwed.

Flowing Shear required some environmental support in order to be effective.

Hummm!

The light pulsing from the purification tower began to grow in strength, and soon the entire forest was lit up, and then some.

The black mist faded and eventually disappeared under the light.

The air was clear once again.

The oppressive feeling lifted from them.

They had done it! One level one purification tower reactivated!

"Not bad. Congratulations on your first successful solo mission."

The senior squad appeared, and Jiang Qing'e had a glowing smile on her face.

Li Luo looked up at the lovely legs standing over him, but he couldn't summon the energy to budge an inch.

She stretched out a hand to him, and he took it with some surprise. Her hand was warm and comforting. He didn't want to let go.

He stood up with her help, then reversed his grip to hold her hand. "Is this a reward?" He grinned.

"Have some ambition, do you? I'll leave you the next level two purification tower, and if you can do it solo, the reward will be ample. How's that?"

Li Luo pulled his hand away quickly. "No thanks, I choose life."

No way. They had already been forced to pull some 200 IQ moves out of their asses to deal with that eight-limbed monstrosity. In a straight fight, their odds of winning were probably 40 percent at best.

And if that was the level of a level one purification tower, how strong would a level two be? There would at least be red eroders, and perhaps even some Disaster Class Others.

Their newcomer team would be food for sure.

Jiang Qing'e's reward might be very tempting, but a level two purification tower... dream on! Only an idiot would take it!

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu were impressed by his rationality. Only their leader could admit his shortcomings so righteously.

"Being able to reactivate a level one purification tower is a good achievement already. And the cannibalizing Other was a rare sight—those don't show up often at level one towers."

When faced with an enemy close to a Fifth Pattern in strength, even Two Star squads would keep their distance, let alone a One Star squad like theirs.

Of course, they hadn't beaten it with strength alone—they had used brains to augment their strategy.

Then again, all was fair in war.

"Well, in any case, we finished that job," Li Luo said, pleased with himself.

It was a valuable experience. Now he had a better understanding of the dangers in Umbra Cave and the scope of the purification tower tasks. And if even the number one newcomer team was having such difficulties, their peers were probably struggling as well.

"When you saw the human skin Other eat the flesh Other, you chose not to attack. Did you already plan to use Flowing Shear then?" Jiang Qing'e asked.

It had seemed like nothing at the time, but in truth, it was an impressive decision. It showed confidence in his own abilities, foresight, and an intuitive understanding of the Others.

Li Luo shrugged. "I just felt like the eating wasn't going down too smoothly. Both were quite evenly matched. If we attacked when the consumption had just begun, they would probably be separated easily, and not weakened as much. They'd probably team up against us before turning to fight each other again."

Calculating, farsighted, decisive.

"Weren't you afraid of the worst case?" Tian Tian asked.

"Yeah, if the eight-limbed Other finished consuming, it would definitely become a red eroder. A third-tier Resonant Master, more than you could handle for sure." Qiu Bai agreed.

"Well, what other choice did I have?" Li Luo asked impatiently. "No other chance at it. Besides..." He turned to smile impishly at Jiang Qing'e. "Why worry with a guardian angel around? Otherwise, I might have made more contingency plans."

Jiang Qing'e inclined her head. "It was a good choice. The Umbra Cave is fraught with dangers, and there is no definite guarantee of safety. Sometimes, following through with a decision can lead to victory."

She was delighted with how well Li Luo was doing in the Umbra Cave. He had shown both grit and sensitivity, valuable qualities in this place.

All in all, he had passed her test with flying colors.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian didn't comment, but their impression of the newcomers rose significantly. This dual resonance-wielding young lord was a spicier piece of ginger than they had expected.

Jiang Qing'e unrolled the map, and they saw that the purification tower was now glowing with white light.

Jiang Qing'e prodded it with a finger, and two faint lines of script appeared.

Black Swan squad.

Fairness & Justice Squad.

Li Luo was astonished. "Even names? Is it reflected on the maps of other squads too?"

Jiang Qing'e nodded. "Even the maps are made from wood pulp from the Tree of Resonant Power. They are linked on a deeper level with the wood of the purification towers. It's actually important as seeing the progress of others helps stave off the feeling of isolation and encourages the squads."

Li Luo shook his head in admiration. The school would stop at nothing to get them to kill Others.

"We're making good time. Let's keep heading on. But this time we'll move with speed. Best keep up, you three," Jiang Qing'e said, rolling up the map.

They nodded humbly.

"Let's go. I want us to be outside the forbidden zone in three days' time."

She pushed on, not giving them too much time to rest, striding off in the direction of the next purification tower.

They groaned, feeling the lactic acid burning in their legs. There would be little time for recovery in the next few days.

### **Chapter 0253: Outside the Forbidden Zone**

In the next three days, Jiang Qing'e and Li Luo's squads went on a rampage, reactivating a total of five level one purification towers. Li Luo got his first taste of not only fighting strong, but also fighting fast.

Their times of true rest were few and far between, always having to keep their guard up. Jiang Qing'e was truly leaving them on their own now that they had proven themselves, and they had to keep their wits about them at all times. No more guardian angels; they worked side by side and were delegated a proportional share of the work.

They did come across a few more freak Others, but by applying their growing trove of experience, they were never left as desperate as their first play had been.

Still, they were nothing compared to the Black Swan Squad, which blitzed through the Others near the level one purification towers ruthlessly. They were in no danger at all.

By the time Li Luo's group had cleared out their designated zone, they always found the Black Swan Squad relaxing at the purification tower, job done and awaiting their rendezvous.

Li Luo's squad would show up out of breath and tired out, and the Black Swan Squad would be lounging around, barely giving them time to recover before blithely announcing that it was time to move on.

The breakneck pace ran Li Luo's team rough and hard, but then they looked at the diminutive Bai Mengmeng on their team grimly keeping up with the pace, never once asking them for quarter.

Her tenacity was a real surprise for Tian Tian and Qiu Bai.

The Fairness & Justice Squad had truly earned their first place position. They might be green, but under that greenness was considerable talent just waiting to shine.

In time, they might well become the strongest squad in the Astral Sage College.

The rough three days had not been without reward. Their school points bank continued to rise thanks to their grinding, as did their own resonant power.

In just three days, they had matched their cultivation progress of half a month back in school.

If one could just survive the horrors of the the Umbra Cave, the cultivation payoff was great.

Three days later, they finally reached their next destination.

The outside of the forbidden zone.

They stared at the hills ahead of them with amazement. In the mountain range, the mist was white, devoid of the dark pallor that was omnipresent around them.

There was not a single sign of corruption either.

If they kept their eyes firmly ahead, they could almost pretend they were back in the outside world.

A pretense that was simply that. They knew that within the clear terrain lurked an even greater danger.

The threat they sensed was far greater than any of the purification towers they had cleared before.

The mad spirit beast that had eluded even the Violet Vibrance mentors.

Students like them would be dead without question.

"That beast seldom comes out," Jiang Qing'e reassured them. "Throughout all these years, many students have come to this onyx lake, but none of them were ever targeted by the beast. So there's no need to worry."

The newcomers nodded in relief. They saw that other students were making their way over as well.

"Onyx lakes are some of the best places in the Umbra Cave. Each time the Umbra Cave opens, students will rush over to take as much of the limited energy reserves as they can. The later you arrive, the weaker the effect," Tian Tian said.

"We've made good time. We're probably the first wave, when the effect is strongest," Jiang Qing'e said with a satisfied smile. "You guys have done well for the last three days. Take this as a nice reward."

Three eager faces looked up at her, and she led them down from the high slopes towards the valley.

It took them a full hour to make their way down the treacherously steep and winding road, but as a consolation, the black mist was much thinner here.

Soon enough, they stood before the lake, glittering like an onyx mirror.

It was a strange lake. There were many glossy, black lotus leaves on the nearby banks. They were thick and sturdy, and some of them already had people standing on them.

Li Luo looked to the center of the lake, where he saw a beryl-green glow come from deep within. It was pulsing with worldly natural energy, deep and resonant.

There was no water in this lake. Only worldly natural energy, condensed.

Behold, the onyx lake!

The appearance of their squads raised quite a fuss, especially when those present spotted Jiang Qing'e.

Three Star Hall students rarely wasted their time at a level two onyx lake, as they had cultivated here so much that the effects were waning. They had all moved on to seek stronger onyx lakes. Jiang Qing'e could not possibly use it either, and so their reason for coming here could only be for their three babies' sakes.

Even the onyx lakes were a competition for the finite resources on offer.

Jiang Qing'e paid no mind to the sullen glares thrown her way. She flicked a finger, and her heavy sword crashed down from the sky, stopping an inch above a lotus leaf. A golden ring of energy bloomed around the leaf with a muted boom.

"Mine," she said calmly.

Li Luo's squad blinked in amazement. They had no idea how this thing really worked, but clearly the closer to the lake, the better.

Not only had Jiang Qing'e secured them prime seats, but the ring helped deflect some of the pressure as well.

This was an excellent coat, with nice, broad coattails begging for a ride.

The sword had landed on one of the prime spots, one that many of the others had been eying hungrily... before Jiang Qing'e had swaggered in to claim it.

Still, no one said anything. There were other good spots up for grabs, ones they wouldn't have to go up against Jiang Qing'e for.

Not everyone thought that way.

"Senior Jiang, that's against the rules, isn't it?" a voice said sharply. Everyone jumped and looked curiously in its direction. Who would be so bold to cross Jiang Qing'e?



## Chapter 0254: Onyx Leaves

A flurry of heads turned towards the owner of the voice.

He was one of three people on a nearby black lotus leaf, a scrawny youth currently rigid with righteousness and nervousness.

The whispers broke out.

"It's Wang Yufeng, a Two Star student."

"He's what? Top ten there?"

"And so he thinks he stands a chance against Senior Jiang? Nutters."

Li Luo's gaze flicked over and stayed on the two people behind Wang Yufeng.

Familiar faces.

Song Qiuyu and Difa Jingming.

Song Qiuyu had tried to help the Song family topple the Sun creek Villa back in the Tianshu Province, but Li Luo had foiled their plans there. So the feud had started.

And again, Li Luo suspected that her hand was in this disagreement...

"I've broken the rules?" Jiang Qing'e repeated calmly.

"Everyone knows that onyx lakes should be free-for-alls that depend on each individual's own ability. Senior Jiang is very strong. If you were here to take onyx leaves for yourself, none of us would resent that. But you're here to take them for Li Luo... That's a little unfair for the rest of us, isn't it?"

Song Qiuyu timidly tugged at his hand. "Yufeng, forget it. Senior Jiang is very strong. Let's just back off on this."

Wang Yufeng's face darkened further upon hearing that. "If strength alone could trump the rules, that would mean we don't respect the institution of the Astral Sage College."

These strong words had the students sitting up straight. Plus, if Jiang Qing'e had her way here, it would indeed cause all of them to lose out.

Now that Wang Yufeng had volunteered to stick his neck out first, they were happy enough to back him up.

The stirring and muttering grew more belligerent.

Li Luo looked at Song Qiuyu. That woman was truly skilled at manipulation.

Back at the Tianshu Province, her vehicle of mischief had been Mo Ling. And now it was Wang Yufeng eating out of her hand.

Although onyx lakes held vast reservoirs of energy, this energy was actually warped and mutated. Not even a Heavenly Dipper General could safely immerse themselves within one.

Then why come to an onyx lake, you ask?

Because within each onyx lake grew an onyx tree, which would produce leaves from condensed worldly natural energy, known as onyx leaves.

With each pulse of energy from the onyx lake itself, the tree would spit forth onyx leaves. These leaves were the treasures the students coveted. Each leaf could be split into three parts, and the squad members could place them on their tongues. It would give them immunity from the savage currents of energy in the onyx lake, and allow them to submerge fully and cultivate.

In other words, they were tickets to the lake. Get leaves, get in, and get strong. Or sit outside on the banks and watch.

Obviously, those who were closer to the front stood an advantage in catching the leaves. That was why Jiang Qing'e had chosen the spot.

"Ever since the onyx lakes were discovered, everyone has always competed by themselves," Wang Yufeng asserted again.

Jiang Qing'e shot him an angry look. "You're overthinking things. Of course Li Luo and his squad will snatch onyx leaves themselves. I do not intend to help them. I'm just here to take a spot on their behalf, which, according to my knowledge, doesn't violate any rule."

"Hmm..."

Her declaration calmed the crowd down.

Wang Yufeng started. He was stung—all that bluster and rhetoric was... for nothing? He felt a little foolish.

Song Qiuyu laughed. "Senior Jiang, do you really mean that? A newcomer team competing against the Two Star squads for onyx leaves?"

"Do I look like a liar?" Jiang Qing'e met her eyes coolly.

Song Qiuyu looked away, afraid. She inched behind Wang Yufeng for safety. "Well... but I mean... a newcomer team? We've never seen one before. They would be making history if they got any."

She said this in a neutral, almost admiring, tone, and yet somehow she managed to imply that the Two Star students would be extremely humiliated if Li Luo's squad succeeded.

"Song Qiuyu," Jiang Qing'e said. "That's your name, isn't it? I suggest you focus more on your cultivation. Hiding behind others does not make you stronger." Song Qiuyu reddened, flushing with humiliation and anger. Did Jiang Qing'e just imply that she was cowardly? Still, there was nothing she could say in the face of such power, and she prudently bit her tongue.

"Don't worry," Wang Yufeng said tenderly to her. "As long as Jiang Qing'e does not interfere, Li Luo's squad will not get any onyx leaves today."

Song Qiuyu nodded dispiritedly. Wang Yufeng felt angry seeing her that way. Jiang Qing'e was throwing her weight around against them. So be it. They would take it out on Li Luo.

Throughout all this, Difa Jingming had remained silent. He took one look at Wang Yufeng, whose thoughts could not be more transparent. Inwardly, he shook his head.

Oh, Qiuyu, why go up against Li Luo? Ever since he took first place at the Tianshu Province, he had been on a one-way shooting star to glory.

Woe to the one who decided to stand in the way of a shooting star. Burning was all that awaited.

Jiang Qing'e ignored them now. She had already lowered herself by replying to them in the first place.

"Go on, then. I've gotten you a good location, but getting the onyx leaves will be up to you. Remember that it's rarely a struggle of raw strength... which you guys can't win anyway. It's about fastest fingers first," she advised them.

The three nodded, then they moved onto the lotus leaf.

Qiu Bai and Tian Tian were sizing up the Two Star squads present. "Are you sure Li Luo and the others can do this?"

"Sounds exactly like what I was asked when I had them reactivate the level one purification tower on their own."

"Well, if you put it that way..."

#### **Chapter 0255: Compete**

Li Luo and the others stepped up onto the black lotus leaf. They were surprised to find that it as sturdy as a block of stone.

These black lotus leaves had been transformed by the waves of worldly natural energy that constantly pulsed out from the lake.

The energy pulses came on and on relentlessly.

Many of the other squads had to use their combined strength just to stand up against these pulses.

In comparison, Li Luo's squad was having an easy time of things. Jiang Qing'e's sword was still emitting the halo of light energy that nullified most of it.

Although she could not help them take the leaves directly, she had saved them a lot of strength, which they could fully devote to leaf-snatching.

The other Two Star Hall students looked on enviously. This wasn't against the rules, and it was an awesome perk to get.

Green, green jealousy.

There was probably no other male student in the Astral Sage College that Jiang Qing'e would be so tender and devoted to.

Li Luo ignored the glowering, although he did sneak a sideways look to confirm the hostile look on Wang Yufeng's face. Trouble for sure.

Plus, they weren't far apart. If onyx leaves came in their general direction, it was inevitable that they would clash over them.

"Leader, we have to be careful of Wang Yufeng. He's a Fourth Pattern, and he has a lower seventh-grade thunder falcon resonance. Speed is his domain," Bai Mengmeng said quietly to him.

Xin Fu nodded. "Getting onyx leaves is more about speed than strength. So if Wang Yufeng is going to pick on us, we're in trouble."

"Lower seventh-grade, thunder falcon resonance, huh..." Li Luo's eyelids moved. "No worries. Just follow the plan."

Jiang Qing'e had already explained how onyx leaves were usually fought over, and he had cooked up an appropriate strategy. As for how effective it was, they would have to find out in a bit.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu nodded.

The three waited silently, awaiting the pulsing energy from the onyx lake.

They waited for two tense hours, and then a shrill howling suddenly picked up. All the students sat up, ready.

All eyes were on the glittering depths of the onyx lake, ready to receive its treasures.

The number of onyx leaves was random and limited. On a bad day, only one would be yielded.

On a day where there was just one, the fighting would be especially intense.

How many would come out today?

The energy in the lake pulsed out, and the water danced and bubbled from the agitation. Higher and higher it churned, and then there was a swift-

Whoosh!

A tide of energy licked up towards the sky.

Trees in the vicinity were blown over, and some of the weaker squads tumbled off their black lotus leaves. Only the stronger squads managed to hold on by supporting each other.

Li Luo's squad stood steady, thanks to the protective halo of light. Without it, they might have been blasted back to the entrance of the Umbra Cave...

Thanks to Jiang Qing'e's help, they could ignore the overflowing energy and focus fully on the lake.

All three held their breath.

In the center of the energy wave, there were three black silhouettes. Three leaf-shaped silhouettes.

Onyx leaves! Three!

"Wow!"

The students roared in excitement as one.

They were sent flying in three different directions, and one of them was headed straight for them.

Whoosh!

Before they could act, a silver streak flew past them, headed straight for the leaf.

Wang Yufeng!

He could have chosen any of the three leaves, but he had chosen theirs on purpose.

Still, he was indeed skillful enough to do so. His lightning speed was faster than any of the other squads, and he appeared in front of the leaf in a flash.

Song Qiuyu smiled smugly as she saw Wang Yufeng closing in on the leaf, even throwing a smirk Jiang Qing'e's way.

Too clever for your own good—a wasted trip for Li Luo!

Wang Yufeng closed in on the leaf with vindictive triumph. There were few among the second years who could out speed him. Li Luo? The thought was laughable.

Neither water nor wood would help him here.

His hand reached out towards the leaf.

Shoop!

A streak of light shot past him, accurately skewering the onyx leaf.

Dang!

It looked like a mere leaf, but the metallic ring of the light arrow striking it belied that it was made of much more durable stuff.

Wang Yufeng's hand clawed foolishly at air. He flew into a rage and whirled, only to see Li Luo grinning impudently at him, bow in hand.

The arrow of light must have been his work.

The kid was cunning. Using an arrow to interrupt?

It would not be so easy!

Wang Yufeng turned again and shot toward the spinning leaf at the speed of light.

Shoop!

Another arrow of light changed the leaf's course.

"Again?!" Wang Yufeng sneered, now prepared. "Falcon's Claw!"

A predator's claw of electricity crackled to life, closing around the arrow with preternatural speed.

The arrow vanished.

An illusion!

His eyes narrowed.

Shoop! Shoop!

An entire volley of light arrows was headed his way all of a sudden, fast enough that he could not discern real from fake. He faltered.

What sort of tactic was this?!

By the time he recovered, they had already sped past him, smacking the onyx leaf into a different direction.

Straight towards Li Luo.

Wang Yufeng's rage fueled his speed, and again he turned into a blur as he hunted down the leaf.

His skills were true, and in a few heartbeats, he was on the leaf again.

As was another arrow of light.

He flicked a contemptuous finger that shattered the light arrow, but this time it split into another mini light arrow that pushed the onyx leaf onwards.

Whoosh.

The onyx leaf was knocked into a small clump of trees nearby, where it was knocked again by another burst of shadow resonant power. It continued to ping pong around.

Dang!

Picking up speed with each directed hit, the leaf soon reached Li Luo.

Wang Yufeng was fast, but not faster than energy itself. To his credit, he was almost upon Li Luo, but the latter's hand had closed over the leaf decisively.

Wang Yufeng could not stop in time, and his speed carried him into Li Luo, bowling them all over.

He furiously untangled himself from the mess of limbs, snarling as his resonant power crackled around his person.

Li Luo idly played with the leaf.

"Senior Wang, are you intending to take it by force?"

He gestured meaningfully to a nearby tree, where Jiang Qing'e, Qiu Bai, and Tian Tian were watching expressionlessly.

Wang Yufeng blanched.

Li Luo wasn't pulling any punches.

"Senior Wang, sometimes lightspeed isn't enough. Sometimes one needs... a bright mind."

He tapped his own temple and grinned.

Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu squirmed. Leader, that's a lot of salt in the wound.

### **Chapter 0256: The Husband Show-Off**

"You!"

Wang Yufeng burned with anger and humiliation. He was clearly the stronger one.

Given his speed, taking an onyx leaf should've been a piece of cake for him. But Li Luo had not intended to race him at all. He had simply let his techniques do his work for him.

Superb teamwork had allowed them to triumph. He, on the other hand, had been too arrogant, not bothering to call Song Qiuyu and Difa Jingming to assist.

Although, they couldn't match his speed either.

In any case, the leaf was in Li Luo's hand, and many had witnessed his humiliating loss against Li Luo.

He was speedy, but not speedier than an arrow of light.

Wang Yufeng almost wanted to find a hole and bury himself, just to get away from everyone staring at him.

As angry as he was, he didn't dare to use force against them either.

Firstly, it was against the rules. Secondly, no one would report his violation of the rules, because Jiang Qing'e and her team would cheerfully beat him to a pulp first.

In the end, he quickly returned to his black lotus leaf. "Sorry," he muttered to Song Qiuyu. "I slipped."

Li Luo's gloating smile was directed at her, and she was seized with an impulse to heap scorn and abuse on Wang Yufeng for being useless.

A Fourth Pattern, and one of the speediest in the Two Star Hall, had lost against Li Luo?!

She forced a smile instead. "That had nothing to do with you. Li Luo is cunning. Don't worry, we can get it next time."

Wang Yufeng nodded glumly. He had intended to please Song Qiuyu with this clash, but now he was a laughing stock.

The other two onyx leaves had been quickly snatched up by two delighted squads as well.

Meanwhile, the other squads were looking at Wang Yufeng with disgust.

He was top ten in their year, and yet he had lost to Li Luo. What a disgrace.

Jiang Qing'e raised her hand, and the huge sword lifted up and obediently returned to her hand.

"Well?" She turned to her squadmates with a pleased smile.

"Well, that was unexpected as all hell."

Li Luo's team had not even set a foot off the lotus leaf, and yet the onyx leaf was in their hand.

Perfect teamwork and strategy—it had thoroughly impressed both Qiu Bai and Tian Tian. In contrast, the arrogant Wang Yufeng's brute force had fallen flat.

"An excellent leader," Tian Tian said honestly.

Qiu Bai was in agreement. To be this far behind your opponent and still win the leaf? Even a fool could tell that it wasn't just mere luck.

Li Luo's team was something special.

Jiang Qing'e's eyes shone with delight at her teammates' recognition. "C'mon, Leader. We gave a few compliments, and you're preening like a mother hen," Tian Tian chided.

Jiang Qing'e was usually cool and distant, immune to any sort of flattery. But after they barely acknowledged Li Luo, she was practically cooing.

Jiang Qing'e smiled without reservation. "The most precious thing has been acknowledged. Can't I be happy?"

Tian Tian swallowed. Somehow, those mushy words didn't seem to belong in Jiang Qing'e's vocabulary. Li Luo was clearly incredibly important to her.

Surely their relationship ran deeper than the formality of a promised marriage, right?

Even Tian Tian was starting to feel a little jealous now. Li Luo had to be some kind of god to win this goddess.

Meanwhile, Li Luo had broken up the onyx leaf and handed a third each to Bai Mengmeng and Xin Fu.

"Do we really stick these in our mouths?" Bai Mengmeng asked dubiously, wrinkling her nose at the ugly leaf. It was even leaking some strange pus.

"Bear with it."

Li Luo and Xin Fu urged her, then they stuffed the leaf into their own mouths. There was some astringency, but they could feel the pressure of the lake's energy disappear from around them.

"Like magic," they marveled.

Bai Mengmeng followed suit, scrunching up her face as she tried not to spit it back out.

Meanwhile, the other two squads that had gotten onyx leaves were already eagerly wading into the onyx lake.

"Let's go," Li Luo said to them. With a smile in Jiang Qing'e's direction, he turned and strode down to the onyx lake.

When the three figures vanished into the murky energy haze, Jiang Qing'e turned away.

"Each of the 38 steps in the onyx lake enhances one's resonant power by a notch if the cultivator can bear the pressure... How many steps do you think Li Luo will make, Leader?" Tian Tian asked.



Qiu Bai smiled. "I recall Leader here setting a record. She reached the 38th step and jumped two stages. That was a real sensation."

"I think Li Luo will also reach the 38th step," Jiang Qing'e said confidently.

Her teammates' eyes widened, then they gave up the topic. Jiang Qing'e could go that far because she had a ninth-grade light resonance. Li Luo might have dual resonances, but they weren't that strong. Even added together, they couldn't compete against a ninth-grade light resonance.

So why on earth did Jiang Qing'e regard him so highly...?

Still, Li Luo had worked enough miracles for them to wisely hold their tongues. He had earned a suspension of doubt.

Also, Jiang Qing'e was getting a little too excited about showing off her husband-to-be.

### **Chapter 0257: 38 Steps**

As they descended into the onyx lake, Li Luo and his team saw a fathomless crater filled with not water, but raw, rich worldly natural energy swirling in a gigantic whirlpool. The size and power of the huge swirl made them feel small in comparison.

The edges of the crater were not smooth, with long, wicked rocks sticking out at haphazard angles.

"Ready? This onyx lake has 38 steps. Each step allows us to imbue our bodies with more energy... Let's set our target at the 35th step for now." Li Luo grinned.

Bai Mengmeng stuck out her tongue. "Leader, your goal's too far for me. I think I can only reach the 32nd step or so."

Out of the three, she was the weakest, still only at the Flowering Seed Tier.

"Well... let's just do our best. The deeper we go, the better the effects. Plus, it's our first time in an onyx lake, when the effects are strongest. We can't waste this chance." Li Luo nodded encouragingly to her.

The three spoke no more, taking the deep plunge down. Their feet soon connected with the solid stone below, and they instantly felt energy surging into them, charging their bodies with a refreshing tingle.

It ran through every passage in their bodies, even clearing up their sinuses. They gasped at the sensation.

It passed in a few brief moments, and they were left with a vague sense of dissatisfaction.

"That's too short," Xin Fu grumbled. "But I do feel like my resonant power has grown a little," He added delightedly.

Li Luo nodded. He could sense that both of his resonance seeds had come alive in response to the power, although they had not been charged much.

Then again, it was just the first step.

"Leader, it feels like you charged for a few more seconds than us..." Xin Fu said.

"Really?" Li Luo said, surprised.

The few seconds had passed all too quickly. He hadn't noticed...

Bai Mengmeng thought it over. "Hmm, yes."

The first step was over in five or six seconds. A few seconds longer... Did that mean the effect on Li Luo was approximately double?

"Let's keep going."

In the next few minutes, the three cleared ten more steps.

Li Luo noticed that the charging time for him was indeed noticeably longer than his squadmates.

Just on the tenth step, he could already feel his resonant power growing rapidly. The single resonance pattern on his seed was growing brighter by the moment, swimming like a glowing dragon.

"Perhaps it's because of the dual resonances." Li Luo shrugged.

Being able to take energy into two seeds instead of one was indeed a significant advantage.

The two accepted it as such. However, Li Luo alone knew what was actually happening.

If the charging process could be likened to a sumptuous feast, then Li Luo had two stomachs, while others only had one. He was a resonant power glutton, greedily wolfing down every last scrap of power.

Far superior absorption compared to the others.

Li Luo felt a trickle of excitement course through him. If he could make it to the bottom of the stone steps, how much power would he gain?

It was indeed a miraculous opportunity.

Buoyed, Li Luo eagerly continued downwards.

Two hours passed in a flash, and now the trio were at the 30th step.

All three were practically glowing with resonant power now. They were starting to look saturated.

None of them showed any indication of stopping. Instead, they were all greedily looking forward.

In just two hours, they had probably covered as much ground as two or three months of hard cultivation!

However, the pressure on them was starting to grow more noticeable. Even the onyx leaf's protective effects appeared more diminished in the face of the tremendous crushing force they were feeling.

Any further, and it would be a test of their strength.

They took the leap to the 31st step together.

Two other squads had arrived as well, although they were sweating profusely, gritting their teeth and trying to withstand the pressure.

Eventually, one person crumpled under the pressure, his body shooting upwards with the current. He was carried upwards and outwards quickly enough, his face still pale from the exertion.

The trio had no time to worry about others. They themselves were feeling the pressure as well.

The weakest among them, Bai Mengmeng, was clenching her teeth so hard that her jaw was popping.

Li Luo raised his eyebrows at her. She understood, but she shook her head.

He nodded, and the three continued on.

Step after step.

They were at the 34th step now.

This was Bai Mengmeng's limit, but her perseverance had paid off. The resonant power within her roared with life, building her stronger and stronger.

Her final result was a jump from the Lower Flowering Tier to the Upper Flowering Tier.

She sighed with both relief and regret, and gave a parting wave to the two boys as the current took her out.

She was not a particularly ambitious person, nor was she too interested in fighting or challenging limits. This was enough for her.

Li Luo nodded slightly to her. He was already surprised that she had made it this far. Any further and she might end up injuring herself instead.

As they watched Bai Mengmeng leave, Li Luo and Xin Fu exchanged a look, then they moved down to the 35th step together without hesitating.

### **Chapter 0258: To The Limits**

As soon as Li Luo's foot touched the 35th step, he could feel the worldly natural energy surge through the point of contact, running through his body like a maelstrom.

It was free, and it was glorious.

The onyx lake was the energy's refuge from the dark tide, and yet even that was not enough. Energy always sought a safer home. Compared to the harsh environment in the onyx lake, it would rather choose a cultivator's body.

That was why one's resonant palace would exert a powerful attraction on the energy, sucking it up and enriching it.

The deeper one went, the greater the influx of energy.

Volumes of worldly natural energy surged into Li Luo like a water cannon attached to his feet. His two resonance seeds were swollen with power now, and Li Luo could sense a breakthrough incoming.

Whoosh!

Just then, he heard a muted bump from beside him. He saw Xin Fu's face screwed up in concentration, huge beads of sweat on his forehead.

He was swept up and away against his will, his energy spent.

There was regret in his eyes because he had not made the breakthrough to a Second Pattern, which was his goal.

The breakthroughs in the Pattern Genesis Tier were much more difficult. Bai Mengmeng had managed a Sprouting Seed Tier breakthrough, but Xin Fu had not managed to clear a step.

However, his efforts were not wasted. The resonance seed within him was already bright and full, and there were freckles of power beginning to form—the signs of a budding second pattern.

He was just one step away.

He waved to Li Luo too, but the latter was fully focused. Only three more steps.

He wouldn't give up now.

The pressure surrounding him was nothing compared to the mental pressure he felt. The changes at House Luolan, his diminished lifespan—they hung over his head like the Sword of Damocles.

He might appear calm and easygoing to others, but on the inside, he had been fighting a dark anxiety that no one knew.

The onyx lake was one opportunity that he could not afford to pass up, especially not his first dip in. Jiang Qing'e had warned them that any future entry would only bring discounted rewards.

If Li Luo wished to break through now, he could reach the Second Pattern. But he did not choose to do so. He held on for the moment.

On her first time, Jiang Qing'e had descended to the 38th step and jumped two stages in one shot.

Li Luo was sorely tempted.

It might be incredibly difficult, but he was going to go for it.

Five years to reach Duke. How else was he going to get there?

His eyes hardened with resolve.

Xin Fu saw the tightening of his shoulders from behind, and he nodded to himself.

There was no one else around Li Luo now. The other two squads had already exited. After all, the 35th step was beyond the limits of most people.

He took a deep breath and continued down.

...

Outside the onyx lake.

As the other squads began to emerge one after another, they soon realized that one person was missing.

"Li Luo's not out yet?"

"I heard from the others that he went down to the 35th step, but he isn't out yet. He must be going for the last three."

"What? How bold is that guy? Really? The last three?"

"Heh, the pressure on the last three steps is incredible. There's nothing like it. If he forces the issue, it might just backfire on him."

"Well, he's got dual resonances. So maybe he's got twice the ambition too..."

"I wonder if they're really that strong..."

Song Qiuyu and Wang Yufeng were stony-faced.

"Even I could only make it to the 36th step," Wang Yufeng said scathingly. "How far does that First Pattern brat think he can go?"

Song Qiuyu did not reply, but there was a malicious glint in her eyes. Hopefully, Li Luo had bitten off more than he could chew. Hopefully, he would choke on energy and crawl back out with nothing.

On the tree branch.

"So he's really going for the last three, huh," Tian Tian said with awe.

Qiu Bai nodded. "Ambitious."

Jiang Qing'e showed no surprise. She knew the pressure he was facing. And she knew the logical choice for him.

Once, she had thought that she alone needed to make the quick leap to Duke. Then she could shoulder House Luolan's burdens, and Li Luo would be freed. But now she knew of his shortened lifespan, he was in with her on the race. There would be no idyllic life for them.

That was why she had put him through trial after trial in the Umbra Cave.

Better take small risks with one's life now, before it was all gone.

Unconsciously, her hand tightened around the hilt of her sword as she stared deep into the energy vortex of the onyx lake.

"Li Luo, I believe you can do it."

"Others think that House Luolan has a phoenix of light, but they don't know that we also have a dragon hidden in slumber."

...

Whoosh!

Li Luo landed on the 36th step, and the impact almost sent him flying. The energy was all around him and within him, a typhoon of madness, and he was in the thick of it. It felt like if he didn't concentrate hard enough, he would be shredded apart from outside and within.

He could even hear the shrill squeaking of his bones being crushed.

Worldly natural energy flooded his body like a river through a broken dam, so violently that his insides felt raw from the chafing of the power flow.

Li Luo stood there calmly and took it. He had expected something like this.

His body thirsted, and he wasn't going to complain about a storm. He treasured every last bit with his hurting body.

The higher one's resonance grade, the higher the affinity with the energy, and the easier the energy flow would be to handle.

Jiang Qing'e, for example, must have done well with her ninth-grade light resonance. There was nothing better to deal with the energy pressure.

Li Luo might not have that, but he had his own advantages. Not only did he have dual resonances, he had four affinities!

Although his light and earth resonances were secondary, they were nevertheless attuned to some small parts of the worldly natural energy flooding into him.

Li Luo breathed through the pain and held on.

Both his resonant palaces were glowing in dual colors now.

The raw power was slowly refined within his body as he absorbed the four elements he needed. Gradually, he extracted the blue, green, yellow, and white out of the black energy.

Peeling apart layers from the raw material.

The energy stream subsided now, held at bay by his four glowing lights.

His resonant palaces absorbed as much as they could, as fast as they could, channeling power to his two resonance seeds.

They were vibrating and humming now, so violently that it seemed like they might explode.

Still Li Luo kept on, forcing one foot in front of the other. He walked off the edge.

The 37th step.

Another notch on the pressure, but Li Luo was ready for it now. He braced himself accordingly.

Still, no amount of mental fortitude could deny his physical limitations. His skin was being shredded by the pressure, bloody scars and patches appearing as pieces of skin were shorn off in the cruel vortex.

Li Luo ignored it. His eyes were firmly fixed on the ultimate goal. Without hesitation, he walked forward, smoothly and surely.

The 38th step!

### **Chapter 0259: Two Breakthroughs**

The 38th step brought about a new, more intense ringing in Li Luo's ears. This was as strong as the energy vortex got, and by gosh was it the wildest ride he had ever been on.

The mad roar was all around him, and he could feel himself being blown about like a leaf in the wind. It was hard to even concentrate.

This 38th step was insane.

The cuts on his skin widened and widened, flayed open by the energy vortex. He was starting to feel cold, and a little faint from the loss of blood.

Whoosh.

He took a deep breath to steady his mind, even when his body was being tossed about like a ragdoll. He could not afford to panic. He could not afford to back down.

He forced himself into the lotus position and moved his focus inwards.

Water resonance. Wood resonance.

Light resonance. Earth resonance.

Primaries.

Secondaries.

He struggled to master the flow, to pull what he needed and could use out of the black channel of raw, untapped power. He accomplished this by steadying himself with the endurance elements of water and wood.

If only he could hold on and sort the stray energies out, he could grow rapidly here.

If he could survive the energy vortex.

As time passed, Li Luo noticed that the energy membrane around him was starting to thin in places.

Once it broke, he would feel the full brunt of the energy vortex. He would die, no question about it.

"I guess my dual resonances started off too weak."

A fifth and sixth-grade resonance couldn't compare to a single ninth-grade.

In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that he had an additional two bonus secondary resonances, he might not have held on for as long as he did.

Li Luo eyed the energy membrane on his body. Underneath it, his four resonant powers flowed in a thin sheen that almost looked like it was part of the membrane.

It wasn't just about the quantity of energy he could store. More didn't directly equal better.

He had to use it well, use it strategically.

Now was the time to play to his strengths and utilize the unique advantages of his dual resonances... take as much of it as he could wield. After all, it was actually Duke-level power, and he had barely scraped the top of this power.

He couldn't hold his dual resonances together for long, and so he usually saved it as a final defense for crucial moments.

Still, if he could hold out until his breakthrough, the energy vortex's effects would be diminished, and he might just survive.

Li Luo felt the two resonance seeds within him, shining as bright as stars even when he closed his eyes.

Almost there.

Shrrrk.

With a ripping sound, Li Luo felt the energy membrane around him start to tear.

He did not hesitate, casting it off.

Simultaneously, his two resonance seeds pulsed, sending a pure stream of water and wood resonant power. They mixed.

Dual resonances!

Hum!

Blue and green mixed into a glittering turquoise sheen that covered him, a defense that he had manufactured himself against the energy vortex.

Li Luo was frozen in place, fully concentrated on making sure this final defense did not fail.

Dual resonances was the domain of true Dukes, but Li Luo's clutch move would hold him for a few moments together.

Hu hu!

The energy vortex was held at bay outside of his defenses. All the while Li Luo continued to absorb more and more worldly natural energy.

After a while, even his turquoise skin started fading, growing dimmer and dimmer.

The energy pressure threatened.

Li Luo smiled and relaxed.

The time had come. The cannon was loaded.

No longer did he suppress the breakthrough now. He let the power fully explode from his resonance seeds.

The second pattern formed very quickly, as if an invisible hand had run a well-inked brush across the surface of his seeds.



Pattern Genesis Tier, Second Pattern!

It wasn't over. Li Luo had held it back for so long exactly because he wasn't content with a singular breakthrough!

Even after the second pattern formed, the seeds still glowed with power. Wave after wave of resonant power rippled over the seeds' surface, until the beginnings of a third pattern could be seen.

The mark grew clearer and clearer, but the seeds grew dimmer and dimmer. All their power was being exhausted here.

Li Luo stood up and folded his body into a complex stance. He also changed his breathing pattern.

12 Step Weave: Fourth Step, Inhale-Exhale.

This was the Duke-level energy cultivation art that he had won from the last ranking battle. In his cultivation so far, he had managed to master the basic steps.

This was the perfect time to call upon it.

He sucked in a titanic breath, as if he were a dragon ready to breathe fire.

"Gurgle!"

He sucked in a gigantic mouth of energy into his belly!

He repeated this four times!

With four giant gulps of energy, he supplemented his resonance seeds' dwindling stores, and his third pattern formed with energy to spare.

Three full patterns now, bold and clear on the surface of his seeds.

Li Luo's sweat stopped now. With this jump, the pressure of the vortex suddenly dwindled away from deadly to manageable.

A smile slowly spread across his lips.

He had done it.

Just like Jiang Qing'e, a double breakthrough!

### **Chapter 0260: Sneaky Gains**

Pattern Genesis Tier, Third Pattern!

Li Luo could feel the new energy coursing through him, building him anew. His resonant power was on a whole new level compared to what it was before.

And as a Third Pattern, he could stand against the top 30 in the Two Star Hall with sheer power alone.

Accomplishing this in less than half a year at the Astral Sage College was not unheard of, but it still classified him as one of the undisputed elites.

Li Luo was \pleased with himself. This was one of his largest jumps in recent history.

The onyx lake had been well worth the trip.

All the pain he had been through fell away from memory as his success glowed within him. If he had spent all his time in school, he would have taken two months to get this far.

As for other students, they might not match him even by the end of the first year.

That was how rare and effective the onyx lakes were. To get ahead in this world, both luck and skill were necessary.

Now perhaps only Qin Zhulu could stand against Li Luo in the One Star Hall.

As for Wang Hejiu, Bai Doudou, and the others, they were already eating his dust.

Even at the start of school, Li Luo had been able to hold his own against them in battle. It had always been his resonant power holding him back.

Now that he could stand here comfortably, he continued to absorb what other energy he could. The more the better.

While absorbing, Li Luo looked deeper into the dark abyss ahead.

The 38th step was supposed to be the limit, but if so... what was below?

On impulse, he flicked a Waterlight Bullet forwards.

Whoosh!

A bright, illuminating pellet whizzed off into the murky depths.

After a few moments, it was snuffed out by the energy vortex, but Li Luo could see a stone wall below, where a large, black tree grew.

On the tree, there were black leaves that swayed and rippled with the waves of energy, some of them being ripped off each time.

The onyx tree and its onyx leaves.

Li Luo also noticed that only the top layer of leaves were being blown off by the energy waves. There were many more leaves pressed up against the stone wall that were sheltered against the energies.

No wonder only two or three leaves blew out each time.

"I wonder if I can grab some."

Since onyx leaves were tickets into the onyx lake and cultivation, the students outside were desperate for them. Each time, they fought like lions over the few leaves that were released.

If Li Luo could grab a handful here, he could trade them for Other fragments. Others could get their shot at cultivation, and Li Luo would win a whole bunch of points for himself. Plug a bit of that 100,000 point bank he needed...

Win-win, eh?

His eyes brightened with the thought, and he almost slapped himself on the back. "Great idea, you!"

Without hesitation, he combined his blades and sent a light arrow whistling forth.

Still, dreams were much prettier than reality.

The light arrow had only flown a dozen meters before it was lost to the buffeting energies.

Li Luo frowned. The energy disruption here was too strong for other energies to pass through cleanly.

It was like throwing wooden spears against a wall. No matter how hard you threw the spear, it was always going to bounce away.

So it wasn't such an easy goal after all.

Surely he wasn't the first one to have made it to the 38th step and think of this money-making scheme.

Then again... no one else had his advantages.

Maybe he could make this work.

Still, resisting the environment was tiring, and his dual resonances were more or less depleted for the moment. If he was going to make a move, any move, he probably only had one last shot left in him...

After that, he would have to leave before his defenses expired.

He lifted his bow again, this time with a sense of urgency. His two streams of resonant power flowed upwards, gathering at his bow.

This time his light arrow was much more slender, barely a thread of light that connected bow and string.

Yet on this faint thread danced more penetrative deadly power than Li Luo had ever summoned before.

Hum!

The bow sang, and the light arrow charged with blue and green shot forth. As it passed through the energy field, it flickered and wavered.

Still, this time it made it through without slowing, punching through many of the connections between tree and leaves.

Crack!

As planned, black leaves were separated from the tree.

Whoosh!

The black onyx leaves immediately took flight in the energy current, swiftly ascending upwards.

Li Luo had prepared silk strings, reinforced with resonant power, and was ready and waiting to snag them up.

He roughly counted them. Eight onyx leaves!

He smiled at them with a maniacal grin of greed.

And then a cold chill passed through his spine. Danger. He looked back down again.

He sensed a pure evil, emanating from the depths of the onyx lake. And it was staring at him.

His scalp crawled with a prickling sense of danger.

He could not explain it, but the desire to get out immediately was overwhelming. He hesitated no more, kicking off with the leaves in hand, letting the current take him back up.

Faster, he prayed. The current couldn't get him away fast enough. He didn't even know what lurked below, but he knew that it was something far beyond his abilities!

...

Deep in the mountains of the forbidden zone.

A certain dark cave.

Crimson beast eyes flared open with a feral growl. They were fixed in the direction of the onyx lake.

The onyx lake ran very deep with tunnels, and one narrow tunnel ran directly to the ruby lake that it usually cultivated in.

It could sense a strange power that compelled it.

Could it be... dual resonances?

Had another Duke come to challenge it?

No, this was a Resonant Master kid. But... with dual resonances?

There was thoughtfulness in the crimson eyes, a human-like intelligence that pondered the notion.

It seemed to recall something as its huge body rose out of the lake.

A natural dual resonance user?

Well then. If it ate the kid, wouldn't it move a step closer to Duke-level power?

Greed filled those eyes, alongside a savage intelligence that would stop at nothing to fulfill its goal.