

## Resonance 481

### Chapter 0481: Goodwill?

Jing Taixu's appearance had the crowd muttering to themselves. They watched his every move in awe.

Li Luo was watching too, with a more neutral admiration. Jing Taixu moved very well through the air, as expected of someone with a wind resonance. Resonant Master Stage cultivators were not able to stand in mid-air, but he could already achieve short periods of flight.

"His wind resonant power is very sentient," Bai Doudou marveled.

She was a wind resonance user too, and a lower eighth-grade one at that. But even someone as strong as her looked clumsy and awkward compared to Jing Taixu.

Such was the power of a quasi ninth-grade.

"This guy really knows how to show off," Yu Lang said, disgusted.

Still, he really did know how to capture eyeballs. He was naturally handsome, and he moved like a willow tree in the wind. Many female students were making eyes at him.

Still, the rest were more interested to see if Jing Taixu could withstand the first wave of energy.

He landed lightly on the Stairway to Heaven.

Boom!

When he touched the ground, a thunderous crash sounded as the energy roared out at him like an angry dragon. Some of the spectators blanched.

Jing Taixu did not even blink.

He stood his ground and summoned his resonant power, a wash of green, airy energy that he condensed before him.

"Wind Cannon."

Boom!

The energy had concentrated into a solid, green cone on the tip of his finger. It blasted out with a sonic boom as it ripped through the air with blistering speed that confounded the naked eye. It was headed straight towards the energy wave.

POOM!

Boom! Rumble!

The two attacks met in a cacophonous argument that lasted for a few seconds, then the energy wave swallowed up the Wind Cannon, pushing on past to wash over Jing Taixu.

He was ready and waiting with a grass-green shield that dispersed the brunt of the energy.

When the first wave of energy had been completely nullified, he was still standing on the Stairway to Heaven, only having taken a single step back throughout the process.

He had successfully stopped the first wave.

"Wow!"

The spectators roared with excitement. It could be done!

His reputation had awed them, but now his display of strength had cemented their awe one step further. No wonder he was the hot favorite to win the Hall-level competition.

Jing Taixu could activate the anima storm. Although most of the benefits would be taken up by his school, there would still be energy trickling down to the others as anima dew. They would be able to get some juicy scraps.

Although it was Jing Taixu who had activated an anima storm, the others cheered as well.

Jing Taixu stepped off the Stairway to Heaven. "Friends from all schools," he declared in a ringing voice, "this anima storm has been opened already, but I still need three schools to come share the burden with me. If you are willing and able, come forth and we can discuss."

He was already drifting back towards the Enlightened Sage College's island.

His invitation tempted many commanders. Being on Jing Taixu's side would result in an easy life. After all, the anima storm was extremely rich; even a small share of it would be more than they had managed to acquire in the last week.

But at the same time, they knew that a small share was all they would be getting. Jing Taixu had spoken of discussion and cooperation, but they knew the partnership would not be equal at all.

He was not short on helpers willing to offer themselves up as choices.

Which meant that they would have to swallow their pride and accept inferior terms if they wanted to work with him.

And indeed many were willing to do so, for the sake of anima dew.

Many went forward eagerly after only a moment of cursory hesitation. Someone offered an opening bid, and soon there was an intense competition to shortchange themselves, just for a chance to join the team.

The Enlightened Sage College students were watching this with great satisfaction and pride.

However, they were not the only ones in the market. Very soon, two more figures were speeding out to claim the other anima storms.

"It's Sun Dasheng from the Sacred Summit Sage College!"

"And Lu Ming from the Heavenly Inferno Sage College! They're going for it too!"

Li Luo was more interested in the latter.

Lu Ming, the Illusory Thunderbolt. The famous dual resonance user.

It was the first dual resonance user that Li Luo had met besides himself, and so he was truly curious.

The girl called Lu Ming had extremely fair skin, a dewy beauty that positively glowed in the sun. It was a stark contrast from her emotionless face, that made her seem aloof.

But the most compelling thing about her was the electricity that danced along her skin.

Lu Ming and Sun Dasheng each let their resonant powers roar out.

It was immediately clear that both were at the Third Changing.

They landed on the Stairway to Heaven and readied themselves.

"Hahaha! Jing Taixu's done it, so I surely can too!" Sun Dasheng roared. He twirled his golden staff exultantly, then he smashed it into the energy wave.

Lu Ming's approach was much less ostentatious, but all the more impressive for it. She simply formed a band of electric light around her wrist, surrounded by another ethereal halo of light.

Li Luo's eyes narrowed at the familiar halo.

The Becoming One tier.

Lu Ming had done it with ease.

Her palm flashed out, and a lightning serpent darted out to meet the energy wave.

BOOM!

On both Stairways to Heaven, the sound was deafening as could be.

Finally, Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming took a couple of steps back. They had managed to resist the energy.

It was an expected result.

After all, both Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming were hot favorites like Jing Taixu. Everyone knew that these three were the strongest in this iteration of the Holy Grail Meet. Whatever Jing Taixu could withstand, surely these two could as well.

Like with Jing Taixu, the two returned promptly to their schools' islands after proving their success, and other schools swarmed to them to be their partners.

"What are we going to do?" Yu Lang asked, watching the other three schools take in partners.

Li Luo was just about to speak when he saw a person fly directly towards their island.

Jing Taixu.

All eyes were on him as he landed on their island.

"What are you doing?" Li Luo asked him, surprised.

Jing Taixu smiled at him. "Friend Li Luo, are you interested in working together?"

Li Luo laughed. "Can't find anyone?"

"I prefer working with someone reliable," Jing Taixu said with a shrug. "It makes things easier. I've heard of your skills, so I hope that you can help me out. As for the anima cumulonimbuses that you harvest... I'll just take 40 percent. Please don't think of it as a harsh deal. The others are currently paying 60 percent."

"That's very generous of you," Li Luo said, surprised.

"I want to build a relationship with you," Jing Taixu said frankly. "I did not handle the information about Senior Jiang well previously. If you're willing, we can leave it behind us and be friends. What do you say?"

He extended a hand to Li Luo, smiling.

Li Luo looked at him with interest.

"Does this guy want to use Li Luo as a wingman to get in Senior Jiang's pants?" Yu Lang said loudly, his face carefully directed at a stump on the ground.

Jing Taixu ignored him, eyes tight on Li Luo's face.

A few moments later, Li Luo showed no signs of accepting his goodwill, and so he shook his head and retracted his hand.

"It seems like you are still bothered by my past actions, my friend," Jing Taixu said with a rueful smile.

Li Luo had no interest in playing games with him here. He pointed at the air.

"Oh, no. It's just that I think there isn't much room for cooperation between us. You see, I've got a big ambition too. There's one more anima storm just sitting over there, you know."

Jing Taixu looked up at the last unclaimed anima storm and understood his meaning. He laughed.

"Understood. I wish you success in your endeavor."

He turned and left.

## **Chapter 0482: Li Luo's Ambitions**

Lu Qing'er turned to Li Luo the moment Jing Taixu left. "You're going to try and activate an anima storm too?"

He had declared that he did not intend to be anyone's bitch.

"The easiest way to get a big slice of a pie is to bake a pie," Li Luo said cheerfully. "It's a whole anima storm out there, people. If we can take it, we'll be good to go on to Dragonbone Island."

Bai Doudou nodded. "If we can take it. But..."

"From what we saw from Jing Taixu and the others, it'll take a Third Changing's power to succeed."

Li Luo understood what she had left unsaid. Although Li Luo's show of strength so far had been beyond reproach, he was still a Second Changing, putting him slightly behind Jing Taixu, Lu Ming, and Sun Dasheng.

Most importantly, even if he could withstand the first wave of energy, did that mean he could climb the entire Stairway to Heaven and successfully ring the anima bell to activate the storm?

If he failed, he would not only become a laughing stock, he would have also given up on the chance of bringing anyone else to Dragonbone Island.

They would have to give up on the anima storm.

"I think there's no harm trying. It's a little risky, but the payoff is huge. I think it's worth it, all in all."

Lu Qing'er looked glowingly at Li Luo. "I don't think Li Luo's any weaker than those three. If they succeeded, why can't he?"

Wang Hejiu rolled his eyes at the infatuated girl. "I think we should be a bit more realistic about this," he grumbled. He was still a little sore because he had a soft spot for Lu Qing'er, but nothing had ever sparked between them.

Lu Qing'er ignored his caution.

"I think it's worth a try too," Bai Mengmeng said in a dreamy voice.

"If we're going to go for it, we better get as much of the storm as we can," Qin Zhulu rumbled in his deep voice. "Why live like hyenas off the scraps when we are lions?"

"I thought you were a tiger." Duze Beixuan scoffed.

"Both are kings," Qin Zhulu said, "and neither would settle for giving away 40 percent of the kill. It would be demeaning to take those terms."

Duze Beixuan fell silent.

"Well, if you're willing to give it a try, I'll support you," Yi Lisha said. "I guess the first wave of energy is a good indicator. Pass that, and we got a shot, I say."

A few others voiced their support.

Li Luo nodded gratefully in appreciation. "I'll give it a try, then."

Jing Taixu's olive branch was not one he'd accept, no matter how sincere the guy might have been.

Whether he wanted to smooth over the situation or whatever, it did not matter to Li Luo. His goal was to become the strongest student in the One Star Hall. They would clash in the end.

With this decision made, Li Luo hesitated no longer, but set off for the last anima storm, landing speedily on the Stairway to Heaven.

The remaining schools watched him, astonished.

"Someone else is going for the stairway!"

“Who’s that reckless?!”

“It’s... the Astral Sage College’s commander, Li Luo.”

“Oh? The one who’s become famous recently? I hear he’s a dual resonance user too!”

“He took on three commanders single-handedly!”

“He’s the fourth hot favorite to win this, I hear.”

“Eh, rumors are always exaggerated. Jing Taixu and the other two didn’t build their reputation overnight. Li Luo might be good, but he can’t be as good.”

“Did you hear he rejected Jing Taixu’s personal invitation to join him? Sounds like an arrogant guy.”

“Well, pride comes before a fall.”

One person among all the spectators was thoughtfully silent.

Sun Dasheng leaned on his golden staff and watched carefully. Li Luo had left a deep impression on him. There were not many Second Changing cultivators who could take two strikes from him.

He wanted to fight Li Luo for real, but had been busy hunting down anima cumulonimbuses in the last week.

“I wonder if that guy’s stronger than the ice queen, Lu Ming?” he wondered idly to himself.

On another island, Lu Ming was watching Li Luo closely as well.

“Sister Lu, is that the dual resonance user that’s become famous recently? He’s quite handsome,” a female student said.

Lu Ming nodded. “From the resonant powers he’s using, he must be a water and wood resonance user. And from that purity, at best a seventh and sixth-grade.”

Both of her resonances were seventh-grade.

Grade-wise, she had the advantage.

“Can he succeed?”

Lu Ming had already turned away, unaffected by his good looks. “It depends on how good his dual resonance cultivation is. But he’s still a Second Changing, so he’ll have a harder time.

“What does it matter that he can withstand the first wave of energy? Getting to the top is no easy matter. This is just an appetizer.”

The other girl nodded in agreement.

Jing Taixu had already returned to his island and continued picking teams. He watched Li Luo rise into the air with an unconcerned expression. This young lord of House Luolan was indeed special.

Their intelligence had clearly been lacking.

But that had nothing to do with the goodwill that he had offered.

After all, dual resonance users were rare, but not to him. And he had a quasi ninth-grade himself. Quality over quantity.

He did not even fear Lu Ming, let alone an inferior, Second Changing-version of her.

His true intentions for offering Li Luo friendship had been called out by the loudmouth from the Astral Sage College.

His target was Jiang Qing'e.

A girl that roused his interest.

She had almost become his marriage partner. That thought appealed to him.

More importantly, only a ninth-grade could pair with a ninth-grade, right?

Jiang Qing'e was slated to become the strongest Three Star Hall student. Sure, their school had planned something for her, but privately, Jing Taixu doubted it was going to work... So he'd better take the strongest One Star Hall title himself.

That would just help make his point that the two of them were a couple destined to be together. He was brought back to reality from his dream when Li Luo landed on the stairway.

#### **Chapter 0483: Fourth Storm Activated**

When Li Luo landed on the Stairway to Heaven, the familiar energy blazed forth with a dull roar that made the entire earth tremble.

The air shook and sizzled as the wave energized the very space it passed through.

Li Luo stood on the stairway, watching the incoming attack. It was a little like a diving board—only when you were standing there did you truly feel how scary the endeavor was.

He could feel goosebumps prickles as his instincts screamed at him about how dangerous this was.

All across the numerous islands, many students watched intently.

Everyone wanted to know if this new dark-horse addition to the hot favorites was really as strong as the rumors had claimed.

Lu Qing'er, Bai Mengmeng, and the other Astral Sage girls held their breath, clutching each others' hands tightly.

**BOOM!**

The energy wave was right before Li Luo's face now, and he swept the Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade upwards, powered by a tremendous wave of his own resonant power, funneled through his sword arm.

Both his resonant palaces were running at full capacity. He held nothing back.

They merged.

The brilliant power burst forth in resplendent blue and green, backed by a scintillating halo of energy around Li Luo's wrist.

Some of the students gasped.

Even Lu Ming paused to watch with narrowed eyes, her expression now serious. She was all too familiar with that halo. Only a cultivator at the Becoming One stage of dual resonance mastery could use it. Li Luo truly had some skill.

Still, perhaps she should have anticipated that. There was no way he could have beaten three commanders otherwise.

Still... Li Luo's power looked odd to her, even as a dual resonance user herself.

There was something off about the flow. It was especially quick.

She had no time to examine it closely. Li Luo had struck out.

His green power flowed into his blue, imbuing it with energy while gracefully yielding its form. Sparkling water hummed in the air.

"Thousand Watery Knives art."

Li Luo's attack swept upwards, a thousand knives of water flashing out in his own deadly wave.

They tore into the blanket of energy and went wild, shredding it as fast as they could.

Screech!

The two bursts of energy consumed each other with a shrill sound.

Each glittering water knife was like a knight overwhelmed in a horde. They cut the sheet of power into pieces, then further still into shreds. Some of them were broken down completely, allowing pockets of energy to disperse. But the knives eventually fell, and still the wave of energy came on.

It was torn and tattered now, disparate pieces of energy regrouping and washing over Li Luo, swallowing him whole.

Li Luo did not panic. When he saw Jing Taixu and the others take this, none of them had managed to break the wave completely with their first attack either. The purpose of the attack was merely there to attrite the offense as much as possible.

Another wave of energy from within him, this one forming layers and layers of resonant energy around him in a watery armor.

"Heavy Water Toga."

Ping!

Defenses ready, there was nothing left to do but tense his body. From the first point of impact, Li Luo felt like he had just been charged by a bull. The wave of energy ripped away at the toga, bursting through each layer as it tried to sap as much of the energy as it could.

But the Heavy Water Toga could not completely stop it either. There was still remnant energy remaining that smashed into Li Luo.



He stumbled backwards, struggling to keep his footing.

In a hard clash of resonant power, the Second Changing Li Luo came off worse than Jing Taixu and the other Third Changing students.

Especially Jing Taixu—the final blow had only forced him back a single step, testament to the depth and control he had over his power.

Li Luo took several steps, and only managed to regain his footing on the very edge of the Stairway to Heaven.

Still, he did not celebrate. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes instead.

Everywhere else, the students gasped and shouted, pointing and gesturing excitedly. Ultimately, Li Luo was still standing on the Stairway to Heaven, which meant that he had succeeded. He had activated the fourth anima storm.

Li Luo's strength was no longer in question now. And it was all the more impressive that he was the only Second Changing cultivator to succeed in activating an anima storm.

When Li Luo returned to the Astral Sage College's island, a flurry of schools were rushing to send representatives forward. He would still need three schools with him to assist.

Their quiet, little island suddenly grew lively.

Jing Taixu watched the new swarm of people with a small smile on his face.

"Brother Jing, no wonder that Li Luo turned down your goodwill. He wanted to take one storm all for himself. He's very strong, to be able to stop that as a Second Changing," a youth with snow-white eyebrows remarked.

"I'm not surprised he can do it with the Becoming One stage." Jing Taixu agreed with a smile. "It's impressive work, and in terms of raw resonant power, I think even ordinary Third Changing cultivators wouldn't be able to stand up to him."

The white-eyebrowed youth nodded enviously. "Dual resonances means two resonant palaces. It's a natural advantage, not to mention the versatility of resonant combinations. It would take a ninth-grade like yourself to hold him down, Brother Jing."

Jing Taixu gave a soft laugh absent of arrogance. "Like I said, he's stronger than the average Third Changing student, but I'm not the only exception. Lu Ming and Sun Dasheng are right there as well."

"How do you see the Astral Sage College, Brother Jing? Li Luo's rejected your olive branch, and now he's shown strength. Could he be a threat...?"

Jing Taixu waved the remark away.

"It does not matter. He might have withstood the first wave, but it was close. The journey up the Stairway to Heaven will only get harder. He might not be able to hold out till the end.

"In the Hall-level competition..." he smirked.

"There's really no one I have to be afraid of."

The white-eyebrowed youth smiled and nodded.

Finally, the noise and bustle died down as the four schools with the anima storm champions finished deciding their partners.

Li Luo's side had chosen very quickly too, although their choosing was rather careless. They had simply gotten all the schools that had come forth to draw lots, and the three lucky ones had been chosen.

The unchosen schools were sad, but they did not leave. As the anima storms were activated, the latent worldly natural energy might wash up some goodies for them, which was better than nothing.

With this, the next phase of the anima storm harvesting was finally ready to begin.

#### **Chapter 0484: Li Luo's Resplendence**

Hundreds of shadows ascended into the skies simultaneously, and the atmosphere reached fever pitch.

The curtains over the event were about to unveil the main attraction, an eye-opening show of anima cacophony.

Everyone was clear that they had reached the tipping point of the competition, and also their final opportunity to shine. The events that occurred after this would only involve the best of the best.

In the midst of the raucous excitement, Li Luo led his group into the anima storm with the Stairway to Heaven being his aim. Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, and the rest gently landed on the stone platform on his right side.

There were four stone platforms in total, situated on both sides of the Stairway to Heaven.

As per the rules, each stone platform was to be manned by a sage college with the intention that they would share the burden of resisting the torrential amounts of energy raining down upon them. As one ascended the Stairway to Heaven, the flow of energy would grow increasingly strong, to a point where a single individual like Li Luo would be unable to handle it alone.

This also included the likes of Jing Taixu. The monstrous tides of energy was not something so easily resisted.

The Academic Federation had specifically designed the competition with this in mind. The anima cumulonimbus was not to be monopolized by a single college. Cooperation was the key to victory.

Thus, as Li Luo gradually approached the steps, the anima cumulonimbus seemed to come to life, increasing the pressure upon him. Without a glance, Qin Zhulu and the students from the other three colleges made their way atop the stone platforms.

There was no hesitation as they took their positions. The strongest participants were placed at the fore with the rest shoring up the defenses. They would correspondingly be subject to mightier resistance than their peers situated slightly further away.

As these four chosen ones stepped upon the Stairway to Heaven, berserk tides of energy immediately crashed down upon them without warning.

However, something different occurred this time. As the energy rushed towards the challenger, four vortexes magically appeared which siphoned off some of the energy, directly surging into the individuals atop the stone platforms.

Qin Zhulu and the rest had their first taste of the savage flows of the anima cumulonimbus.

The torrential roar of the energy surge caused the expressions on their faces to warp in horror. This frightening pressure felt like a mountain was placed atop them, suffocating them gradually.

Just how monstrous was the pressure Li Luo had endured?

Resonant power surged as everyone gave their all to struggle against the energy waves. The longer they could hold on, the lighter the burden on Li Luo.

Whilst his companions were sharing the burden, Li Luo indeed had a significantly easier time than he did in his first encounter with the anima cumulonimbus. However, he was very clear that this was merely the beginning.

As the ceaseless discharge from the anima cumulonimbus continued, the energy would rise in intensity and strength.

Not wasting any time, he took measured steps as he ascended slowly.

Brandishing his weapon in front of him and wreathed in a veil of flowing resonant power, each step was deliberate and heavy.

A similar scene could be seen on the other three Stairways to Heaven. Jing Taixu, Sun Dasheng, and Lu Ming, however, were moving slightly quicker than Li Luo. Resonant power surged out of them endlessly, counteracting the energy waves and allowing them to fly forth.

Out of the three, Jing Taixu seemed to have the easiest time as he effortlessly led the pack. Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming, on the other hand, were slightly slower but on par with each other.

The sole individual remaining was Li Luo, who was trudging along in last place.

The stark display led the students from the other colleges to shake their heads in disapproval. Li Luo's relatively weaker Second Changing tier showed its disadvantage here. His previous performance seemed to have forced him to his limit, and whether he could ascend to the peak of the Stairway to Heaven remained to be seen.

It would be a sight to behold if he was inevitably flushed away.

Some people relished in his misfortune. They did not have the right to struggle for a piece of the anima storm, and seeing someone else knocked down to their level brought them cathartic release. The jeering looks did not faze Li Luo. He was no stranger to them after all. Witnessing the other three's rapid ascent did not worry him, as he fully understood that this was a natural advantage conferred by greater resonant power. He had his own set of preparations that he had hidden up his sleeves.

Continuing to move relentlessly, he hacked at the space in front of him with the Onyx-Elephant Blade, blade light tearing a path through the energy waves.

Meanwhile, waterlight resonant power continued to gather within his other hand, forming a seal that seemed to be constantly in flux, emitting a shimmering light.

Li Luo's experience with the Stairway to Heaven had taught him that the strength of the energy waves pushing against him would rise in intensity every thirty steps. This would repeat all the way till he reached the peak.

There were several hundred steps, and by extension, the magnitude of the energy waves crashing upon him would rise by over ten times as a result.

His unfaltering efforts eventually led him to step upon the thirtieth step.

It was as though a raging dragon was heaving right before him, a splendid torrent of energy coalescing before his very eyes, rushing headfirst into him.

Yet Li Luo did not hesitate when faced with this frightening display of energy. Instead of resorting to his previous strategy of forcefully cleaving a path and blunting his momentum, he kicked himself forward, taking the initiative to collide against the energy wave directly.

It was like watching a lion cub struggling against a raging river, a pitiful ant struggling against the force of nature.

Numerous gazes turned to focus upon him as they gasped in shock. Had this arrogant guy finally lost his marbles? Was he trying to prove his lack of something with this act? Even the front runner, Jing Taixu, would refrain from such a barbaric tactic despite his superior resonant prowess, opting to weaken the momentum of the energy waves before finding the path of least resistance. Li Luo on the other hand? Was he a moth flying into a flame?

Instead, he raised his palm, the waterlight resonant power gathered within. In a flash, several water mirrors appeared before him, with a stream of light connecting them.

These water mirrors were connected to each other like a phalanx, forming a larger water mirror several meters in length.

"Waterlight Demon Mirror Phalanx."

Torrents of energy screamed past as they rushed at him, finally clashing with the water mirror in front of him. At the point of contact, the water mirror emitted a stupendous amount of retaliatory force before it shattered, offsetting the energy waves with an equally ferocious counter strike.

It was akin to seeing two massive rivers crashing into each other, converging at a single point.

The repercussions shifted the heavens and the earth!

Boom!

A thunderous boom echoed from the Stairway to Heaven, shaking its very foundations to the core.

It was a sight of absolute horror as the titanic torrent of energy had been struck violently and been viciously ripped apart. What remained was a path of emptiness, an unobstructed avenue for one to pass through.

This was the moment Li Luo had been waiting for. Taking advantage of this moment of calm, he launched himself forward without hesitation, each stride covering over five steps.

The waves of energy would take time to replenish, and this short period of time was his best chance to advance quickly.

In a blink, he had taken over twenty steps, directly overtaking Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming, nipping on Jing Taixu's heels.

The rapid scaling of the stairway left countless dumbfounded and in awe. This was an incomprehensible sight. Just how had Li Luo ignored the energy torrent and directly bound upwards without resistance?

How had he created that heaven-sundering force that had torn the energy waves apart?

Was this the power someone at the Resonant Master Stage could even muster?

The ones who were most shocked were the other three geniuses. They couldn't believe their eyes, and for the first time, they felt a strange sense of competition coming from this dark horse.

Just what had happened?

(TL Note: Its Li Luo's slap you back in the face special technique of course!)

#### **Chapter 0485: Head to Head**

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The roar of surprise from the students was uplifting to behold.

They stared at Li Luo in disbelief as he made his mad run up the Stairway to Heaven. No one had expected that he would accelerate past Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming.

What in the world was going on?

Nobody understood at all.

Even Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, and the rest of the Astral Sage students were just as perplexed.

The other three schools that were supposed to support the Astral Sage College were staring open-mouthed. When this endeavor first started, they were worried that Li Luo would not be able to activate the anima storm.

They had decided to gamble on this cooperation, but this development wiped away any remaining doubts they had.

Li Luo was really something special!

He alone had a serene expression on his face. His move was nothing special—he had just utilized the Waterlight Demon Mirror to trigger a rebound of power. It was a niche move that worked as well as the incoming attack, although Li Luo had managed to master it to the point where the odds were always in his favor, thanks to the light resonant energy that he imbued in it.

And he had actually used not just his normal Waterlight Demon Mirror, but the scaled-up version that he had modified himself—the Waterlight Demon Mirror Phalanx.

After some tricky finessing, the reflecting effect of the Waterlight Demon Mirror Phalanx was brought to new heights. The torrent of energy sweeping down the Stairway to Heaven was tremendous, which meant that the Waterlight Demon Mirror Phalanx was even more tremendous. With the energy that he reflected, Li Luo had torn a swath deep into the torrent of energy and ran through like a madman.

The gap in the energy was closing ahead of him, but the newly formed energy wave was still weak. Without breaking stride, his Onyx-Elephant Blade flashed out and cut it in pieces as he bounded past the 30th step.

His eyes flicked over to the side...

He was level with Jing Taixu.

Both of them were on the exact same step. The crowd could not believe it.

Another powerful wave of energy roared out.

Jing Taixu did not look over at Li Luo, but he knew that the Astral Sage commander was neck and neck with him. He grew even calmer than before.

Li Luo might be slightly weaker in terms of resonant power, but his arsenal was incredibly versatile and could not be underestimated.

Technically, there was no direct competition on the Stairway to Heaven. One person ascending did not affect the ascension of the others in any shape or form. But after a moment's hesitation, Jing Taixu decided that he would be the first to ascend.

It was not a decision with any real reason behind it. If it had been Lu Ming or Sun Dasheng ahead of him, perhaps he would be a little more graceful in conceding.

But the person was Li Luo.

The fiancé of Jiang Qing'e... That fact alone meant that Jing Taixu could not bear to lose to Li Luo. Not in anything, not even a race to the top of the Stairway to Heaven, even if it had absolutely no bearing upon anything. But to him, how could he talk to Jiang Qing'e ever again if he lost here?

Jing Taixu smiled grimly to himself. "Too bad, Li Luo. It's all Jiang Qing'e's fault for being so damn charming!" He lifted his head and slammed his palms together, summoning a howling, green wind that cycled between his hands at a screaming pace.

A moment later, he moved his hands up to his mouth, cupping it on either side, and he blew.

Demon Wind Funnel!

Whoo!

His wind energy was so concentrated that it was no longer the pale, green hue typical of wind resonance users. It had been concentrated into a forest-green color, and the cone of wind energy blasted out like a horizontal tornado.

The students watched in awe. Some even shuddered as they watched the colossal funnel spin out towards the wave of energy.

Boom!

It sheared through the air itself, a dark-green cyclone that ate up anything in its way.

It paved the way like a bulldozer, shredding a channel through the energy wave.

Jing Taixu pushed on behind it, swiftly climbing the stairway.

The students exclaimed at the sheer power that he had shown.

BOOM!

Just at this moment, another thunderous sound came from Li Luo's side, and the students swiveled to see another tremendous force blast through on his side as well. Li Luo shot forth, just as fast as Jing Taixu.

The crowd watched rapt as the two figures pushed on grimly. It looked like a head-to-head competition.

It was amazing that Li Luo was competing at all. There were few in this competition who could force Jing Taixu to get serious.

Most dumbfounded of all were Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming.

They looked at the two figures way ahead of them, unsure of what to feel.

"Is he using the Profound Water Mirror's reflective capacity? It's a smart move, but his resonance art seems too strong to be true," Lu Ming thought to herself. The water mirror that Li Luo employed was not that rare a move, but she had no idea why his was so strong.

Both Lu Ming and Sun Dasheng understood that Li Luo had grasped the meta of this challenge way better than they had. He had used the most efficient way: harnessing the energy wave against itself. It was effective, fast, and saved him strength.

Neither did it go against the rules.

All they could do was acknowledge his brilliance.

Just like that, Li Luo and Jing Taixu surged ahead, while Lu Ming and Sun Dasheng were left in the dust. But neither of them panicked. On the contrary, they slowed down their pace even more. It did not matter who finished first or last. What mattered was that they finished. There was no point in throwing precious strength into meaningless competition.

Jing Taixu should know this very well as well, which was why they found it very odd. Why was he competing?

Why was he so concerned with Li Luo?

In front of them, Li Luo and Jing Taixu continued their frenzied race up the Stairway to Heaven, like a pair of vigorous salmon climbing up the waterfall.

Wave after wave of energy hit them, and they pushed onwards past each one, undaunted.

The students watched with eyes wide.

Who would be the first to activate their anima cumulonimbus?

Chapter 486: Ringing the Anima Bell

Rumble! Boom!

Titanic exchanges of energy flew both ways. The Stairway to Heaven continued to beat down on the challengers, who were desperately trying to attack the waves back before they reached them.

Ordinarily, the 30th step was supposed to be a milestone. After that, the going was supposed to get even tougher. And yet the two in the lead were currently pushing on as though there was no such resistance.

It was not that the energy flow was weak, but rather these two were running with all cylinders fired.

Each time they passed 30 steps, the energy would ratchet up another notch, and they would quickly neutralize it and move on.

A few minutes later, the two were well in the lead, and very close to the top of the Stairway to Heaven.

Miraculously, Li Luo and Jing Taixu were still neck and neck.

It was Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming who had slowed down even more. Even they were watching their rivals with interest. Who would finish first?

Besides, the energy would be strongest at the end.

Perhaps at this most grueling part, the difference between the two would become clear.

“Li Luo...”

Lu Ming stared at the dark horse challenger, her mind full. The fact that he could keep level with Jing Taixu was testament to his superb talent. The masterful use of the water mirror technique had been nothing less than inspired.

But through this period of observation, Lu Ming could see that his Water Mirror Art was taking a toll on him. Each time the energy grew stronger, the gap between the incoming wave of energy and the reflected energy continued to narrow.

Which meant that in the last wave of energy, Li Luo’s Water Mirror Art would be close to ineffective. His speed would be seriously diminished, and he would likely not be able to keep up with Jing Taixu.

In the end, the Spear of Enlightened Sage would probably win the race.

Ultimately, it did not matter. The Stairway to Heaven did not reward speed. The fact that Li Luo had managed to force Jing Taixu to take this seriously was already a win for his side.

At the very least, it made her see him with newfound respect.



She had ignored rumors of a fourth contender in the Hall-level competition up till now, but seeing Jing Taixu and Li Luo side by side ahead of her... seeing was believing.

Boom!

Another monstrous explosion rocked her out of her reverie.

The wave of energy bearing down on them was the final one, and also the strongest one.

Jing Taixu's eyes were tight on the energy flow, and he was still looking calm.

With a single hand, he summoned green resonant power that formed a green fan, which he brought now in a magnificent swish.

"Slicing Twister!"

A large arc of wind energy several meters wide flew out with speed that confounded the eye. Many students barely registered a blur of green and a split-second of howling.

It crashed into the incoming energy.

Shrrrk.

At the heart of wind resonant power's efficacy was its speed. Air was one of the lightest elements, and it was brought to dangerously quick speeds through the resonance. It broke things apart, sheared its way forward, and blew things away.

Currently, it was concentrated into a powerful arc that split the energy wave into two.

Terrifyingly destructive!

Jing Taixu stepped forward into the energy-free wake of his attack, moving onwards to where the anima bell stood at the top.

"Wow."

The students were stunned, in awe at Jing Taixu's move.

At the same time, a good part of the crowd was watching Li Luo.

POOM!

Li Luo, as with before, used his Water Mirror Art, the huge, watery, glass surface taking the energy before shattering and converting it into his own.

Again, an opening broke out in the energy wave.

But just as Lu Ming had predicted, the opening was not deep enough to punch through the entire depth of the wave. It was not going to carry him through.

Yet Li Luo did not slow or hesitate. He stepped into the small gap, and soon enough, he was against the unbroken energy wave wall's boundary.

He lifted the Onyx-Elephant Blade.

His dual resonance powers burst forth within his body.

A resonant power halo appeared around him.

His sword blade glittered with energy, spitting and hissing as though trying to intimidate the obstacle before him.

Li Luo knew that it was not enough.

He forced even more energy into his sword, until faint patterns of light started to glow on it.

Golden-Jade Onyx-Elephant Blade, Level One Divine Elephant Power!

The power immediately ripped the skin on Li Luo's arms, his veins bulging as he struggled to control it.

But he grinned through the pain, feeling grim satisfaction at the sheer power he could muster.

He brought it down in a decisive slash. This thing was unstoppable. He felt invincible. He ran on towards the top of the Stairway to Heaven.

Over at the other side, Jing Taixu had reached the top a moment earlier. He was in front of the anima bell in a trice, and he slapped his hand down on it.

He smiled to himself.

Li Luo was good enough to worry him, but not good enough to win.

He was a step behind.

His hand was an inch from the anima bell, when he heard a beautiful peal, a clear ring from a bell just a moment before his own rang out.

Jing Taixu's eyes narrowed.

He whirled around to the other Stairway to Heaven, where he saw a sword stuck halfway in the bell, which was swinging and ringing merrily.

A moment later, Jing Taixu's own hand hit the anima bell, ringing it as well.

His smile was gone.

Everyone was watching in stunned silence.

Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming had both stopped, staring in shock.

Li Luo ambled the last few steps up to the bell, and pulled his sword out.

He did not turn around to look at them, but carefully wiped his blade down, then spoke loudly to the air.

"Well, that was..."

"Tedious."

Chapter 487: Who's Scarier?

Li Luo's dry remark was said with enough volume to be carried through the wind and across water. Many looked at him oddly, unsure of what to make of it.

Was he referring to himself? Or Jing Taixu? *n./0vE!b!n*

They suspected it was the latter.

After all, there was no need to go all out in this challenge to the top. The rational play was what Sun Dasheng and Lu Ming had chosen.

On the other side, Jing Taixu had quickly composed himself. He did not respond, seemingly having not heard Li Luo's remark. Looking at him, one even doubted that the intense contest had even happened at all.

Weng!

Both doors to the anima storms in front of Li Luo and Jing Taixu began to open with a hiss of worldly natural energy like a gentle mist from a pressure cooker. This one was a delicious energy, not at all like the hostile waves from before.

Some of the energy wafted out over the lake, which immediately glowed golden in response. Lotus of glittering yellow started to bloom in mid-air, lazily drifting down to settle on the surface of the water.

The islands went crazy.

Each school desperately tried to grab as many of the golden lotuses as they could. Fights broke out immediately, bursts of resonant power flying back and forth.

One school remained unmoving in the chaos—the Astral Sage College. Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, and the others were still frozen in amazement. They looked at Li Luo in front of the awakening anima storm with shining eyes.

Li Luo had actually rung the anima bell a second before Jing Taixu, opening the way for them.

"Hehe, Li Luo really showboated hard on this one."

Yu Lang casually wiped away the buckets of sweat from his worrying, and now spoke with a tone that he thought was confident, but in actuality wobbled like jelly on a plate. "T-that Jing Squishy, ahem! H-ha! How dare he try to f-fuh-fight Brother Luo? When has Li Luo ever not been the coolest guy on the field, huh?"

"It was just a contest to the top of the ladder." Bai Doudou rolled her eyes. "Don't get cocky just yet. Li Luo pulled a good trick on that one, but in an actual fight, the others might not just go through the motions when using their powers."

Wang Hejiu nodded. "Jing Taixu is still very strong. And now he's also angry at Li Luo for beating him. We'll have to be very careful."

Yu Lang tutted at them. "Jing Taixu should listen to advice from his betters. If he would bend an ear in humility, the great Yu Lang here would tell him that he should know when to cut his losses and try to

save some face. Otherwise, if my good brother Li Luo gets serious, he'll end up as nothing more than a stepping stone."

A nervous silence hung in the air as the others tried to ignore him, desperately praying that no one from other schools had heard him. This guy had no fear.

Qin Zhulu impatiently pushed past them, striding up the Stairway to Heaven briskly. Now that the energy waves had been deactivated, it was a normal staircase that they could all climb with ease.

The other three schools timidly followed.

They were now a little embarrassed that they had ever doubted whether Li Luo could ascend and activate the anima storm. After all, he had barely managed to stand his ground against the first wave.

But now he had not only succeeded, he had even beaten Jing Taixu there!

They had truly won big on this gamble.

The three commanders offered Li Luo their profuse thanks, heads bobbing very politely in deference.

Li Luo waved it away with a friendly smile. "We are all here with a stake in this. Without the three schools supporting us in reducing the energy, we alone could not have made it. Now that the anima storm is open for business, you can go and check the areas that belong to you. Count the amount of anima dew and then split it as we agreed earlier.

"Hehe, I hope that none of you are thinking of cheating us out of our share."

When the three schools had been chosen, Li Luo had, of course, discussed terms with them. Naturally, the large anima cumulonimbus would belong to the Astral Sage College. That was not to be divided. As for the medium and small anima cumulonimbuses, they would be delegated to the three schools. However, they would cede 50 percent to the Astral Sage College at the final harvesting.

It was not considered unfair of Li Luo—it was a common understanding that had been established.

Opening the anima storm was the hardest part of the task. Although the other schools had helped, their role was less crucial.

"As Commander Li Luo says. We understand this point well. We're already very grateful that you're only taking 50 percent. The other three groups demand 60 percent," they hurriedly assured him.

Li Luo smiled and nodded. He looked out over at the lake, tutting in sympathy at the squabbling schools outside, then he walked through the doors into the anima storm. He was curious to find out just how big a bonanza the large anima cumulonimbus was going to be.

He had not looked over at Jing Taixu's side once, but he could feel a person staring at him.

Over at the Enlightened Sage College side, the white-eyebrowed youth approached their commander cautiously. "Brother Jing, are you alright? Don't worry about Li Luo. He gamed this challenge well, but in a straight-up clash, he is definitely not your match."

"Lu Chen, don't underestimate him," Jing Taixu said with a thin smile.

"If you really believe that he only won because he pulled some novelty trick out of his hat, then only pain and frustration awaits you in the near future. I sort of guessed it... that Li Luo would be my biggest threat in the Hall-level competition, even more so than Sun Dasheng or Lu Chen."

Lu Chen stared at him in surprise. Jing Taixu actually regarded Li Luo that highly?

Jing Taixu settled back down with a new, icy resolve in his manner.

"And so in order to demonstrate how seriously I take him, I've made preparations."

With that dire announcement, he turned and walked into the large anima cumulonimbus.

Lu Chen looked at his commander's back and shivered a little to himself. He pitied Li Luo a little, because he knew just what their leader was capable of. Li Luo was in a whole world of trouble now...

In all the years he had known Jing Taixu, he had never seen someone earn his ire and emerge unharmed.

If someone gave Li Luo a crystal ball to see the future with, he'd probably be scurrying over right now to beg for forgiveness from Jing Taixu.

A pity...

Lu Chen shook his head.

"Li Luo, you don't know the heat of the fires that you play with."

Chapter 0488: Jing Taixu's Plan

With the large anima cumulonimbus open right in front of him, no amount of self-restraint could stop Li Luo from running in eagerly.

In front of him was a lush garden, the scent of worldly natural energy thick in the air. His attention was immediately drawn to three trees in the center of the garden. They looked to be on fire, flickering with an eerie, red glow and a strange heat.

The tree had no leaves. Instead, there were buds of red light attached to the bare branches, gathering worldly natural energy at an incredible rate, swelling to plumpness right before his eyes.

A ring of moisture circled each bud.

These little buds were definitely able to form anima dew.

But the sheer number of buds... he could hardly believe it.

Even the medium anima cumulonimbuses they had come across had yielded 23 drops of anima dew at most. These three red trees had more than 200 buds.

Over 10 times what a medium anima cumulonimbus provided.

That was not the extent of their haul. There were also medium and small anima cumulonimbuses, which would add up to a sizable number as well.

"I came for juice, but I found a tree full of fruit instead. This one's crazy juicy!" Li Luo thought happily to himself. With this haul, they might just be able to fill five anima gourds. Five Violet Vibrance squad leaders could go to Dragonbone Island.

That was truly ideal, as good a result as they could have hoped for at the Hall-level competition.

After finishing this, they could move on to the Dragon's Belly, and then past that to Dragonbone Island.

Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, and the others had followed him in, and they too inhaled sharply. They stood in the middle of the garden, just looking around them in wonder for the longest time. Finally, they cheered, a hushed cheer of disbelief that such fortune could have come to them, tinged with a fear that this was too good to be true, and that someone would come and take it all away.

Li Luo smiled at them. "Qing'er, you account for the number of anima dew drops. Mengmeng, you go around to the other schools. Total up the number from the medium and small anima cumulonimbuses."

Lu Qing'er and Bai Mengmeng hurried off to carry out his orders.

Li Luo relaxed a little after they left. The first half of the Hall-level competition was near its conclusion, and now all they had to do was wait.

Wait for the bountiful harvest to come in.

...

While Li Luo was happily daydreaming about their riches, there was another student not too far away with more bitter thoughts on his mind.

Jing Taixu sighed to himself incessantly as he paced the shore.

"What's up? Still sore you lost to Li Luo on the Stairway to Heaven, so you came here to clear your mind?"

Jing Taixu swung around to see Lu Ming standing nearby, watching him coolly.

Jing Taixu stopped his pacing. "Would I be so small-minded? But I am indeed worried that another strong competitor has emerged."

He made a face. "Since when did dual resonances become so common? Two in one competition?"

"Dual resonances intimidate lesser cultivators," Lu Ming said indifferently. "But not a quasi ninth-grade like you, Jing Taixu."

Jing Taixu smiled. "Not so. I have the healthiest respect for your dual resonances, Lu Ming."

She looked at him neutrally. "So you sent someone to come find me and ask me out for a meeting. All to exchange such banalities?"

Jing Taixu's smile faded off his face. "I want to work with you," he said directly.

A flash of surprise crossed Lu Ming's eyes. "You? Seeking me out to work with me? This is not the proud Jing Taixu that I know. And who is the target of this cooperation? Li Luo?"

Jing Taixu nodded with a tight smile.

"Jing Taixu, the competition on the Stairway to Heaven was meaningless. You lost to him by half a step—does that warrant such overcaution?" she pressed.

As a bystander, she could judge both of them clearly. There was honestly no reason for Jing Taixu to be afraid of Li Luo.

Jing Taixu was silent for a moment. "If I said that this is a dangerous person, you might well laugh at me for being paranoid. But I have always trusted my instincts. Li Luo is the biggest threat in this competition. I want to neutralize it as soon as possible."

Lu Ming shook her head. She did not understand Jing Taixu's caution, nor was she sure that he wasn't trying to pull something on her. "No matter your reasons, why should I help you? You are the biggest threat to me in this competition."

"I don't need you to fight Li Luo directly with me," Jing Taixu assured her. "Of course, it will be the Enlightened Sage College who deals with Li Luo's bunch."

"All I need is an illusion formation set within the Dragon's Belly. I know that illusion formations are your forte."

Lu Ming's eyes narrowed. "You want to act in the Dragon's Belly? That's very risky. You might well sink your entire ship."

"It is indeed an entire ship that I plan on sinking," Jing Taixu said bluntly. "If I am to act, I will raze the Astral Sage College out of the competition in its entirety."

"Lu Ming, the Enlightened Sage College and the Astral Sage College fighting is a good thing for you. You get to watch either side be taken out. What's not to like for you?"

Lu Ming blinked deliberately at him. "Jing Taixu, that sort of meaningless logic doesn't work on anyone over the age of three."

"Unless they're called Sun Dasheng. You could try him."

"You know Sun Dasheng's character as well as I do," Jing Taixu said impatiently. "He's not cut out for negotiations or plans. He just wants to fight head-on."

"Well, I'm not interested in your negotiations or plans either." Lu Ming shrugged.

Jing Taixu was silent for a moment. "I promise you that on Dragonbone Island, I will fight Sun Dasheng before I fight you. You know what this means. You could well take me down in my weakened state. If you have any confidence in your abilities at all, I think you'll appreciate the advantage that this gives you."

Lu Ming was stunned. Jing Taixu was promising to fight against her at a disadvantage?

Jing Taixu was indeed the top dog in this competition, but she did believe that both herself and Sun Dasheng stood a chance against him. Either way, it would not be an easy win.

Unless... Jing Taixu was confident enough to beat them both consecutively?

Lu Ming's eyelids flickered.

"Lu Ming," Jing Taixu said sincerely, sensing her wavering, "all you need to do is set an illusion formation, an easy task for you. And then you gain a big advantage. It might well win you the competition. Can I be any more sincere or convincing?"

Lu Ming remained silent, and Jing Taixu waited with her. A few minutes later, he saw a small nod.

"Well, if you want to give me a free chance, I'm not going to say no."

Jing Taixu smiled broadly.

"I knew you would agree," Jing Taixu said happily.

They exchanged a few more details, then Jing Taixu left with a new spring in his step.

Lu Ming watched him go, her expression unfathomable.

### **Chapter 0489: The Sixth Slot**

Waiting for pizza to fall from the sky was one of the great pleasures in life.

Bright and early the next morning, a blazing rainbow of light illuminated the skies across all four anima storms, and the delicious, heady smell of ripe energy roused the students immediately.

They knew that the anima dew had finished condensing within the anima cumulonimbuses.

Energy had overflowed out of the anima storms throughout the night, creating disparate droplets of anima dew across the lake. However, these were slim pickings compared to the cornucopias of anima dew to be found within the storms.

Still, there was no point in eying the fruits beyond their reach. None of them was strong enough to scale the Stairway to Heaven.

"Li Luo, we've gotten a total of 295 anima dew droplets from the large anima cumulonimbus!"

Lu Qing'er and the others rushed over excitedly to report the good news. They had carefully stored all of it into their anima gourds, and the final count was in.

Even before this, they had sort of estimated a figure somewhere in this range, but the results were still music to their ears.

"295 droplets... that's more than ten times a medium anima cumulonimbus. Large anima cumulonimbuses are awesome." Yu Lang's eyes were round as saucers.

Li Luo nodded fervently. The difference between medium and large anima cumulonimbuses was exponential. Then again, there were only four of them available, and all the schools were supposed to fight over this. It made sense that the rewards would have to be commensurate with the rarity.

It was a nice, fat boost that would save them a lot of legwork.



"If we can fill five anima gourds, we can prepare to move on to the Dragon's Belly and lay some groundwork for the second half of this competition. If we can't, then we might have to wait a few more days," Li Luo said cheerfully. "Our goal is to send five people to Dragonbone Island."

At the start of the competition, Li Luo had initially set a goal to send three people. But with this unexpected haul, he could now afford to aim a bit higher.

Five people—he could take all the Violet Vibrance squad leaders. Strength-wise, they ranked the highest.

"Besides Jing Taixu, Sun Dasheng, and Lu Ming's schools, the others will at most be able to send one or two contenders. If we can send five, we'll be at a good advantage."

Qin Zhulu, Wang Hejiu, and the others nodded. With that advantage, they would be well-positioned to take the win.

And all this was possible because Li Luo had boldly staked his claim to an anima storm.

Even his bitter rival, Wang Hejiu, was very polite to Li Luo now. He had no complaints about Li Luo's contributions as their commander.

Bai Doudou and Bai Mengmeng hurried over.

"Li Luo, we've collected an additional 180 drops from the small and medium anima cumulonimbuses." The sisters beamed, flushed with excitement at their riches.

"180 drops, huh..."

Li Luo repeated gleefully. They had taken over 400 droplets of anima dew just with this one play. In the last week, they had only managed a little over 100.

He was thanking his own guts for not accepting Jing Taixu's offer.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Li Luo said to his school, "I'm happy to announce that we've met our goal. We have enough to send five people through the Dragon's Belly to the final showdown at Dragonbone Island."

The other students cheered.

"But if my calculations are right, we not only have enough to send five people through the Dragon's Belly, we also have an additional 80 drops of anima dew. That's a heck of a lot. I say we see if we can scrounge up a couple dozen more on the way there. If we can, we would be able to send yet another person along as a bonus."

"That's a great idea!"

Duze Beixuan, the ultimate Li Luo hater, was the first to leap to his feet.

Among the students, of course the five Violet Vibrance squad leaders were the strongest.

But if there were to be one more, who would it be but him?

The others were receptive to Li Luo's suggestion as well. An additional person wouldn't hurt.

Seeing no objections, Li Luo smiled. "Well, then the next question is: who should the additional person be?"

"Who else but me?" Duze Beixuan shouted immediately.

In terms of strength, he was a little weaker than the other Violet Vibrance squad leaders, but compared to the rest of the Violet Vibrance students, he was the strongest.

"Can't say for certain. Strength isn't all about punching people in the face. Neither are you strong enough to punch enough faces with enough strength to make much of a difference. I think more brains would serve us better, eh?" Yu Lang piped up. In truth, he was not aiming for the additional slot at all. He just wanted to take some wind out of Duze Beixuan's sails.

"Are you calling me brainless?" Duze Beixuan snarled.

"I'm calling you brawn-less." Lu Qing'er's cool voice cut through their quarrel.

The students turned to her. It seemed like she was interested in contesting as well. With her ice resonance being a lower eighth-grade, and her background as the young mistress of the Golden Dragon Bank, she might have resources beyond the means of the others. She was a worthy consideration for their ranks.

Li Luo grinned at them. "Anyone else interested?"

Bai Mengmeng, Xin Fu, Qiu Luo, and all of the others shook their heads. They were fine sitting this one out.

Li Luo nodded. "Well, let's draw lots, then. That's fairest."

There was a general murmur of assent, and Duze Beixuan swallowed his irritation.

Li Luo took a twig from nearby and divided it into three pieces, gripping them in his fist. "Longest stick gets the sixth slot. Any objections?"

The three nodded acceptance, then reached out together to draw sticks swiftly from Li Luo's fist. They compared them.

"Looks like the slot is mine," Lu Qing'er said triumphantly, holding up the longest stick with a smile on her pretty face.

In truth, she was not that interested in getting to Dragonbone Island. She knew that her strength would probably not make much of a difference one way or the other, but she just wanted to spend a little more time with Li Luo. Maybe help him out a little.

Duze Beixuan's face was sour as could be, but he had to accept the result.

Yu Lang couldn't care less. Even if he had won the lot, he had intended to give it to Lu Qing'er. He didn't want to go to Dragonbone Island. They would kick his scrawny ass there.

Besides, his ass had already been badly abused in this competition. Due to no effort on his part.

With the sixth slot decided, Li Luo clapped his hands together. "Well, that's settled. Let's get moving, people."

The students scattered off to make their preparations, but one person lingered. Lu Qing'er, with her hands clasped coyly behind her back, looking shyly at him.

"What?" Li Luo asked, a little uncomfortable at being stared at this way.

"Well, thank you," she said softly, twirling the twig piece in her fingers.

"What are you talking about?" Li Luo asked innocently.

"The end of my twig looks a little strange. You grew it with your wood resonant power, didn't you?"

"Student Lu Qing'er," Li Luo said loftily, "I have no idea what you are talking about. I am a fair commander, and the Astral Sage College has put its trust in me. If you tarnish my reputation, I will report you to Vice Principal Su Xin."

He turned and left.

Lu Qing'er stared at his hurriedly retreating figure, her eyes glowing with happiness.

#### **Chapter 0490: Entering Dragon's Belly**

With the dispersal of the large anima cumulonimbus, the once rowdy and hectic crowd began to disperse. The other colleges that were previously supporting cast members began to quickly search for more anima opportunities, hoping to squeeze out a few more drops of anima dew that would allow them to send even more teammates to Dragonbone Island.

In the span of barely even half a day, the entire area had vacated significantly.

Li Luo and the rest were no different. After gathering the anima dew, they began to move anew.

The direction they were headed in was the Dragon's Belly. This was the zone furthest away from the start point in the Hall-level competition. At the same time, it enveloped the entirety of Dragonbone Island, so anyone who wanted to make their way to the island had to trek through it.

However, there was no real rush for Li Luo's party to expedite their journey there. They were lacking just that smidge of anima dew to round out their forces.

Thus, the next two days were a flurry of exploration and random wandering, all in the hopes of glimpsing a tasty anima treat.

The windfall from the large anima storm had warped their expectations of the ease of collecting anima dew... thus the sudden drought and difficulty in finding any more drops was a significant dampener. Fortunately, not too much anima dew was required, and they managed to scrounge up enough to fill up the sixth anima gourd.

Finally, the group began to directly make their way towards the depths of the Dragon's Belly.

Occasionally, they would stumble across a group from another college, all of whom would inevitably treat Li Luo politely before turning tail and fleeing with their tails tucked between their legs.

Nonchalant and nonplussed by these happenings, Li Luo led his team forward rapidly.

After half a day, Li Luo finally reached a location where the temperature seemed to be almost scorching.

After crossing a small mountain, one could see a vast change in the environment before them. The scenery before them was painted with a swathe of raging crimson, flooding the senses with a raw redness. It was a sea of flames, constantly raging into the skies, the sheer heat warping the void before them.

Additionally, overlayed across the sheer heat was an indescribable pressure. It felt ancient and boundless, and if one strained to listen, a dragon's cry could be heard within.

"Is this the Dragon's Belly? It's.... terrifying," Yu Lang said with a slightly pale demeanor.

Li Luo nodded in agreement gravely. He could feel the frightening energy that encompassed the flaming sea. This was not something a mere Resonant Master Stage cultivator could resist. If they were to wander aimlessly, they might very well be scorched into literal ashes in mere seconds.

"Can the anima dew protect us?" Wang Hejiu gulped. Fear could be seen within his eyes, and he was doubtful that this seemingly ethereal liquid could allow him to step foot into the flaming sea.

"Sheesh. What are you prattling on about? Even if the anima dew can't protect you, if you were REALLY in danger, the anima gourd would send you flying out of here. With so many esteemed college staff members and the Academic Federation around, how would they simply stand by and watch swathes of students run headfirst and die?" Bai Doudou disdainfully explained.

"Even if it can keep me on the edge of my life, won't I suffer?"

"Then don't go."

Wang Hejiu pouted at this incredibly blunt reply.

"Everyone, we have already decided who our representatives are. Thus I won't say anymore." Li Luo clapped his hands, interrupting the bickering of the duo. With a somber expression, he continued, "The second half of the competition is upon us, and presumably, the final, decisive battle is not far away. All motivational words have long been said. However, I do have one last thing to add."

The gazes of the Astral Sage College were fixated on Li Luo. This period of time had demonstrated his might, and even the likes of his rival, Wang Hejiu, and Duze Beixuan had silently accepted him within their hearts.

"The entire Astral Sage College is awaiting our victory. As a member of the Astral Sage College, there is a responsibility for us to strive with all we are capable of to be triumphant. No matter what trials and tribulations await us, none will stop our march!"

A slight smile could be seen on his face. Confidence and calm exuded from this young man who was exceptionally charismatic. Inadvertently, the gentle gazes of certain females couldn't help but linger upon him.

Qin Zhulu and the rest, on the other hand, grunted and nodded.

"Alright, take out your gourds and double check if the anima dew within is sufficient. We will prepare to enter the Dragon's Belly."

Qin Zhulu, Bai Doudou, Wang Hejiu, Yi Lisha, and Lu Qing'er retrieved their gourds and conducted a final check.

Meanwhile, Li Luo turned towards Yu Lang, Bai Mengmeng, Xin Fu, and the rest and smiled. "It looks like we may have to go our separate ways for now. Thank you for all that you have done."

Yu Lang heaved a sigh of relief. "You will be the bearer of our hopes and dreams. We will await your good news."

Bai Mengmeng also gave a vibrant smile, one that was pure and moving as she clenched her fists. "Do your best, Leader! I believe you will earn the title of the strongest One Star Hall student!" Li Luo nodded at her enthusiasm, and without saying anymore, he turned to leave, slowly making his way towards the Dragon's Belly.

His companions immediately kept pace with him as well.

As they made their way ahead, glancing back allowed them to see radiant light engulf Yu Lang, Bai Mengmeng, and the rest, enveloping them before shooting into the sky.

Similar scenes could also be seen elsewhere.

These were all students that were unable to enter the Dragon's Belly. After their representatives left, they had opted to leave the battlefield.

The next segment of the competition would be the stage of the chosen ones.

Li Luo then turned to face the crimson sea ahead of him. The almost berserk flames in front of him seemed to be violently thrashing around, instilling a certain fear in all who saw them. Even though they had yet to step inside, one could hear the roar of the flames before them.

Yet one could see a faint hint of golden light within the crimson sea of flames.

The Dragon's Belly..

"Could this have been formed with the blood of an actual dragon?" As he pondered over how this fantastical sight had formed, he drew out his anima gourd and poured the anima dew over himself.
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The shimmering anima dew seemed to form a thin, liquid film that enveloped the entirety of one's body. At the same time, an inscrutable, cooling feeling spread throughout him, completely warding off the heat of the Dragon's Belly.

Li Luo curiously stared at the liquid that covered him. It didn't seem to have affected his ability to use resonant power; all it did was completely suppress the influence of the Dragon's Belly's environment.

He mused to himself, "This layer of anima dew might be able to block the effects of the Dragon's Belly, but it seems to be slowly eroding away. It looks as though we will have to reach Dragonbone Island

before we are out of time. At the same time, the protective ability of the liquid seems to be basically zero. If one were to be attacked, it would likely be broken. Thus, it looks as though we will have to avoid any form of confrontation if we want to preserve our strength."

Lu Qing'er immediately quipped, "I don't think anyone would be willing to fight within the Dragon's Belly... right?"

"We should just be careful. No scheme is beyond our enemies for the sake of victory." Everyone nodded in agreement.

Signaling for the rest to go, the group kicked off their journey, rushing into the depths of the soaring, crimson flames within the Dragon's Belly.