

# Forge of Destiny – Volume 2

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**Source**: Volume 2

Awoken as an Immortal, Ling Qi must contend with her peers on the mountain now that the great truce enforced by the Elders of the Sect is no longer in effect. In an Outer Sect increasingly falling into two camps, her friendships have made where she stands clear. To continue climbing the steep mountain of cultivation and maintain the friendships and allies she had gathered to her side, she must strive like never before. But it soon becomes clear that there is someone watching her from the shadows...someone with an unhealthy interest in her advancement. Enemies lie in full sight and out of reach as well. Now comes the test of the foundation she built in her early months at the Sect. Will it be enough to support her through the turbulent Outer Sect? Inspired by ancient folklore, modern martial arts, and Xianxia, Forge of Destiny cultivates a world both fantastic in setting yet familiar in the humanity of its inhabitants.

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### **Chapter 65 - Challenge**

"Are you sure you're ready for this then?" Ling Qi asked Li Suyin as the two of them and Su Ling walked the path down toward the main courtyard. Li Suyin still wore her disciple's garb, but she had replaced the sash with a light green one patterned with leaves and formation characters.

"I am," the one-eyed girl responded. Ling Qi thought her stance was stiff and tense, but there wasn't any hesitation in Li Suyin's words. The partial breakthrough into the second realm, seemed to have given her confidence.

"I don't like the idea of being a spectacle," Su Ling grumbled, arms crossed and pointed ears twitching agitatedly. She had replaced her disciple's gown with a rather mannish outfit of thick cloth and leather with sturdy woodsman's boots and sleeves bound by steel-studded bracers.

"It needs to be a spectacle or Xu Jia can just ignore the challenge," Li Suyin replied firmly, fingering the needles holstered in the pouch at her belt.

"What are you going to do if she ignores it anyway?" Ling Qi asked. She tugged uncomfortably at the gold-lined armband she wore over her gown; although she still wasn't used to it, the Cai armband would make the chances of something shady happening less likely. Cai Renxiang had started to move fast in the aftermath of the intra-council fight, probably to head off possible rumors of her lacking strength.

"Then I will return here every day this week to repeat it," Li Suyin said with determination. "If Xu Jia has so little honor that she can ignore that, then I will think of something else."

Su Ling snorted, and Ling Qi hummed thoughtfully. She still didn't know the exact details of her friend's plan, but Li Suyin seemed confident in whatever it was.

Ling Qi grew uncomfortable as they entered the main plaza. There were several pairs of Cai Renxiang's enforcers about, and there was a noticeable wariness toward them. She saw several older disciples eyeing the enforcers with rebellious or irritated looks.

The enforcers themselves made her feel uncomfortable for an entirely different reason. The way they lowered their heads in deference and respect when she passed by threw her off.

It seemed Cai Renxiang had been spinning tales about the council split - and those involved too, if the murmuring she heard in her wake was accurate. The actions and feats of those who had supported Cai was getting played up. Su Ling gave her a sidelong look as they passed through the crowd. Ling Qi shrugged her shoulders helplessly, which the girl seemed to accept.

The three of them soon reached an open space in front of one of the little gardens that dotted the plaza. Li Suyin brought them to a halt, taking deep breaths to steady herself as she paced along the edges of the meditation space and pausing to place down wooden tokens painted with formations characters. It drew her some curious looks, but nothing more.

Ling Qi, too, watched curiously, standing beside Su Ling as she watched her friend set up and then return to the center of the little square after placing the last token. She felt her friend's qi surge upward a tiny bit, and the wooden tokens lit up with faint blue light.

#### "XU JIA!"

Ling Qi almost flinched as her normally quiet and meek companion's voice thundered in her ears. The volume was as loud as Elder Jiao's had been at the end of the truce. Beside her, Su Ling grimaced, ears lying flat against her head.

"I, LI SUYIN, NAME YOU COWARD AND BANDIT! RECEIVE MY CHALLENGE AND FACE ME IN THE GREAT PLAZA BY NOON THIS DAY OR BE RECOGNIZED AS THE HONORLESS CRAVEN YOU ARE!"

Ling Qi's eye twitched as the echoes faded and she felt scores of eyes fall upon them. She would never have thought Li Suyin would have the guts to do something like this. On the other hand, she now knew why Li Suyin was so confident the other girl would show up. It was as good as slapping Xu Jia across the face in public.

Ling Qi could see the minute tremble in Li Suyin's hands though. The other girl was a lot more nervous than she was letting on. Ling Qi reached out to pat her on the shoulder. "You have this as long as you keep your head. I have no doubt that you're better than this girl."

"What she said," Su Ling grumbled, rubbing an ear with one hand. "Still, weren't you going to fix that to not blow our own ears up as well?"

"I did not quite manage that part," Li Suyin said under her breath, glancing back with a nervous smile. "Sorry," she added apologetically while attempting to keep her shoulders straight and her chin up under the attention of the other disciples.

After a few minutes, people began to move again, although a not insignificant portion remained nearby, keeping a curious eye on Ling Qi and her friends. Ling Qi found herself making eye contact with a pair of Cai's enforcers. She didn't miss the way they adjusted their patrol route in response.

Ling Qi began to grow impatient as the minutes ticked by. Was the girl Li Suyin challenged really just going to accept an insult like that? She couldn't imagine any noble-born disciple actually would. More likely, Xu Jia had simply been far away. Even with Li Suyin's amplifying formation, Ling Qi doubted that Li Suyin's voice had reached the entire mountain.

So although it was annoying, Ling Qi simply stood quietly at her friend's back for the next quarter hour. At last, she saw a group approaching their position with purpose. There were five girls in total, but none of them were particularly impressive to her eyes. Three were entirely in the first realm still, one was partially in the second realm, and the fifth was solidly in the second. The last and strongest one looked a bit older than the others.

It was interesting to watch the way their expressions and approach changed once they got a clear look at Li Suyin and the two girls behind her. Their approach briefly slowed down, and a flicker of worry broke through the anger and indignation on their faces. Ling Qi's gaze flickered between Li Suyin and the girls. As Li Suyin was glaring at the one partially in the second realm, that girl was likely Xu Jia.

"At least you have some shame," Li Suyin said, doing her best to look confident and threatening as she stared down the girl. "I was worried that you would not dare to come for a fight that was not an ambush, Xu Jia."

"That you dare to spew such slander merely shows what a low class drudge you are," Xu Jia sniffed. A brief glance at the older girl to her right seemed to restore her confidence. Xu Jia was a fairly average looking girl, a bit taller than normal and classically pretty in the way just about every female on the mountain was. "Do not think that I will forgive you. I -"

"You broke into my home, smashed my things, and had your thugs hold down and beat my friend," Li Suyin interrupted. Ling Qi gave her friend a worried look. Li Suyin was getting worked up, which might affect her discipline in the upcoming fight. "If that is not a bandit, I do not know what is. I do not wish to talk to a thug like you. Step forward and fight, or leave and admit your shame."

"Hold your tongue, girl," the older girl spoke up. She had a similar face to the younger girl at her side, likely making her an older sibling. "I do not know who you think you are, but -"

"Are you Xu Jia?" Ling Qi said clearly, raising her voice over the other girl's and meeting her gaze with steady eyes. The other girl narrowed her eyes angrily, but Ling Qi saw her eyes flick down to the armband she wore and then back to her face. She liked to think she was able to spot the moment recognition dawned. "Then be silent. You can observe, but you have no right to interfere."

She fingered the smooth curve of the replacement flute Bai Meizhen had given her to use this morning until she had a new one made. It wasn't as good as her own flute, but it would be enough. Besides, although the girl might edge her out in raw cultivation, she knew well that the simple appearance of absolute confidence was a major deterrent, particularly if Cai Renxiang had spread tales about her council's battle prowess.

The older girl's lips thinned in anger, but in the end, she was the one who looked away first. She flicked her sleeve toward the younger girl at her side. "Xu Jia, crush this peasant and be done with it," she said before looking back up to glare at Ling Qi. "Unless, of course, you do not intend to fight fairly."

Ling Qi held back the incredulous snort that almost escaped her, but Su Ling was not quite so controlled, drawing disdain from the girls across from them.

"If you do not intend to continue delaying, please step forward," Li Suyin said quietly.

"Who was delaying? I was merely awestruck at your audacity," Xu Jia retorted, stepping forward from her group as they backed off. Ling Qi and Su Ling moved back as well, giving the two duelists room to fight. A pair of clawed gloves appeared on the girl's hands, four lengths of sharp curved metal protruding from each of Xu Jia's wrists. She supposed that was where the scars on Li Suyin's cheek had come from.

Only the murmured buzz of conversation from more distant watchers disturbed the silence. The stillness was broken as Li Suyin flung a trio of her combat needles in a wide spread, forcing the other girl to duck under them. Xu Jia's claws lit up with sickly green qi, extending the blades by several centimeters, and as she came up from under the throw, she darted forward, sped up by the way the stone under her feet seemed to briefly flow, launching her forward all the faster.

Li Suyin sidestepped the initial outstretched claw strike and ducked under the follow up from the girl's other hand, responding with a feint of flung needles from her off hand while jabbing toward the girl's shoulder with the ones clutched in her main hand. Xu Jia avoided the stab fairly easily.

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes. What was Li Suyin doing? Li Suyin had never done much throwing with her weapons before when they practiced, and the lack of practice showed with how ill aimed the needles were. It was almost physically painful for her to watch half of the flung needles tumble off course before even getting near the target.

The duel continued with Li Suyin leading the other girl on a circular chase, failing to do much damage to Xu Jia and taking a scratch herself now and then. The scrapes left behind were ugly and bled freely by Li Suyin's grimace, but her concentration didn't change. Ling Qi found herself glowering at the older girl's increasingly smug expression and irritated by the jeers of Xu Jia's companions.

Just as Ling Qi was beginning to worry that Li Suyin didn't have a plan though, the two girls clashed again, Xu Jia's qi enhanced claws screeching off the needles in Li Suyin's hands while Li Suyin caught the girl's other set of claws in a gnarled and bark-textured hand. Ling Qi caught Su Ling's smirk at her side as a tiny click reached her ears. A flash of metal from under the hem of Suyin's gown drew a cry of pain as the little boot knife slashed across Xu Jia's shin, drawing a painful looking but ultimately superficial cut.

Such an attack only drew more jeers, particularly since it looked to have mostly just made the other girl angry. Xu Jia pulled out of Li Suyin's grip and slammed a kick into her midriff, making the blue-haired girl stumble back.

"I hope such a pathetic trick was not what you were counting on," Xu Jia said haughtily as she fell back into her stance.

"No," Li Suyin wheezed as she forced herself straighten. "It was a good distraction though," she added, smiling in a distinctly unfriendly manner. "Mark. Set. Seek."

As she spoke, Li Suyin formed a symbol with her empty hand, two fingers and her thumb extended upward with the others curled down. Ling Qi felt a pulse of qi, and the needles on the ground rattled briefly and then shot toward Xu Jia on an unerring course.

Xu Jia's eyes widened as she flung herself away from the closest needles, but there had been nearly two dozen of them on the ground. It was inevitable that at least one needle would manage to strike her, particularly with the way the needles would reverse direction upon missing, honing in like iron filings to a lodestone. The first needle struck... and then exploded. It was no grand blast, more firecracker than rocket, but it still knocked Xu Jia off balance, resulting in more needles striking home.

Ling Qi suppressed a flinch at the sudden chain of explosions around Xu Jia but restrained herself to only smirking at the other side's suddenly unhappy observers. Li Suyin wasn't idle either while Xu Jia was stumbling and dodging the needles. In fact, the intact needles were already slowing down as Xu Jia coughed and emerged from the smoke, but Xu Jia's distraction prevented her from being able to avoid Li Suyin jabbing a trio of needles into Xu Jia's right thigh with well-practiced precision.

Li Suyin skipped back out of range from the retaliatory slash, leaving her needles behind. Her opponent's leg buckled underneath her, dropping the girl to one knee and allowing the remaining needles to drive into her back and explode.

The plaza was silent as the echoes of Li Suyin's explosions faded away, and when the smoke cleared, Xu Jia was lying face down on the ground, gown shredded and her back raw with burns. Ling Qi smiled as Li Suyin approached and then crouched down, reaching for the dull grey ring on the girl's finger.

"Stop." Ling Qi's smile faded as the older girl stepped forward, an ugly look on her face. "I think that is quite enough. If you think to bully my younger sister so, you will have to face me."

"It's pretty appropriate for the victor to take a token," Ling Qi rebutted. "Are you really that poor?"

"And who do you think you are?" the sister sneered. "I am Xu Qiao, eldest daughter of Xu Wen, and I have accepted enough of your rudeness. That little scrap of cloth does not put you above me. Do not imagine yourself above your station!"

"I am Ling Qi, and although I cannot say I have a clan to back me, I have made a friend or two," she said dryly. Ling Qi didn't miss that the original enforcer pair from before now stepped forward nor that two other pairs of enforcers did the same. "I will not say that I am above you, but don't you think you're being too much of a sore loser here?"

Xu Qiao's face reddened, and she scowled out at the crowd. "Is this what the Sect is reduced to? Kowtowing to the whims and authority of an unblooded heiress? Are we to allow ourselves to be cowed by our juniors so?"

Ling Qi maintained her confident mien despite the grumbling from the crowd, but she was a bit worried. It was Li Suyin who spoke up next as she carefully removed the ring from Xu Jia's fingers.

"My apologies if you mistook my intentions, Miss Xu. I intend to only take a reasonable token of victory." A small waterfall of spirit stones and pills fell from the ring, piling in front of the unconscious girl. "I am no bandit after all."

Ling Qi wished she could clap Li Suyin on the back, because that did the trick. Although she could still see some older disciples giving the enforcers unhappy looks, it seemed that Li Suyin's actions had pushed Xu Qiao's actions even further into 'sore loser' territory. It still hurt her a little to see her friend sacrificing so much loot.

Ling Qi raised an eyebrow at Xu Qiao, silently giving her the opportunity to back down. The look she got in return was venomous, but after a moment, the color faded from the girl's cheeks and her expression smoothed.

"I see," Xu Qiao said coldly as Li Suyin stood up and returned to Ling Qi's side. "You two, collect my sister and her things. It seems I have been remiss in my sister's training. This waste of time has at least had some value in showing me that."

As they moved away, the unconscious girl in tow, Su Ling's lips curled. "Bitch," she spat. "Hope they drop her a couple times on the way."

"Why didn't you use your family art there?" Ling Qi asked Li Suyin. "Once you touched her, it would have been over, right?"

"I do not wish to use my family arts that way if it is not necessary," Li Suyin said quietly. Her expression turned sheepish then. "Ah, Su Ling, could you help me with my shoes? I think the blade is stuck."

Ling Qi shook her head as Su Ling acquiesced with a grumble. She didn't quite understand Li Suyin's reluctance, but she was glad that her friend had found her own kind of resolve.

### Chapter 66 - Sect Work 1

Ling Qi's other primary concerns in the following days were much less exciting. A great deal of time was spent carefully browsing through the wares at the market for better and more effective pills and for proper equipment. She picked up a bow of middling quality to replace the training bows that kept burning out when she used her Falling Stars art and then turned her attention to obtaining a new flute.

Ling Qi dithered for some time on what to do with the remains of her mother's flute. At first, she thought she might be best off simply repairing it and keeping it as a keepsake, something to use during idle times and otherwise leave unused.

She didn't like that idea though. She had kept the flute intact through all her years in the street, and it had been both a temptation and a comfort. She had clung to it when she had lost everything else. It may have been her mother's originally, but now, she couldn't help but think of it as hers in a way that nothing else she owned really was. So no, she wouldn't allow it to be set aside like that.

In the end, Ling Qi elected have the flute pieces incorporated into the new talisman she had commissioned. Although the crafter had been decidedly dubious at first, he seemed to understand after she explained that the fragments were from an heirloom. The work on something so delicate was going to take two weeks. In the interim, she would continue to use the flute Meizhen had obtained for her.

Her shopping trip left her fairly impoverished so she soon returned to hunting and training with Han Jian. It was irritating that Fan Yu was back and Gu Xiulan wasn't, but she could put up with him in order to continue refining her archery and mastery of her arts. The spirit stones from selling cores and materials gained from their hunts also helped restore her funds.

Between her new bow and cultivation of her Falling Stars Art, she found it easier and easier to land her shots regardless of wind, weather, and even cover or difficult angles, and her refinement of the current that she imbued her arrows with to an impossibly sharp point allowed her arrows to punch through armor. She had polished the basics of the art and could now begin learning the more advanced techniques that it held.

Her training at the vent with her friends continued apace as well, although without the urgency and stress that had marked it in the last month or so. She still sparred with Li Suyin but less so now as the other girl refocused on her studies. Instead, it was Su Ling who more often practiced with her, working toward mastery of her chosen weapon. Su Ling seemed to have switched over to the saber from the sword at some point.

Similarly, Ling Qi continued to attend to the egg in her homemade kiln, fueling the flames within with an ever increasing amount of spiritually infused wood and periodically shoveling out the accumulated ash. The veins on the egg shone brightly now, and she saw it moving on occasion. It seemed like it might be ready to hatch soon.

Time to practice with Meizhen was much more scarce. Ling Qi had fully intended to get the girl to celebrate this week, but her friend was barely ever at the house. Elder Ying had apparently redoubled her training as Bai Meizhen worked toward a physical breakthrough to Bronze, and the few times she

did see her, Bai Meizhen was deep in meditation, working on some earth technique that sent pulses of rippling liquid movement through the soil or stone around her.

Still, she managed to get some advice now and then as well as the occasional spar. Meizhen had some useful things to say about the use of environmental qi. Apparently, Meizhen's family cultivation art did something similar, albeit with large bodies of water. That art was a bit less useful here in the mountains, but Meizhen could still receive some benefits when it rained. Despite her friend's help, Ling Qi couldn't quite get the circulation of qi right and didn't manage to master the second phase of Eight Phase Ceremony yet.

While she was working on such things, she also continued her effort to hunt down Gu Xiulan. The fiery girl had squirreled herself away well though, and finding her proved difficult. Eventually, Ling Qi's dogged perseverance and increasing willingness to interrogate passersby about the matter led her off the mountain. There had been rumors of a girl resembling Gu Xiulan and of bright fires lighting up the night as day.

The rumors led her out past the edges of the spirit wards and the most far flung farms to the rocky, more sparsely forested hills where the forest rose to become the mountains. Her search seemed fruitless for a time, but on an early morning, she saw steam billowing steadily up on the horizon and went to investigate. What she found was a great clearing in the trees surrounding a huge crack in the ground, hundreds of meters long and a half dozen wide. The interior was shrouded by the great clouds of steam it emitted and even dozens of meters away, she could feel the warmth of the ground through her shoes.

A figure was seated in a meditative position at the edge. For a moment, she thought she had found her friend, but as she drew closer and the figure gracefully stood and turned to face her, she found she was wrong.

The young woman regarding her coolly through the steam resembled Xiulan in a way. She had the same classical beauty and... impressive assets, but she was much taller, almost as tall as Ling Qi in fact. Her hair was dark red, almost black but not quite, and hung in loose ringlets down to her shoulders. She wore a shimmering golden gown, intricately cut and hanging low on the shoulder, much like Xiulan's own preferred style of dress, but if anything, even more risque. The cut left her collarbone entirely bare, hinting at the curve of her chest. The young woman's expression was closed off in a way that Gu Xiulan's never was, cold where her friend was hot. The woman looked her over with an assessing gaze, her red painted lips thinning in displeasure.

"This is a private training ground. I must ask you to leave." Her voice was soft and feminine, but there was a hard edge of command to it as if she was used to being obeyed. Ling Qi wasn't surprised. Even leaving aside the intricate formation carved bands of gold gilt steel around her wrists and neck and the burning embers in her brown eyes, the woman looking down at her from the top of the hill was in the fourth realm.

Ling Qi clasped her hands together and bowed with some nervousness. "My apologies, Senior Sister." It seemed a safe assumption that this was an Inner Sect Disciple, and she had an inkling of who the woman was already. "I was simply searching for my friend ,Gu Xiulan, and had thought this seemed a likely place." She wasn't lying; the qi of fire and metal blazed here, standing out like a beacon in this

region. "I will leave you to your training." Ling Qi wanted to stay and ask questions, but she wasn't about to risk offending someone two realms above her pointlessly.

The young woman studied her with greater intent. Ling Qi felt something like pressure pressing down on her under the older woman's gaze, but it was nowhere near enough to make her shudder or shiver anymore.

"Xiulan is here. There is no reason for you to continue searching." The woman's voice remained cool and even as she crossed her arms, emitting a faint jingling as her golden earrings and other ornaments shifted with her movement. "You are Ling Qi?" The woman's expression had softened a tad, and her body language was no longer quite so unwelcoming.

Ling Qi almost let out a sigh of relief; her guess had been right. "I am," she replied. "I... hope she has been well? She was wounded when I last saw her, and I have reason to believe she was... distressed," Ling Qi added carefully.

The older girl, Gu Xiulan's elder sister, inclined her head very slightly. "I am Gu Yanmei. I appreciate the concern for my younger sister's well being," she replied. "We are resolving certain family matters at the moment however. I must still ask that you leave. Distraction at this point would be costly. Gu Xiulan should complete this ordeal in another day, perhaps two at the outside."

Ling Qi felt a bit of disappointment despite expecting the request. "I see. Thank you for your instruction, Senior Sister Yanmei. Might I request that you tell Gu Xiulan that I have been looking for her when she emerges?"

"It would be no trouble," Gu Yanmei said, turning away from Ling Qi in clear dismissal to once again face the crevice.

Ling Qi turned away as well, stymied for the moment. She supposed it was an opportunity in a way. Although she had wanted to invite Gu Xiulan along for the fun of getting payback against Kang's minions, figuring combat would cheer the girl up, she could use this time to earn Sect Points instead. Gu Xiulan might be able to get some Inner Sect tutoring for free, but Ling Qi did not have that advantage.

She needed to start accumulating Sect Points. The Sect's mission board had many, many jobs, giving Ling Qi a multitude of options. Most, however, had fairly low payouts, and after that condor mission, Ling Qi knew that if she stuck with the safe and easy missions, she would just end up wasting a great deal of time that she could have spent cultivating.

With that in mind, she considered some of the more dangerous - and more lucrative - Sect missions. In the end, one in particular caught her eye. There was a mission to investigate the disappearances of several young laborers and a guardsman in the forest near the Sect. She would need to either rescue or return proof of their demise, and if possible, eliminate the threat or report on its nature.

However, it was a job dangerous enough to be recommended for a team of two disciples. With Gu Xiulan absent and not wanting to bother Meizhen with something so trivial, Ling Qi had few options. It occurred to her that Su Ling might be a good match with her tracking skills and greater familiarity with the wilderness than a city girl like her.

She'd just have to ask. If Su Ling agreed, Ling Qi would take her first truly dangerous mission.			

### **Chapter 67 - Sect Work 2**

Thankfully, searching for the vulpine girl was not nearly as onerous as searching out Gu Xiulan. Ling Qi simply had to head out to Su Ling's cave home and wait until Su Ling returned to make her offer.

"So, what makes you think I'm a good pick for this?" Su Ling asked dubiously after hearing out Ling Qi as she leaned casually against the wall next to the entrance to the cave home. She didn't sound entirely happy with Ling Qi.

Ling Qi suspected she knew why. The mission description echoed what the other girl had said about her own 'mother'. "You're the best person I know for looking into clues and trails in the forest. I'm a city girl, you know? Plus, if this spirit is tricking and trapping people with illusions or something, you're pretty good at avoiding that." It was refreshing to be able to speak plainly.

Su Ling frowned, her pointed, furry ears twitching. "Yeah, alright. I guess that makes sense. How much did you say this thing was supposed to pay?"

"Twenty five points each, assuming we get rid of whatever is spiriting people away, That's more than halfway to a tutor, or enough for you to use the production hall for a couple weeks," Ling Qi answered.

The other girl grimaced, glancing away. "That's probably gonna be pretty damn deadly then. Still, I could use the points," she grumbled.

"I'm pretty strong these days, you know?" Ling Qi said with a slightly cheeky grin. "I think we can handle it."

Su Ling gave her an unamused look but eventually sighed, pushing herself up from the rock face. "Fine, gimme a bit to collect some things. Then we can head down the mountain."

Ling nodded easily and settled in to wait. When the other girl had emerged, she had several heavy pouches dangling from her belt and had a thick leather vest covered in steel studs thrown on over her top. As they descended the mountain together, Ling Qi decided to make some conversation; she still didn't know the other girl very well after all.

"So, what are you up to when you're not at the vent?" Ling Qi asked. "Just gathering materials?"

"Mostly," Su Ling replied gruffly, scanning the path ahead. "Suyin's been teaching me some stuff, and I've been doing some jobs so I have the points to look up recipes and methods in the archive. Been working towards some better tools too."

Ling Qi hummed in acknowledgment of the answer, arms held behind her head as she walked. "So you're definitely going for a production spot then?"

The fox-eared girl snorted. "You're pretty ridiculous, you know?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ling Qi asked, annoyed.

"I don't have my eye on the whole Inner Disciple thing. I'm not like you. I don't pick things up in a couple of days an' master arts in a week. I'm not arrogant enough to think I can start from nothin' and snag a spot when I'm not some kinda prodigy," Su Ling said bluntly.

"Well, you're definitely not going to with that kind of attitude," Ling Qi reproached. "It's not like I don't work hard."

"I never said you didn't," Su Ling shot back. "Simple fact is - you're something else. I figured that out a while ago. You've got this - thing." She made a vague gesture in the air in illustration. "Like, you're flighty and oblivious as shit sometimes, ignoring stuff that's not right in your view, but you're scary intense when you've got your focus on something. You don't take breaks or get discouraged. Ya don't fail." Su Ling sounded a bit frustrated, although Ling Qi thought it was more due to Su Ling's dissatisfaction with how she had articulated her statements.

"I'm not that oblivious," Ling Qi protested. "And the rest of that isn't true either. Don't you think you're making a lot of judgements when we barely know each other personally?" She took breaks. Didn't she go out with Xiulan on occasion?

Su Ling shrugged. "Probably, but that's how I see it. You got the things you focus on, and you just kinda ignore everything else. I don't have that kinda drive and focus."

"So if you're not gonna go for an Inner Disciple position, what do you want then?" Ling Qi asked, still feeling irritable about the other girl's assessment. "Are you just going to sit in the Outer Sect?"

"Maybe. I don't really give a damn about all this Sect stuff," Su Ling said dismissively. "All the stupid lil' power games and verbal knife fights. I'll survive my service then set up out in the mountains or woods huntin' monsters. Or maybe I'll just leave and go wandering."

That didn't sound bad, Ling Qi supposed, but Ling Qi didn't think it was a path that she herself could pursue. She needed strength if she really wanted to be free to do as she wished so she wouldn't be able to ignore the drive to snatch opportunities like Su Ling apparently could.

"Well, if that's what you want," Ling Qi said dubiously before changing the subject. "Anyway, what do you think of the information we have on this mission?"

"Last disappearance was earlier this week. There's ten people missing so far, including the guard." Su Ling seemed happy enough to drop the previous subject. "No blood or signs of struggle either," she continued, ticking off points on her sharp-nailed fingers. "Sounds like pretty standard spiriting away. Something is kidnapping folks alive, most like. There's dozens of spirits that do that kinda shit though."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Ling Qi said. "Still, all the disappearances were during the day. That's different than normal, right?"

"Not as much as you'd think," Su Ling said. "Stories always like ta paint this kinda thing as happening at night, but fact is, there ain't many people dumb enough to be out at the edge of the wards at night when they aren't even working."

"You would know better than me," Ling Qi conceded. She had rarely ventured out into the farmlands around Tonghou, small and cramped as they were. It was far easier to be recognized where there were fewer people after all. Besides, the outskirts were where the cultivator guards primarily patrolled, and she hadn't survived on the streets by crossing their paths.

The two of them fell into mostly companionable silence as they continued their trip, arriving at the location near the town's border where the disappearances had been reported. This section of wards covered one of the town's lumber yards, which processed and prepared a great bounty of wood for use in infrastructure projects by the Sect. There were several such yards around the town. Most of those who had disappeared had not been workers at the yard though, but rather, young women and boys from the town outskirts. The only exception was the guard, who went missing after being sent out to look for the women and boys.

Ling Qi honestly felt useless as she traipsed along through the woods with Su Ling, peering about for clues. She really had little idea what to look for, only able to point out the signs of human passage due to the enhanced senses that came with being a cultivator. Her companion took it in stride, patiently examining possible trails and poking around for signs of spirit activity.

Conversation was terse and simple since Su Ling was focused on tracking and Ling Qi chose to keep an eye out for potential enemies. Their search gradually took them deeper into the woods as they followed the trails of human activity that Su Ling discovered with her nose and keener sense for traces of residual qi.

"Hold up." Su Ling's gruff voice shook Ling Qi out of her thoughts as she came to a stop, peering ahead toward the sound of running water. "Do you feel that?"

Ling Qi paused herself, concentrating her senses.

"Yeah, I think so," Ling Qi whispered. It was quiet and still, unnaturally so. There was a faint, unseasonable chill in the air that she had previously missed due to how little such things meant to her anymore. The natural earth and wood qi in the area felt subtly off too.

"It smells like a graveyard," Su Ling hissed, her furry ears standing straight with alarm and discomfort.

Ling Qi felt the first stirrings of alarm herself as she picked up a steady dimming of light at the edge of her vision. Fog was rolling in from the direction of the running water she could hear.

She was fairly confident in handling whatever came upon them... but was it a good idea? They didn't even know if whatever was causing the fog had anything to do with their investigation.

"We should keep moving forward," Ling Qi said decisively, striding forward toward the mist. "The trail goes through here, right?"

"Wh-" Su Ling gave her an incredulous look. "Why? We can at least find a way around or something."

"You don't really believe that," Ling Qi shot back. "No way is this fog just a coincidence given what we're looking into. C'mon, we knew we were going to have to deal with something dangerous."

"You're crazy," Su Ling grumbled, but she hurried to catch up with Ling Qi.

Ling Qi slipped her plain and unadorned flute into her hand, feeling a stab of irritation at the unfamiliar tool before brushing it aside. The two of them proceeded forward into the mist in silence.

**Trespassers** 

Murderers

#### Thieves

Ling Qi stiffened as she began to hear accusatory whispers on the wind, mixing and mingling with each other until the individual words could no longer be made out. Up ahead, she could see a break in the treeline where a wide, shallow river flowed. The air grew cold and wet around them, and Ling Qi felt the creeping sensation of being stared at intensifying.

The eerie atmosphere culminated with a low, angry wail as they reached the riverbank, and the mist came alive. Ghostly hands erupted from the muddy banks, grasping and snatching at the hems of Ling Qi's gown followed by burnt, half-skeletal faces, twisted into unnatural expressions of fury and hate.

She caught an "Oh, fuck no," mutter from Su Ling as the animalistic girl's ears flattened against her head and her amber eyes widened in alarm. "Trail goes downstream," Su Ling shouted as she drew her saber. "Do we have a plan or what?"

Ling Qi danced back from the riverbank, easily escaping the apparitions' grasping hands and eyed their increasing numbers. "I'll start playing. If you can screw up their senses too, we should be fine," she called out then began to play, filling the space around them with her own mist.

The spirits rising from the riverbanks, broken and rotted spirits of men, women, and children alike, wailed as the shadowy claws of her mist constructs tore wounds in ghostly flesh. Ling Qi shuddered at the terrible sound, all too similar to actual people crying out in pain. She comforted herself with the knowledge that they weren't really people, just echoes and images.

"Pretty sure we just put our foot in something a hell of a lot bigger than a couple of disappearances," Su Ling said as blue-white fires formed over her head. "Dammit, this had better work on ghosts!" Foxfire burned between her clasped hands, stretching out in a long chain as she threw her hands out wide.

The flickering flame exploded outward. For a moment, Ling Qi saw bright lights, heard the sound of soothing music, and smelled the scent of delicious food, but then, it was gone, the technique passing over her. Some of the spirits stiffened and froze, faintly luminescent tears leaking from the black pits where their eyes should have been, but others only wailed louder in despair or spun about, flailing at the misty talons that still clawed at them.

As hateful red sparks danced in the eyes of the spirits rising from the ground and the whole screaming, sobbing mass surged forward like a tidal wave of mist and river water, one thing was certain. It wasn't enough to stop them all.

The two of them bolted, Ling Qi continuing to desperately play and Su Ling ducking and dodging the grasping, clawing hands of the mass of spirits. Su Ling slashed away ghostly limbs, only to have new ones replacing them right away.

Well behind them, Ling Qi caught a glimpse of a gleaming aquamarine figure clad in ancient armor, seemingly formed entirely of river water. The figure's face was visible only by the glowing green sparks in the eye sockets under its helmet.

Ling Qi could feel the intense concentration of deathly water qi cross the threshold of her technique, and her fingers danced over the flute in the hopes of clouding the figure's senses. Streamers of shadow

trailed in the wake of her run as she flickered from one position to the next under the influence of Crescent's Grace. At her side, Su Ling's qi flared as she activated some technique, and Su Ling's legs sped up and blurred with motion.

Ling Qi's qi failed to take hold on the more powerful spirit, but thankfully, Su Ling had more success. Su Ling ducked low, spinning around to slash outward with her saber at waist level. A burning, half ring of blue-white fire blazed into existence two meters tall behind them. Spirits shrieked and sobbed as they drove through it, seemingly unheeding of the pain, but some dispersed in their attempted passage. It was enough to keep the mob from growing even larger.

Nonetheless, the mob was still dangerous at its current size. Tiny hands scraped through her ankle with unnatural, biting cold, forcing Ling Qi to kick away a ghostly child with two arrows protruding from its back, its other features obscured by terrible burns covering its body. Su Ling cried out in pain as well, but the girl didn't fall behind so Ling Qi kept running.

Ling Qi was beginning to think that going straight through the fog hadn't been the best idea.

The thought was reinforced when she felt a powerful surge of qi from behind her, her qi crushed from the mist. As control of the mist was snatched from her, her constructs dispersed. Su Ling cursed loudly, shouting something unintelligible, and a noise that sounded like firecrackers going off in rapid succession popped through the mob behind them, briefly sending it into disarray.

The mob of ghosts quickly recovered though, and dread pooled in Ling Qi's stomach. Then, her eyes caught something ahead, and hope gave her a burst of energy. "Su Ling! Up ahead! I can see a warding totem. Make a run for it!"

"Got it! I dunno what you're doing, but you damn well better be right behind me!" Su Ling redoubled her speed.

Ling Qi spun around and flickered above to a sturdy tree branch, her new bow appearing in her hands as she did so. She lined up a shot at the armored water spirit at the center of the mob chasing them. She let her fears fade and her concerns disappear as the wind kicked up around her, blowing away mist, and sheets of crackling static erupted from her hands and bow. Her own blue eyes met the glowing green ones of the spirit. Then, her arrow sliced through the air like a luminescent star with a crackling boom before striking the spirit dead in the helm.

The spirit's head snapped back, and the spirits around it let out an ear-splitting shriek, seeming to collapse into confusion at the injury to their leader. Ling Qi briefly glimpsed the thing's mummified face and pulsing veins of sickly green and red qi throbbing through its desiccated flesh before she turned tail and dashed for the warding stone before her Crescent's Grace technique expired.

Ling Qi passed the faintly glowing moss-covered stone just moments before the mist splashed against the invisible edge of the ward and flowed outward, following the ward's boundary. Ling Qi did her best to ignore the distorted faces and clawing hands pressed up against the ward and instead looked around.

Su Ling leaned against a tree nearby, peering warily out into the haunted mist. The trees were more sparse here, and Ling Qi could see a few crumbling walls and patches of paved stone among the tree

roots. Higher structures loomed further in the distance, and the river they had followed flowed sluggishly off to her right, burbling over the crumbled stones of a long broken bridge.

"What is something like this doing so close to the Sect?" Ling Qi asked, clutching her bow tightly. She eyed the churning faces in the mist and the worrying way the invisible barrier bulged inward in places.

"Little villages die all the time no matter where you are," Su Ling replied, sounding slightly out of breath as she straightened up and peered deeper into the ruins. Ling Qi thought she caught a hint of bitterness in the other girl's tone. "It's not really surprising. I'm thinking the trail we followed might have just been folks making offerings now. Then again, this place seems kinda old for that."

Ling Qi rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. Had she been too reckless in pushing ahead?

"Might be," she admitted. "I hadn't thought of that. Still, now that we're here, it can't hurt to check it out, right?" Her instincts still told her that they were on the right track.

"Yeah, might as well," Su Ling replied with a shrug, edging away from the barrier. "I can still sense some human qi around here so we might even be on track. Maybe we can find this place's temple; it might have something to placate the spirits."

Ling Qi nodded, carefully following the girl into the ruined village and away from the plaintive cries of the spirits outside. Hopefully, they would find something here.

## **Chapter 68 - Sect Work 3**

Ling Qi and Su Ling slipped deeper into the ruins, following patches of remaining pavement between the crumbled walls of old buildings. Behind them, they left the dead, still pressed up against the barrier of the ward. It was still only late afternoon, but one would never be able to tell going by the overcast sky.

"Sorry for getting you into this," Ling Qi said quietly, peering carefully into the shadows as the other girl focused on the ground, her eyes following something Ling Qi could not sense. "I suppose we should have taken this a little slower, huh?"

"I knew this was gonna be dangerous," Su Ling replied bluntly, pausing at a crossroads before leading Ling Qi to the right toward the more heavily clustered buildings lying like scattered bones in the mist. "I've never seen that many ghosts in one place though," she grumbled, glancing furtively over her shoulder.

"I've never seen a ghost before at all," Ling Qi said uncomfortably. There was always a priest or two around to perform an appearament and funeral rights when someone died. It was the one service that even the poorest people could expect. In the slums of the city, some even joked that only the dead could expect any care from the city's officials.

"They're more common than you'd think," Su Ling commented, expression sour as she sniffed the air. "Still, something about that didn't feel right. I dunno how well you can feel this kinda thing, but the river's qi - It feels wrong. Stiff, maybe?" Su Ling seemed to have trouble articulating precisely what she was feeling.

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes, concentrating on the feeling of the qi around her. She couldn't really feel anything odd... Well, beyond the obvious cloying weight of death in the air. "If there's something wrong, it's probably connected to whoever is out here," she said with not entirely feigned confidence. After all, someone out in a place like this would obviously either be captured by spirits or up to no good.

"Maybe," Su Ling said dubiously. "Doesn't feel like a cultivator though."

Ling Qi could only shrug in reply as they made their way further into the ruins. The air was full of tension, but as they ventured further from the ward boundary, the feelings staining the air seemed to grow almost sullen. They soon began to pick up more physical tells of the trail they were following. There were drag marks in the dirt, a bloodstain less than a day old, and even a child's tooth, far too fresh to belong in these ruins. They crouched near the place where they had found the tooth as Su Ling tried to determine where the trail lead next because despite the apparent freshness of the signs, the trail grew faint here.

It made Ling Qi think of the way her Sable Crescent Step art obfuscated her trail wherever she went. Perhaps that was why she was distracted when Su Ling suddenly jerked, her pointed ears twitching wildly, and shouted, "Get down!"

Ling Qi threw herself down and felt the brush of the wind as something small and feathery shot through where her head had been. She caught a glimpse of it as it flew past her, a pale white crow's skull shrouded in shadows in the vague shape of a body with feathery wings. Ling Qi only had a moment to observe before Su Ling's sword smashed through it, fire licking at the blade, and clove the skull in half.

It dropped to the stones with a clatter, trailing a few sad and scraggly feathers.

"What the hell was that?" Ling Qi said as she pushed herself back up from the ground, head swiveling from side to side as she searched their surroundings for more foes.

"Some kind of puppet. I think it wasn't alive," Su Ling said warily, eyeing the sky along with Ling Qi. "Suyin was looking into stuff like that; she can only do the needles though." Su Ling paused then, peering into the distance. "...Hells. Fine, I have no more objections. No way is that not shady as shit."

Ling Qi followed her gaze, stilling when she saw what had drawn the fox girl's reaction. She could see the crumbling wall surrounding the broken remains of what had probably been the village headman's house going by the size and the space left around it by the other buildings. It sat at the edge of the river that curved lazily through the ruined town. Dozens of little white skulls and their shadowy bodies perched atop those walls and on the collapsing ceiling of the home, facing the pair in eerie stillness.

Worryingly, Ling Qi could not feel a single bit of qi from any of them. As far as her still new senses from Argent Mirror were concerned, the bird puppet things were not there. She ducked down behind the cover of a crumbling wall alongside Su Ling.

"Not disagreeing, but does the trail go that way?" Ling Qi asked quietly.

Su Ling nodded slightly. "Afraid so," she said in a soft voice. Su Ling paused in consideration. "So I'm sure you want to go in, but hear me out, alright? I think I can get us past those things without a big, drawn-out fight."

"I wasn't going to suggest barging in the front," Ling Qi grumbled. She wasn't so reckless as that, not when she could see what lay ahead of her. "They've noticed us already though."

"Which is why we are going in the front," Su Ling replied. "Well, it's gonna look like we are," she amended at Ling Qi's raised eyebrow. "It's kinda costly and I can't use any other arts while I'm doing it, but I can cloak us and make a decoy illusion. Then we can sneak around the side."

Ling Qi followed Su Ling's pointed finger toward a hole in the crumbling wall around the house. "That sounds good. Will you still be able to fight afterward?"

"I have a couple of pills I can use," Su Ling said. "Don't worry about it."

Ling Qi thought that she probably could deal with the flock of birds, but it would certainly take time for dissonance to wear them down, even if they were fairly fragile. At this point, she didn't want to dally around using a strategy that slow. She signalled Su Ling to start, and the fox girl closed her eyes, an expression of intense concentration on her face as her tail stiffened.

Ling Qi felt the girl's wispy qi wash over her, clinging like a sheet of gauze and rendering everything slightly fuzzy. She could see through the other girl now, and faint shadowy silhouettes moved out to approach the large house.

Ling Qi and Su Ling began to circle around, roughly paralleling the wall, as a great cloud of bones and black feathers descended on the illusions. Other crows hung back, clustering together and blurring, their forms shifting to combine into a single, much larger puppet that loomed over the apparent battlefield.

While the crows screamed and circled, fighting an enemy that was not there, she saw the strain on Su Ling's face increasing. Luckily, the distance they had to cross was not a great distance for cultivators like them, even when having to slow down to avoid being spotted.

They soon slipped in through the gap in the wall and made it under the crumbling eaves of the home, finding themselves in what was once a kitchen. Su Ling let out a soft gasp and twitched slightly a moment later.

"That's it for that," she said with a grimace, popping what Ling Qi recognized as a wellspring pill into her mouth. "C'mon, it's faint, but the trail goes toward the cellar. Let me send the decoys down first."

Ling Qi considered then took one of her own qi pills. She could afford to waste a couple of red stones now, and it was better to go into a probable fight at full capacity than to be stingy.

Given the increasing clamor outside, the two of them hurriedly yanked open the ancient cellar doors and headed down the stairs, following the trail of already disturbed dust, a few steps behind the illusionary doubles made by Su Ling. Ling Qi kept a careful eye out for anything that might be a trap, but there was only hard packed dirt and the musty stink of rotten air.

That changed as they reached the bottom and crept to the right while the figments proceeded forward. The cellar had obviously been enlarged, the hard packed dirt giving way to hastily dug expansion on the far wall, wet and muddy from the water trickling down from the ceiling. Was it under the river outside? Ling Qi thought it might be.

A grotesque totem of bone was built into the far wall, a pillar of pale ivory that nearly reached the ceiling three meters above. The main pillar seemed to be formed by the lashed together ribs of some large beast, but the smaller affectations were far more human, cleaned skulls and rib cages nailed to the main pillar with stone spikes, painted with strange characters that glowed a sickly green.

Pungent smoke hung in the air down here, rendering everything blurry, but Ling Qi could see a tall figure moving to stand, revealing a stone slab at the base of the pillar. Upon the slab lay an unconscious young boy, perhaps ten or eleven years old at her guess. He was stripped to the waist and painted with strange whorling symbols.

The figure standing over him was tall, tall enough to look down on Ling Qi, and seeming taller still due to the black feathered plumes sticking up from the bloody crimson headband he wore. Several heavy necklaces of beads clacked and clattered against the beast talons woven into the thick, form concealing robe of beast hide he wore. Really, but for his dark skinned face and sharp green eyes, he looked almost like nothing more than a shadow himself. His features were smooth, seemingly not much older than the two of them.

Like the shadow birds outside, she couldn't sense any qi at all from him or from the pillar or anything else in this cellar. Even the qi of the earth, which should have been all encompassing down here, was muted.

He scowled at their illusions from across the twenty odd meters of distance separating them and gestured once, saying something in a low and guttural sounding tongue. A wide circle of stretched hide appeared in his right hand, painted with strange geometric symbols, while a strange baton of knobby bone appeared in his left hand. Was that... some kind of drum? Or maybe a primitive shield?

"That thing," Su Ling hissed. "That bone charm on his wrist, the silver painted circle. It's what's screwing with our senses." Ling Qi glanced at her with alarm, but the man didn't notice Su Ling's words.

Ling Qi... was honestly hesitant. This was entirely outside her expectations. How was a Cloud Tribe shaman - for what else could he be in that get up - have made it here, under the nose of the Sect? Hadn't Bai Meizhen mentioned that Elder Ying watched over this whole region? She couldn't sense his qi. What if he was completely above them?

On the other hand, if he was, why was he fooled by Su Ling's illusion? She felt a bit better at that thought. She had to believe that they could still handle this. She couldn't expect that he would be fooled for long so she needed to make her first shot count.

So what was the most important target?

# **Bonus 11 - The Twilight King**

It is impossible to speak of the Cataclysm without delving into the matters of the Second Dynasty. It is agreed among scholars that that by the time of Longshen's rebellion, the Ao family already in its terminal decline. The Imperial family had long since begun to disregard their advisors and select successors to the throne purely based upon force of cultivation, or even worse, on mere seniority or sentiment. The result was a string of weak or ineffectual emperors whose Ways were unsuited to rulership, and a weakening of the bonds which grant us the peace and prosperity of unified rule.

The seeds of Longshen's rebellion were born from this. Contemporary sources indicate that the Eldest son of Emperor Wen was a man of great pride, an unparalleled academic and scholar, he nonetheless had very poor relations with his fathers court due to an acerbic personality and a tendency to dismiss any accomplishments outside of his own fields of interest. He disdained military and civic matters in particular.

It was thus unsurprising to all but the man himself when even his own clan members chose one of the esteemed emperors younger sons to succeed him. It is said that Emperor Zhao was a man of great civic skill and compassion, and it is only thanks to this that the Second Dynasty continued beyond the Cataclysm. However, this document's focus is on the rebellion, and not the final decline of the Second Dynasty.

Longshen was enraged at being passed over, and documentation indicated that he spent the final decades of his ailing Fathers reign furiously attempting to bully various individuals into supporting his claim, but despite his personal potency he found few sympathetic ears. It was at this point clear that he would not accept matters as they were, and (Now exalted) Mu family, then enforcers and executioners of Imperial will were contacted to arrest him. Unfortunately, despite the skill and integrity of the Mu family, Longshen escaped before he could be subdued.

It is unknown where the villain fled to, in the century that followed. While there are many wild rumors, there are no credible sources regarding where he took sanctuary. The next that any in the empire heard from him, was the beginning of the troubles in Golden Fields. In those days, the Golden Fields and their ruling Lu family were powerful voices at court. Being the largest province in the empire, and the center of agriculture were potent enough pieces, However, the region was also the most tamed. The rolling fertile plains and the great Sapphire River held few potent spirit beasts, and records indicate that the provinces population exceeded the next two highest combined. Only their comparatively lacking military might kept them from ascendance.

So, the rulers of Golden Fields were a prideful folk, and so when the first towns and villages in the east went dark, they said nothing to the court, attempting to deal with the matter themselves. It is now known that Longshen, returning from his exile had aligned himself with a separatist cult on the frontier of Golden Fields. The cult worshipped the Dark Sun, the Great Spirit of the Solar Eclipse, a creature of transgression, transformation and chaos. The cult was obviously proscribed by the rulers of the Golden Fields, even before these events.

However even these villains were but the first of Longshen's victims. We must speak now of the methods which made Longshen the threat that he was. Manipulation of the Soul, in his exile Longshen had developed a method to parasitize the souls of others, installing a fragment of his own essence and binding the victims existence to his own. Those changed in this manner suffered from mental contamination, and could not defy him. They were also rendered immune to death while he himself still lived.

Even arts which reduced the body to dust or rent the soul merely allowed Longshen to rebuild them in his presence, though reports indicate that individuals who suffered death grew more and more damaged with rebirth, becoming little more than feral animals eventually.

However, the true horror of the foul villains arts lay in the fact that it did not require his direct intervention. The fragment of his soul his puppets contained ingrained in them a technique which through the sharing of blood, allowed them to pass the infection to others, man, beast or spirit.

Longshen proved cunning, and the Lu lax, by the time the phoenix lords began to take his threat seriously, Longshen was legion. When the first true punitive legion was raised and then crushed, Longshen began to take the offensive. It is difficult to convey the horror depicted within the primary sources which survived those days. The sky blackened by smoke and the scent of blood and rot ever on the air. The sight of those you had known and loved, twisted and transformed into bloodthirsty beasts.

When the first city fell, the Lu mobilized in force, a shining legion of celestial warriors. Before the might of the Lu, before the white fires of the sun, Longshen's advance was halted. But only for a time. Each warrior that fell joined the enemy, and their number only ever grew. By this point, other provinces had taken notice, and for the first time since the strife, a Grand Muster was called across the empire. The armies of Bai marched alongside the warriors of Zheng and clans of Heavenly Peaks, and even the turmoil ridden clans of the south gathered for war. The fleets of Xuan and Jin sailed for the coasts to prevent the spread of the villains infection into the Alabaster Sea.

In the borderlands of the Golden Fields, the armies of the Empire held. However, what happened next is unclear. Lu Guanxi, patriarch of the Lu clan had twice faced Longshen himself, now styled the Twilight King, in battles that had lit second suns in the east. The first time, it seemed that he had slain the villain, but it proved a temporary reprieve. In the second, the patriarch and his elite were driven back by the Twilight King and his monsters.

What happened the third time we do not know. Only that Patriarch Lu Guanxi chose to awaken his clans ancestor, the great phoenix, the Purifying Sun. What can be said about the awakening of a Sublime? One could speak of the sky aflame and the earth charred to twisted glass and melting stone and metal, of a terrible heat that withered crops and started fires as far away as the Xiangmen in the south, of men whose blood flash boiled in their veins, reduced to ashen shadows on shattered walls. Sources from the period are universally nigh hysterical in their tone.

Then it was passed. And the Golden Fields was no more, a vast plain of ash, glass and cooling molten rock. The Sapphire River was gone, and the glittering coast was shrouded in lethal steam. The air itself was poisoned and no cloud could reach the land to pour down cooling water. The Twilight King was slain, but at a terrible cost, for even the Phoenix could not rise again from that poisoned land.

The effects of the destruction were beyond counting. The famines and shortages, the desperate efforts of the empires formations masters to contain the poisonous qi and the spread of the desert, the political upheaval as the fury of the provinces turned upon the throne. Even dead, the Twilight King continued to inflict horror upon the empire...

--Excerpt from a text written under the Empress Yin, second ruler of the third dynasty.

## **Chapter 69 - Sect Work 3**

She met Su Ling's eyes, and a moment of silent communication passed between them. Ling Qi pulled her bow from within her storage ring with a tiny pop of displaced air, the firm grip wrapped around the slightly warm horn settling comfortably in her hand. Su Ling began to circle around the edge of the chamber, clearly meaning to flank the man and separate him from his ritual site and the child.

Ling Qi drew an arrow from the quiver on her back and nocked it in one smooth motion, drawing the string back past her ear as she fixed her gaze on the silvery talisman dangling from the leather wraps on the shaman's wrist. If that was the thing making him untraceable, then it had to go. Wind kicked up and electricity crackled along the length of the missile. The shaman's eyes flicked toward her, but it was too late. She had already loosed her attack.

At this range, her arrow needed less than a fraction of a second to cross the distance between them, and it struck the talisman with a booming gong, sounding more like she had shot a huge temple bell than a tiny piece of jewelry. For a brief moment, it seemed like her arrow was going to be deflected, the qi in the talisman pushing back against her own offensive qi, but then with a sharp report, it cracked and shattered to pieces, the shaman's own qi flaring as the arrow tore through the leather wrap on his wrist.

He spun toward her with a grimace of pain on his face and a flicker of alarm and anger in his cold eyes. He raised the implements in his hands, but she already had another arrow set and ready to fly, this time aimed at his chest. Her arrow met with resistance when the hazy smoke in the air condensed around him, forming shadowy pinions of air and dust that absorbed the qi of her attack as they wrapped protectively around him.

Even as she began to move, circling for better position, her sense for qi returned, and she nearly stumbled, gagging as her gorge rose, eyes watering from the terrible feeling that assailed her. The closest comparison she could make was when she was very young, young enough that she had still been with her mother, plague had swept through one of the neighboring districts of the city. The district had been barricaded off and quarantined of course, but she could still remember the smells and the sounds of disease and suffering.

Ling Qi quickly regained her concentration thankfully. As the shaman beat his baton against the drum of stretched hide in his other hand, the panic and anger in his gaze faded into absolute, unwavering determination. She felt the winds shift around her, and the moisture in the air gathering, the dark chamber growing even more cold and damp. Clouds began to form across the ceiling overhead, dark and crackling with electricity.

It was almost enough to mask the dark and gangly shape that emerged from the muddy ceiling above, dropping down with its chipped and rusted spear extended.

Even with her movements sped by the dark qi rushing through her channels, Ling Qi was not fast enough to fully dodge as the skeletal figure struck, spear cratering the ground where she had stood, and immediately lashed out with a mud-caked claw. Her qi prevented the raking skeletal fingers from finding purchase on her flesh.

She felt Su Ling's qi flare from across the room and saw the shaman's expression twitch minutely as he shook his head like a bull being bothered by flies. It did not stop him from continuing to beat a steady and ominous rhythm on his drum. The shaman moved from his starting position, seeming to be looking to circle out from between the two of them. is unseen feet struck the ground in time with the steadily louder beats of his drum.

Then, of course, things got worse. As the muddy skeleton, clad in the remains of a guardsman's armor save for the crude birdlike mask on its head and the cloak of black feathers over its shoulders, rose from his crouch before her, the bone totem pulsed. A rippling ring of visible sickly green qi washed over them all.

Ling Qi nearly wretched, stumbling as her stomach roiled and sweat broke out on her forehead. She blinked away the spots that had appeared in her vision and tried to steady suddenly shaking limbs. She felt ill and weak.

"Incomplete though it might be, our vengeance will be felt, lowlanders." Ling Qi stiffened as she heard words spoken in heavily accented imperial by the shaman. His hate-filled voice rang out loud over the steady, thunderous beats of his drum.

Ling Qi wanted to throw up her mist, but storing her bow and drawing her flute from the ring would take precious seconds she didn't have. Besides, between her and Su Ling, was she not the one more suited to dealing out damage? Such were her thoughts as she breathed out, channeling cleansing qi at the same time that she prepared a shot to disrupt the shaman's defenses.

She loosed her arrow, and it struck home. Her enemy was slow, almost ridiculously so to her eyes, but she supposed he relied on his defense. Unfortunately for him, her arrow cut through his shield of wind and dust, sending snakes of electricity crackling over his limbs. The arrow dug into his side, punching through his heavy robe, and his face twisted into a rictus of pain.

Her concentration on the shaman cost her. The filthy skeleton proved unnervingly fast, crossing the distance she had put between them in only a few instants and thrusting its spear out, blindingly fast, to score a wound across Ling Qi's thigh. Although the worst was absorbed by her qi, she could still feel blood beginning to flow down her leg.

While she backpedaled, Ling Qi caught sight of Su Ling crouched low near the altar the boy was bound to, her tail waving freely behind her as a second ghostly flame appeared above her head. The shaman's eyes grew unfocused, nearly causing him to stumble. Unfortunately, Su Ling's technique didn't stop the completion of his own technique. The clouds gathering across the ceiling grew dark and crackled with lightning, and actinic white bolts shot down from the ceiling. Although Ling Qi managed to throw herself out of the way, she saw Su Ling get struck with several bolts, protected only by the rapidly dimming flare of her qi, as she snatched the boy away from the altar and the strike zone.

To make matters worse, Ling Qi could hear the sound of splintering wood and eerie cawing from the stairwell. It seemed that the shaman's crow puppets would soon be arriving to aid their master, and the clouds overhead were only growing larger and darker with every beat of the shaman's drum. She caught Su Ling's eye. They needed to put down their enemy fast. She could see two glowing flames over Su Ling's head. Ling Qi recognized those as the technique Su Ling had used to blow up the cliff

side when they fought the sediment guardian at the vent. If Ling Qicould land another shot as well, she was sure the shaman would go down, either from lack of qi or from his wounds.

For the third time today, her arrow flew true, striking the taller man dead center in the chest. His qi flared, but the arrow punched through. The shaman was flung back by the force of the hit, and he slammed into the totem with a pained grunt. Then, Ling Qi had to desperately roll to the side to avoid the skeletal guardian's spear again and was forced to expend qi as the butt of the weapon smashed into her jaw, snapping her head to the side despite the qi cushioning.

A chain of explosions boomed through the cellar as the faint sparks that had lingered around the shaman from Su Ling's techniques exploded, setting the shaman's robes aflame and leaving swathes of burned flesh.

Despite the flames, the barbarian pushed himself up, leaving an ashen, bloody handprint on the eerily glowing bone of the totem. "Tch. Still this weak..." He bared his teeth in a bloody smile. "This one's life will not complete things, but it will have to be enough. Let the black spirits and the Gnawing Ones curse your very bones."

"Will you just shut up and die already?" Su Ling snapped, weighed down by the unconscious child in her arms, but her complaint was shortly drowned out as Ling Qi felt the totem's qi flare. The shaman's eyes rolled back in his head, flesh visibly withering. The arrow she had just let fly struck nothing more than a corpse, and the disgusting qi in the totem surged upward, mingling with the river's own energy. The man's puppets clattered to the ground, lifeless.

It was suddenly very cold, and Ling Qi shuddered as she heard a madness tinged wail that seemed to echo through the muddy walls from every direction at once.

"Pretty sure the wards just broke," Su Ling said dully as she staggered to her feet, palming and consuming her second wellspring pill. "We need to start running now." The child under her arm still did not stir, although he was obviously breathing.

Ling Qi followed her lead, taking a second wellspring pill as well to restore her qi, but she wasn't sure she agreed. Wouldn't fleeing only make them more vulnerable? This room was defensible, and she could fill it entirely with mist.

On the other hand, her qi was low, and she could not restore it any further for some time and neither could Su Ling. Taking additional restoratives would just be like taking poison. Then again... Surely whatever the barbarian shaman had done had been noticed by this point, right? An Elder had to have noticed something so large-scale. They might not need to hold out for long.

Ling Qi chewed her lip in thought for a moment but then nodded, quickly striding over to where the shaman's body lay. "Alright, we run. Nothing to gain by staying here," she said, even as she crouched down, quickly scanning over the corpse for anything useful. Her stomach squirmed at the sight of his mummified face, but it was only a barbarian, no matter how much it looked like a person.

Su Ling stared at her briefly and then started toward the door. "Please don't get too distracted trying to loot the bastard," she said, sounding exasperated. "We don't have a lot of time here." Su Ling began mounting the stairs at a hurried pace.

"Not going to," Ling Qi replied hurriedly. She had no idea what was valuable so she simply tore off his belt with all of the pouches wholesale, slinging it over her shoulder. Her ring wouldn't store the belt so there was probably several things of value in the pouches.

That done, Ling Qi rose to her feet and dashed after her companion, storing away her bow and drawing her flute. As she played the first haunting notes of her melody, she was careful to extend the protection over both Su Ling and the unconscious boy. Her feet crunched on the fallen crow skulls even as mist spilled from her flute and filled the stairway, shadows in the mist coalescing into dangerous constructs.

She quickly caught up with Su Ling as they burst out of the shattered cellar doors. Ling Qi followed the other girl's lead when Su Ling dashed off away from the river where ominous fog was rising, spilling through the streets like the pale fingers of a giant. Another terrible wail of pain, hunger and rage, echoed through the ruined village, the eerie sound chilling her to the bone.

The spirits were rising.

## Chapter 70 - Sect Work 4

Ling Qi and Su Ling ran with all the considerable speed their qi-enhanced physiques could provide, although Ling Qi was pacing herself a bit to not leave Su Ling - and the boy she carried - behind. Although the buildings were blurring from their speed, clawing hands and glowing eyes were beginning to appear in the mist, growing in number by the second. They reached the edge of the village in moments and were met with a veritable wall of hungry, shrieking ghosts. There were even more behind them though, along with more than one of the watery armored figures, so all they could do was push forward.

Ling Qi felt Su Ling's qi plummet, almost vanishing from her senses entirely, but she also saw a corridor opening as many of the ghosts turned to claw and swarm over mere figments. She shot the girl a grateful look that was probably missed going by the strain on Su Ling's expression.

Their mad dash continued. Although they were still harried by clawing hands, Ling Qi managed to avoid them, her own shadowy constructs ripping at and further distracting the ghosts. Su Ling stumbled and let out a growl of pain several times, but Ling Qi managed to help the girl keep up despite the dead weight of the child under Su Ling's arm.

Then Ling Qi herself stumbled, a sudden weakness taking her limbs. She tasted blood on her tongue, and her stomach roiled. Here, in the forest surrounded by maddened ghosts, she could not afford any weakness at all, but the sickly, diseased qi she had thought purged by her use of Argent Mirror had reemerged, clogging her channels and sapping her strength.

She heard Su Ling curse beside her, the fox-eared girl's face growing pale as well, and knew she wasn't the only one suffering from the effects of the sickly qi. Ling Qi continued to play determinedly, not willing to allow their last line of defense to fade. She altered the tune, channeling an even greater amount of qi into the mist, and began the Elegy.

It helped. Ghosts recoiled, their very essence drained away by the mist. But the forest and the ghosts seemed to stretch on forever in Ling Qi's eyes. Her legs had started burning with unnatural fatigue, and spots began appearing in her vision as her muscles cramped.

Suddenly, the ground roiled under their feet, bucking like an enraged animal and throwing them to the ground. Ling Qi despaired as her concentration and her melody broke. She pushed herself up on trembling limbs as the earth shook beneath her, roots being ripped from the soil and entire trees pitched over and away from them. Ling Qi blinked in befuddlement as she realized that she was now at eye level with the canopy of the forest. She looked back and found a terrifying sight.

The village they had fled from and its surrounding forest were sinking downward, crumbling into a yawning void of a sinkhole a thousand meters and more across. The qi in the air was thickening, spirits wailing as they disintegrated under the weight of the heavy mountain qi spreading in a rippling grey curtain around the edges of the hole.

"What now?" Su Ling groaned, pushing herself up as well. The boy lay on the grass beside her, still unconscious; Ling Qi thought distantly that he must be under some kind of sleeping curse to have slept

right through all of this. They continued to rise on a pillar of earth and stone snaking upward until it was dozens of meters above the tops of the trees.

"Now, young lady, I am taking care of this troubling matter." The two of them jerked at the sound of an aged female voice coming from behind them. Ling Qi turned her head to catch sight of a short figure in a plain brown and green gown, dust and earth still tumbling down to indicate where she had risen from the earth.

It was almost disconcerting, the dissonance between her senses. Her eyes showed her a short old woman with graying hair in a simple bun and a lined face that seemed suited to cheer and smiles, even if her lips were currently drawn down in a frown as she surveyed the devastation where the ruined village had been. She was, if anything, a little on the plump side, the perfect image of a cheerful old grandmother.

To her spiritual senses, the old woman may as well have been a mountain, vast and insurmountable. She was in the violet soul realm and on the edge of something more. There was really only one thing she could be.

"Sect Elder." Ling Qi shakily clasped her hands together and dipped her head. "Thank you very much for your aid."

"Y-yeah, we really needed the save." Su Ling looked nervous, almost ready to bolt, but she hastily copied Ling Qi's actions.

"It was no trouble," the elderly woman said kindly, gesturing for them to raise their heads. "The two of you have worked hard tonight and suffered for it, I think." Ling Qi twitched in alarm as she felt the woman's fingers on her forehead. She hadn't even seen the Elder move. She met the short woman's considering gaze. "My, even incomplete, that is a potent curse. It is fortunate that you were able to bring this to my attention, or things could have been far worse."

Ling Qi had a strong feeling she wasn't just referring to their personal ailments. If destroying a kilometer of forest was needed to contain things, how much worse would it have been if things had gone off without a hitch?

"Are we gonna be alright?" She glanced over to Su Ling, who was watching the Elder warily. "This... It isn't permanent, right?"

The Elder nodded, lowering her hand from Ling Qi's forehead and returning her gaze to crumbling sinkhole beyond. "No, nothing like that, dear," she answered. "It may take a month or two of treatment, but you will both be good as new in time. I will write the writs to the medicine hall myself for the two of you." The Elder seemed somewhat distracted as if she wasn't just talking to them.

Ling Qi grimaced at the idea of suffering weakness for a whole month or two. She could purge it for a short time with Argent Mirror, but it was still going to be a pain. "This... What was all this?" She couldn't help but ask. "And... I mean, what was that Cloud Tribe barbarian trying to do?"

"Forbidden arts, performed out of desperation and desire for vengeance, most likely," the Elder replied with a hint of sadness. "Such things usually are - when they are not mere plays for power. I suppose I

shall have to get the details from you girls to determine which it was. Come. Let us get you back to the mountain."

It was a little bizarre riding back, first to the village to drop off the boy with his tearful and thankful parents. Ling Qi felt distinctly uncomfortable to have the boy's father, a man grown and the owner of the lumber yard, kowtowing at her feet. Going by Su Ling's expression, it was a feeling shared. Elder Ying had been no help either, leaving the two of them to handle the thankful mortals while she spoke with the city's governor.

After that, it was back to the mountain and the Medicine Hall where they had to relay every last detail of their adventure. In the end, the Elder's expression was grave, and she had left them to rest and circulate the medicinal energies of their treatment to wear away the lingering curse.

They had also been left with a choice. They had received the sect points they were owed of course, but Elder Ying had been very firm in insisting that they not speak of the events to anyone else. In return, Elder Ying offered them a choice of an additional reward for their hard work and service.

"Well, that was a... thing, wasn't it?" Ling Qi said tiredly, staring up at the ceiling of the recovery room she was sharing with Su Ling. The Elder had departed, giving them time to think on their potential rewards.

"That's one way to put it," the other girl responded grumpily from her own bed. "Shoulda figured going along with you would be trouble."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Ling Qi turned her head to shoot a glare at the other girl.

Su Ling gave her an unimpressed look in return. "That things fuckin' escalate around you," she said dryly. "Not like it's your fault or anything. Just seems like trouble likes following you is all."

Ling Qi continued to frown at her but eventually huffed, turning her gaze back to the ceiling. "...That's fair, I guess. Still, not like we didn't profit from it, right?" Between the bonus from Elder Ying and the Sect Points, she thought a month of feeling a little weak was worth it, particularly since she could temporarily throw off the curse with Argent Mirror if need be.

"Yeah, I guess so," Su Ling said distantly like she was thinking of something else. "I wonder how the kid is doing. If we were hit bad, he's gotta be pretty sick too."

Ling Qi frowned. "Well, Elder Ying wouldn't have let us take him back to the village if he were really sick, right?" The Elder hadn't directly told them what the shaman had intended, but going by the impression she had of the curse qi and the other details, it seemed fairly obvious he had intended some kind of plague, perhaps spread by the river and its spirits.

Su Ling shot her a sidelong look. "...Yeah. Well, if it was catching anyway," she said, sounding a little unsure. "Maybe I can check back. I recognized most of the herbs that went into the tea they gave us."

Ling Qi shrugged. It didn't really have anything to do with her. She had enough worries without adding unrelated people to the mix, but if it made Su Ling happy, that was fine. "So, what are you going to do with your Sect Points and your bonus?" she asked, turning the conversation back toward more pleasant matters.

Su Ling frowned at her before shaking her head. "Thinking I might cash in the bonus to get my own pill furnace so I don't have to keep spending points on the Production Hall ones."

Ling Qi sat up in surprise. "Isn't that kind of a waste? Spending a unique reward on a talisman?"

"None of the Outer Sect disciples can make 'em, far as I know," Su Ling replied, throwing her arm over her eyes instead of sitting up. "Besides, I told ya I didn't want to get tangled up in the Sect and political stuff more than I had to."

Ling Qi shot the other girl a consternated look. Su Ling was really stubborn about some things it seemed. "Well, if you say so," she said dubiously. "Still, thank you for coming along. I couldn't have done it without you."

Su Ling was silent for a few seconds. "... You're welcome. Not sure I want to do something like this again though, at least not till I get stronger." There was something else besides weariness in her voice, but in her tired state, Ling Qi couldn't tell what it was.

Ling Qi thought that was a pretty fair assessment. Things had come pretty close to going badly for them. Ling Qi fell silent after that, allowing the medicinal energy to circulate while she rested.

#### **Chapter 71 - Sect Work 5**

Being stuck in the Medicine Hall, Ling Qi soon began to feel restless and twitchy. She wanted to do something, but she had been told not to cultivate until morning, lest she end up hurting herself due to the foreign qi in her system.

It occurred to her then that she still had not written a response letter to her mother. Something else had always come up when she thought about it, but now, well... Ling Qi figured she should at least do something productive with her time.

... Even if she was already dreading staring awkwardly at the paper while trying to think of what to write.

She ended up doing just that for a time. She climbed out of bed to sit at the little writing desk in the corner and fiddled with the paper and ink pots. Eventually, after some dithering and a few odd looks from Su Ling, she managed to actually write.

The greeting took a few crossed out tries to get right. She honestly wasn't sure what she felt for her mother at this point. There was the memory of affection of course, buried under resentment and other less friendly emotions. Guilt was prominent too, as was curiosity and many other feelings that combined to make an ugly emotional mess in her head that she was reluctant to try and parse.

#### Mother,

My apologies for taking so long to write back. Things have been very busy. Between work for the Sect, training and other things, I have not found myself with much free time. I hope the packages that I have been sending have been arriving in good condition as well. I do not intend to stop sending them, whatever you might say. I have not been a very good daughter so please accept the coins in place of the expectations I couldn't fulfill. That said, are you in good health? You mentioned a change in circumstances, but you were not very specific.

I am still not certain what to write in these letters besides the well wishes and apologies. What are you doing right now? What has changed for you since I left home? Has anything of import happened in Tonghou?

See? Such generic questions. I do not have any idea what I'm doing. I have been well myself, barring a few incidents in training. The physicians here are more than capable of taking care of such trifles though. I am getting stronger quickly too! It might be a little arrogant, but I think I can safely say that I am among the top ten disciples in my year.

I hope I can visit you someday.

Your daughter, Ling Qi

She felt a bit better after finishing it, but the letter was still a mess; she jumped around on subjects too quickly. She had made an effort to keep her handwriting neat, but her natural penmanship tended toward chicken scratch.

The sun had mostly set by the time she finished writing. Once she had folded the letter, sealed the envelope, and set it on the table by her bedside, Ling Qi laid back down for the first full night's sleep she had partaken in for a month.

In the morning, she found Su Ling already gone, but she was hardly alone. The moment she stepped out of the medical ward, she found herself face to face with a bemused Gu Xiulan.

"Just how did you end up here again, Ling Qi?" Xiulan asked, the shorter girl crossing her arms and looking up at her archly. "Was it that difficult to take care of yourself without me for a time?"

Ling Qi gave her a wan smile. She was glad that Xiulan had recovered some of her arrogance; the girl's lack of self assurance in recent times had been worrying. "You know me, I find trouble to get into. Did you miss me so much you had to come to my bedside?" she shot back as she stepped past the girl, heading for the exit to the Medicine Hall.

Gu Xiulan huffed as she turned to follow her, dismissively flicking the sleeve on the new shimmering red and orange gown she had picked up somewhere. The gown was looser than her usual outfits with trailing hems. "It would be rude for me not to check in on you when you went through the trouble of doing the same for me."

"It wasn't any trouble," Ling Qi said, nodding politely to the disciples at the front desk of the Medicine Hall. "Did you master whatever you were working on then?" she asked. She avoided bringing up her actual concern for the other girl; Xiulan would take it as an insult if spoken. "Your sister is pretty impressive. You must have been working on something difficult for her to step in."

"Elder Sister Yanmei is the pride of our house," Xiulan replied stiffly. "I am most grateful to her for taking so much time aside to work with me." Her stiff tone was quickly replaced by pride though. "But yes, I believe I have gotten through my troublesome little bottleneck."

"Well, I'm glad you're doing well," Ling Qi said thoughtfully. "I was a bit worried when I couldn't find you after the big fight."

"Says the girl who was impaled and guarded like a dragon's jewel in the aftermath," Gu Xiulan snorted, shooting her a shrewd look. "Just what is the relationship between you and Bai Meizhen, Ling Qi? That girl was terrifying."

"We're friends," Ling Qi said simply, frowning at Gu Xiulan. "I like to think we're pretty close friends." She ignored the implication Gu Xiulan had made, not wanting to give the other girl fuel for teasing. "Anyway, do you mind if I ask... Is Senior Sister Yanmei... normal for the Inner Sect? Because she seemed really strong."

Gu Xiulan shot her an amused look that said that she knew what Ling Qi was doing. She picked up the new subject anyway as they left the Medicine Hall and strolled through the market, heading for the main plaza. "Elder Sister Yanmei is quite talented, having reached cyan at the age of twenty two. It is likely that she will be accepted as a core disciple soon. I think you may have allowed the… more prodigious members of our year to skew your view of things."

Ling Qi nodded; she supposed that was so. "She was twenty two?" Ling Qi asked in surprise. She had thought the girl to be seventeen or eighteen. Her own mother was only thirty or so. "I guess reading age

is kind of difficult." Ling Qi wondered at the length of time needed to reach cyan. Did progression in green simply become exponentially more difficult? "Is it normal for siblings to be so far apart in age?"

Gu Xiulan let out an amused laugh. "You are endearingly naive at times, Ling Qi. Sister Yanmei and I are quite close as such things go. My eldest sister is eighty six and has a child only a few years younger than I. You really do need to let go of your mortal assumptions about time."

Ling Qi shook her head, finding the idea that Gu Xiulan's oldest sister was almost three times the age of her own mother and as old as the most ancient mortal grandmothers in Tonghou difficult to process. "... Right. Well, anyway, once I get down to town and deliver this letter, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. I have some plans I think you might enjoy."

Her friend cocked her head to the side, giving her a curious look. "Is that so? Well, I can certainly hear you out."

So, as the two of them went down the mountain to get Ling Qi's letter sent, she began to reveal her plans to get some payback against those who still sided with Kang Zihao after the intra-council fight. She would first be getting a list of names from Cai's underlings and then using that to pick her targets.

With that done, she intended to start on any girls who were within that group, using her particular skills to ensure they regretted siding with that ass even after he took up with Sun Liling. That wasn't all she wanted to do though. While she was taking care of that, she wanted Gu Xiulan to challenge their stronger members, the ones that couldn't claim bullying. She would come along for backup of course.

She kind of wanted to hit them while they were off the mountain too, but she was still leery of that, especially with the curse she was currently suffering from. Ling Qi had decided to scale back her ambitions for the week in that regard too. Keeping the curse suppressed with Argent Mirror was quite the qi drain, even if she could afford to buy wellspring pills with her loot.

Gu Xiulan seemed amenable to the idea, having not quite forgiven Kang Zihao for his dog using her leg as a chew toy.

The first part of the plan went off without a hitch. She put in a discreet request with Gan Guangli and was rewarded with a list and a polite thank you note from the Cai heiress praising her personal effort in discouraging rebellion.

Much of the day was spent following Xiulan, watching with amusement as the girl got into the spirit of things with dueling challenges. Her friend's fires seemed to burn much hotter now, cutting right through the defenses of the boys she defeated. Ling Qi only had to step in once, when a trio of boys tried to jump Xiulan on a mountain path.

The afternoon and the night on the other hand were spent scoping out her female targets. There were few enough of them. Sun Liling hadn't made herself many friends so it seemed likely that those who did still stand outside Cai's rules were connected by family to Kang.

It was... fun getting back into old habits, slipping silently from shadow to shadow through windows left open. Exciting might be a better word. She tinkered with the simple formation alarms that guarded their homes and stripped them of valuables.

Although she didn't get anything amazing like technique slips or powerful talismans, Ling Qi managed to snag some good medicines. Unfortunately, she and Xiulan had to settle for slightly lower than normal profits due to the glut of items suddenly entering the market, but all in all, a pretty lucrative course of action and satisfying to boot.

## **Chapter 72 - Recovery 1**

Ling Qi grimaced slightly as she felt her knees tremble, the cursed qi in her system still hampering her every effort. She took a moment to adjust the weight of the bag she was carrying on her shoulders to be less awkward then hurried to catch up.

Han Jian and Gu Xiulan both shot her looks of concern from opposite sides of the path. Gu Xiulan had returned to their group training, but things remained awkward. Xiulan kept away from Han Jian and avoided talking to him, instead paying more attention to Fan Yu. It seemed to bewilder the shorter boy, but he didn't exactly seem unhappy about it. Xiulan was actually walking beside Fan Yu now.

The usually abrasive boy had been positively cheerful, relative to his usual attitude, since this week's sessions had started. It probably helped that he had finally broken through to the second spiritual realm too. Han Fang was as inscrutable as ever, simply walking by Han Jian's side with their largest catch, a white furred stag, on his wide shoulders.

"Just a little twinge," Ling Qi said dismissively in response to their looks. "The last mission I was on got a little rough."

"Well, if you're sure it's fine," Han Jian said. He seemed a bit tired; there was a certain tightness to his expression and other signs of stress in his stance. "Do you want to pause for a minute?"

"Ling Qi does not require such coddling," Gu Xiulan said with a haughty sniff, not looking at Han Jian.

Han Jian simply sighed and nodded, adjusting his own load. Ling Qi glanced between them with concern, but as socially awkward as she could be at times, she could tell that this was not something that would be helped by her sticking her nose in. So instead, she changed the subject. "I've been meaning to ask, what do you think about the things going on around here lately? I don't know enough to understand if all this stuff with Cai Renxiang is normal or not."

Ling Qi caught Han Fang glancing at the white band pinned to her sleeve and the similar one that Han Jian wore. It was Fan Yu who spoke up first though. "It is not how the Sects are supposed to be," he grumbled. "They are supposed to be free of such things."

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Han Jian said carefully. "Blocks always form; it's just the nature of things... The Lady Cai is going further than usual though in the level of authority she is trying to build."

"And you are supporting it, Brother Jian. Just where is your pride as a son of Golden Fields?" Fan Yu shot back, disgruntled. It was weird seeing his stern expression almost immediately go soft and dopey when Xiulan smiled at him. Ling Qi rolled her eyes. Fan Yu was still an abrasive jerk, but she had a hard time maintaining her initial dislike for him. He was just too easily manipulated.

"Well, considering that Father agreed with my decision in our correspondence and commended me for acquiring armor of Cai make, I'd say my pride is right where it belongs," Han Jian replied dryly, but there was something a bit sharp in his response and Fan Yu lowered his head slightly. Han Jian sighed,

brushing a hand through his hair, which had grown out lately, becoming a bit shaggy. "Golden Fields is still a long way from doing things on our own. You guys know that."

Ling Qi felt awkward as everyone else lowered their eyes too with expressions ranging from chagrin to irritation or simple somberness. "Isn't she the heir to the province though? I mean, doesn't this sort of thing happen pretty often when those kinds of people show up at the Sects?"

Han Jian shook his head. "Cai Renxiang's situation is unusual. Ducal clans are usually much, much larger than the Cai. Someone her age would never be the heir normally, but the Duchess Cai does not have any living siblings nor any other children," he explained. "Even when heirs are young, it usually isn't a settled matter."

Ling Qi frowned but nodded; she got what he was trying to say... although she recalled that Cai Renxiang herself didn't see her position that way. Ling Qi kept quiet.

"She has made the Sect a duller place," Gu Xiulan said irritably. "I suppose we can still find our own entertainment though." Xiulan shot a grin at Ling Qi, which she returned as she remembered the frustration on the faces of those who had lost to Gu Xiulan and the expressions on the faces of her own targets the next day. That had somewhat made up for the markdown on the stolen talismans.

"Things are probably going to get rough before the year is out. Even with her position, the older Outer Disciples aren't just going to knuckle under peacefully, and Sun Liling isn't gonna be in confinement forever," Han Jian reminded them. "I have a feeling that everyone will get their fill of violence by the time the tournament comes around."

Ling Qi gave Han Jian a thoughtful look; he sounded more determined than usual there. Fan Yu's expression darkened again at the mention of the tournament. Gu Xiulan's expression had changed as well, teeth bared in something that was definitely not a smile, even as a few strands of her hair let off wisps of smoke.

She glanced at Han Fang, but he showed no indication of nerves or determination, simply walking calmly at Han Jian's side. Han Fang was fully in second realm as well at this point and not too far behind Han Jian, who had recently hit the mid point in both realms. It seemed at least some of her friends hadn't given up on the Inner Sect. She would not fail to compete.

After the hunt was over, Ling Qi returned to meditation. Under the effects of the elixirs and pills she was using, purchased with her spoils, Ling Qi found her cultivation continuing to steadily rise and her dantian expanding. The growth seemed almost glacial compared to how quickly she had grown in the first months of her cultivation, but she was pretty sure she was still doing well. She was nearing another plateau in her physical cultivation after all.

Her spiritual cultivation had a long way to go though, and her meditations at the vent seemed a little empty with Li Suyin's absence. The other girl was apparently focusing on a job and receiving some tutoring which kept her very busy so they rarely saw one another. It did leave her some time to actually try and talk with Su Ling though. Ling Qi was still unsure as to where she stood with the girl in all honesty. It was difficult to read what Su Ling actually thought under her bluster and coarseness.

Her attempt lead her to where she was now, leaning against a tree while she watched Su Ling skin and clean the corpse of a rather large bear. She had helped the girl haul the beast out of the pit used to trap and kill it, but she then stood aside to let the girl with more expertise work. Ling Qi wrinkled her nose at the smell that rose from the partially skinned corpse.

"Does it always take this long?" she asked, watching the other girl rinse the gore off her hands before returning to the task of freeing the hide from the flesh and muscle beneath.

Su Ling shot her a flat look. "If you want to use everything, then yeah, it does. There's not really any way to speed up this kinda thing that I know of. Who knows. Maybe you can buy yourself a magic skinning knife or something," she answered flippantly.

"Probably not," Ling Qi grimaced. "It's taking everything I can do just to keep up with the cost of cultivation medicines nowadays."

Su Ling grunted, which Ling Qi took as agreement. Ling Qi remained silent after that, watching the fox girl's deft hands as she took the beast apart with practiced ease, wrapping and storing it with the materials she had brought along.

"Why're you doin' this anyway?" Su Ling broke the silence, not looking up from her work.

Ling Qi blinked, cocking her head to the side. "Well, these are good skills to have, right? I need beast cores for the spirit beast I'll be raising soon."

"I already showed you how to harvest the cores," Su Ling pointed out. "And it's not like you can't just haul the rest to market. 'S not like you really go out hunting for income after all; the difference in payout isn't that much for you."

Ling Qi frowned, crossing her arms. "Well, sure, I guess. It's still good to know for when I need it. Besides, we've known each other for awhile, but we haven't exactly talked much. That mission was... not the best situation, but I was hoping to get to know you better."

Su Ling looked up as she reached for a waterskin to rinse her bloodstained hands with. "Yeah, that's what I don't really get. Why now? We don't exactly have anything in common," she said bluntly.

"Why do I need a reason?" Ling Qi said defensively. "And... it's kinda nice to chat with someone who I don't have to worry about my words around," she added more quietly.

"Really? I wouldn't have figured," Su Ling said. "Outta all the commoners here, you're the one who slipped right into place with the noble types. I figured you were making a break for it."

"There are other commoners here besides Ji Rong and us?" Ling Qi asked, the words slipping out a moment before she thought better of it. "... That probably makes your point, doesn't it?" she said sheepishly

Su Ling waved a hand dismissively. "Nothin' wrong with that. It's just why I figured we were on different paths. Then you started followin' me around," she said with a shrug. "Besides, it's kinda inevitable given how ridiculously fast you've shot up."

Ling Qi nodded, accepting her words. "I suppose. I don't really see how that means we're on different paths though."

Su Ling grimaced and glanced at the remains of her kill, little more than bloody bones and offal at this point. "Look, I'm not saying that we aren't friends of a sort. You have Suyin's back, and I respect that. Heck, as long as I didn't get into it with somethin' dumb, you'd probably back me up as well, I think."

Ling Qi nodded, furrowing her brows. "So what's your point?"

Su Ling scowled and distractedly brushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes. "I guess, that art you gave me... It made me think about what I want to do. I don't care about all the politics and stupid games Immortals like to play. I don't care about governments and empires and clans 'n shit," she said, stumbling once or twice. "But they have one thing right. Mortals need all the protection they can get. From monsters, from us, even from themselves. Especially kids who don't even have a say in the shit they deal with."

Ling Qi stared at her. That was the most she had ever heard Su Ling say at once. "I'm still not sure I understand where that separates us." She could see where Su Ling was coming from. She had no doubt the girl's own childhood had been at least as, if not more, shitty than her own.

"What was the kid's name?" Su Ling asked, crossing her arms and giving Ling Qi a patient look. There was a beat of silence between them as Ling Qi narrowed her eyes; she was sure she had heard it mentioned... "How about his dad? You know the guy bowing and scraping to us?"

"... I get it," Ling Qi replied. She glanced to the side. "Well, no, I suppose I don't really get it," she admitted grudgingly. "I don't think I could handle worrying about everyone, not when I'm still trying to just worry about a few." She had spent years focused only on herself and her own survival. She wanted to be better than that, but she was still working out what that actually meant.

Su Ling grunted again and turned back to her task, gathering up the bones to be bundled. "And like I said, that's fine. I just wanted to get a real answer out of ya. You've gotten to dancing around with words too much. You can tag along as you like. I don't mind showing you stuff."

Ling Qi sighed. She was sure that she had the other girl's friendship, such as it was, but she had a feeling that growing any closer would be hard due to their different goals.

## **Chapter 73 - Recovery 2**

Ling Qi had not forgotten her promise to Meizhen, so she needed to speak with Cui. Luckily, the serpent had taken to resting on the stones near the kiln she had built for her egg. The green veined egg rocked back and forth occasionally now and throbbed with qi, sucking in heat voraciously and requiring more work to keep the kiln burning. She thought it would likely hatch soon if she focused on feeding the kiln.

For now though, she could prod Cui for ideas and information on Meizhen's likes while caring for the egg. The snake wasn't too reticent about the information thankfully, although Cui did require some minor bribery in the form of a couple of beast cores from her hunting. The answers she got were a little sparse though, simply because it seemed that Meizhen did not often do things 'for fun'.

However, Cui was still able to give her some ideas. Ling Qi would just have to find a reasonably sized lake. There had to be one around here somewhere, right?

Ling Qi refrained from speaking of her plans to Meizhen, who seemed to have little time for anything outside of cultivation. Meizhen was finishing her breakthrough to Bronze after all. Still, her friend was able to give her a few bits of useful advice before retreating into seclusion, which granted Ling Qi some insights as she mastered the second phase of the Eight Phase Ceremony.

As she cultivated and drank in the celestial qi, she was able to reflect on the moon and what it meant as an element of qi. The moon was, at its core, an element of change, one that meant little in and of itself but which altered other elements it was applied to, creating new variations of elemental qi. Each phase of the moon was thus different. The waning crescent, the phase which colored her version of the Ceremony, symbolized mystery and acts performed out of the light. It was cunning and whimsy, the desire to trick and steal, leaving one's victims scratching their heads and cursing the shadows. It was darkness and wind tempered by guiding moonlight.

Ling Qi was not yet sure how deep she wished to delve into that phase of the moon. Research into the nature of the other phases would probably grant her further insight into the hole in the art she still found herself unable to illuminate. The hole felt different each time she contemplated it, as if awaiting a decision of hers. She had a feeling she would have a choice to make after mastering the third part of Eight Phase Ceremony.

Ling Qi soon found herself spending her evenings at the archives. She had the free time after all, now that she had mastered the second phase, and the shaman's bags from her last Sect mission weren't going to unlock themselves. LingQi hadn't studied the locking characters stitched into the leather in depth, but they had given off a very dangerous feeling.

Of course, actually doing anything beyond practicing her calligraphy and memorizing lists of common formation characters proved difficult. She wasn't really sure where to begin and often found herself staring in frustration at pages upon pages of theorycrafting above her understanding or simply rereading things she already knew. She felt an increasing desire to kick whatever disciple was in charge of organizing the archive.

As the night wore on, her gaze drifted toward the only other disciple present. Xuan Shi was in his normal spot, nose buried in a book. Her eyes drifted to the white band on his arm, contrasting starkly with his black robes. They were basically allies, right? Asking for a little advice wasn't unreasonable. She didn't precisely like it, but she supposed it couldn't hurt. Besides, of the people remaining on the 'council', he was the only one she hadn't really spoken to. She ignored Huang Da's continued existence. As it should be.

After a moment, Ling Qi gathered the books she had been perusing under her arm and made her way over to the boy's table. Glancing at the book he was reading, she paused. What kind of weird book was titled 'Voyages of Yu Long: Mists of the Raven Isle'?

"Excuse me," she spoke up politely as she reached his table. "May I ask you something?"

It took several seconds for Xuan Shi to look up from the thin book in his hands, which was a little annoying but gave her a moment to study him. The odd boy's conical hat was tipped back so she was able to get a better look at his face. His hair was short and black but had a slight greenish tinge when the light hit it right. His features were as blocky and plain as she remembered, but his complexion was darkly tanned where it wasn't outright scaled. The high collar of his robe still concealed the lower part of his face though.

"Miss Ling," Xuan Shi responded with a slight nod. "What knowledge eludes you?"

"I was hoping you could point me to a good starting point for more practical formations knowledge," she explained. "I have a fairly firm grasp on the basics at this point, but I am having a little trouble advancing." Ling Qi was back to speaking formally again; this didn't seem like a good time to be casual.

He stared at her for several uncomfortable seconds while she restrained herself from fidgeting. "What branch?" he asked shortly. "The paths of formation are not as the sands of the beach, but still, they are many. What area do you seek knowledge of?"

She blinked before glancing to the side in thought. What did she actually want out of her formations knowledge?

"... Security, I think. The techniques you need to protect places and things," Ling Qi answered, both because it would be nice to protect her own things and because it would also make her own efforts at acquiring goods more fruitful. Ling Qi had been forced to stand down from stealing from a couple of targets when raiding Kang Zihao's allies because she had noticed security she wasn't sure she could deal with.

Xuan Shi made a thoughtful sound and reached out, tapping his finger against a particularly heavy tome on the shelf beside him. "Constructing defenses is often an arduous task, but if that is Miss Ling's decision, your foundation materials lie here."

She nodded, taking the heavy tome. A few months ago, she probably would have winced at the weight.

"... May I ask you one other thing?" she asked, despite her better judgement. At his raised eyebrow, she continued, "Why do you talk like that?"

He regarded her silently, seemingingly unoffended but not answering either. This time, she did fidget as the uncomfortable moment wore on. "Reputation and words are a power to themselves. Expectations are to be met and maintained, are they not?"

She stared back at him as he lowered his eyes back to his book and flipped a page, clearly dismissing her from his thoughts. So... he talked like that because he was expected to? Weird. She shook her head and turned away to head back to her table to study.

Xuan Shi was right. The book he had pointed out was a well laid out and relatively easy to understand resource, even if the lettering was tiny and the text dry. It would probably take her a few nights to get through it. Thankfully, with the ice somewhat broken, she was able to prod the odd boy into answering questions every so often, and she soon learned the Thieves Monument Formation, a type of security measure that inflicted paralysis on unauthorized lockpickers. Sometimes, she even understood his answers without puzzling over them for a quarter hour.

However, Xuan Shi was not the only one to frequent the archive, as Ling Qi found when she returned there the next evening to continue her studies. She sensed him first, like a cloud of angry static at the edge of her senses, but she was not going to leave just to avoid a potential enemy. There was no violence allowed in the archive anyway. As she entered the building, she caught sight of Ji Rong.

Between his wan skin, his prominent veins, and dark circles around his eyes, frankly, the scarred boy looked like a recently recovered plague victim. Ji Rong's faintly starved appearance lent him a certain feral edge. Ling Qi felt a twinge of sympathy for him, but... they had chosen their sides. She didn't allow herself to linger or look directly at him as she briskly walked past, heading for the formations section of the archive.

However, it seemed that Ji Rong wasn't content to ignore her. "They let you keep your pass, huh? Figured you'd have had to give it to that snake witch," he commented as she passed him, not raising his dull eyes from the art scroll in front of him.

"My friend wouldn't just take something of mine," Ling Qi replied coolly, even as she stopped walking. Old instincts told her to keep walking, to just ignore him and duck out of sight... but her new pride warred with that.

"Hmph. Guess someone like that wouldn't even need it. Not like that stopped the turtle bastard," Ji Rong drawled, finally looking up to meet her eyes. "So it's just bein' a lackey then? Guess I shoulda figured someone like *you* would have no pride."

"And someone like *you* would always have too much," she replied. They were both street children, that much was true, but... they were different. Ling Qi was a sneak and a pickpocket, but Ji Rong was every inch the street tough and thug. "It's not my fault you were dumb enough to try and steal from Cai on the job."

His sunken eyes lit with anger, and his expression twisted into a scowl. "I'm not that stupid," he spat. "You think I don't know that you don't take outta the boss's cut? I just took a prize for my own trouble. Cai got her 'fine'."

"I'm pretty sure she said not to do that," Ling Qi shot back.

"Come off it. Have you ever met a guard who wasn't on the take? Don't pretend you haven't done the same," Ji Rong scoffed. "You, of all people, should know how all this crap works under the pretty words. Nothing's any different."

Ling Qi considered the council and her own role within it. It was true that she had little faith in it; Huang Da was a member after all. However... "That's where we disagree, I guess." She turned away. "I'm not going to live like I'm still in the gutter."

"Idiot," she heard him grumble under his breath as she walked away, too low for anyone without enhanced senses to hear. "And I felt bad for her when that creep latched on. Shouldn't have wasted my time distracting him."

Ling Qi almost stopped but thought better of it. The past was past, and whatever else could be said... She had enough on her plate worrying about herself and her friends.

## **Chapter 74 - Night on the Lake**

The body of the flute was made of a dark wood she did not recognize, etched with lines filled with powdered silver. It was the finest instrument she had ever held, perfectly proportioned and free of imperfections. But the mouthpiece still felt familiar, and the sound held a personal note that was hard to quantify.

Even remade, it was still her flute. Ling Qi left the market that day feeling light, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

However, Ling Qi had little time to luxuriate in her satisfaction. She had promised both Meizhen and herself that she would see the girl's recent successes in cultivation celebrated. She had taken care of the funding, thanks to her hunts with Han Jian and the others, and she had taken care of the set up with a little advice from Cui. Now, the most difficult part remained; she had to convince Meizhen to follow her out into the wilderness.

Ling Qi wasn't going to fail though, not with the effort she had put into arranging the celebration. Her opportunity came late in the week when Meizhen finally emerged from seclusion. Her friend had changed subtly since last she saw her; Meizhen's hair was a few centimeters longer and her movements even more graceful and flowing. The little patches of white scales on her neck and the back of her hands had become less noticeable or perhaps, her complexion had become even more unnaturally white. Bai Meizhen looked more and more like some spirit princess from a story.

Her friend had seemed a bit off balance from her recent breakthrough so it was easier than usual to get Meizhen to follow along under the premise of Ling Qi needing to show her something. It wasn't even a lie really.

As they descended the mountain, it became harder to convince Meizhen to keep following her, and Ling Qi couldn't exactly force her now fully third realm friend along. Ling Qi wasn't about to give up at this point though, despite her friend's increasing irritation at Ling Qi's non-answers.

Soon enough, they approached the little lake Ling Qi had found.

"This is growing absurd," Bai Meizhen grumbled, seeming to practically float above the root-tangled ground with her smooth movements. "You can at least tell me why this is so important, can you not, Ling Qi?"

"I told you that we're just about there," Ling Qi responded with a grin. "Please. It's just up ahead."

"I still do not see why we needed to come immediately after my breakthrough," her companion said cooly. "Could this not have waited? I barely had the time to bathe."

"Nope!" Ling Qi said brightly as she stepped out past the treeline to the shore of the little lake.

"Because you would have become busy again. I told you we were going to celebrate your breakthrough, didn't I?"

Meizhen blinked as she stepped out of the forest as well, her white gown drifting a bit in the breeze. Ling Qi watched as she scanned the rippling waters, made rosy by the light of the setting sun. Her gaze soon drifted to the shore where a small boat was tied to a sapling. "What is this?"

"Cui told me you missed swimming," Ling Qi responded. "And the fishing too. Said you liked stuff fresh. So I figured I could find a place where we could relax for the afternoon since you wouldn't like an actual party. I even practiced with the boat and made an offering to the lake spirit of the lake. You don't need to worry about anything." Getting nets and fishing line rated for grade one beasts had been a little pricey, more than the boat really. The boat had just been a pain to transport.

Bai Meizhen stared at her and then looked back to the lake, expression unreadable. Ling Qi shifted from foot to foot nervously as the silence stretched. Had Cui steered her wrong? Ling Qi had thought it wouldn't be a problem now that they could talk properly.

Then Meizhen raised her sleeve to cover her mouth and made a soft sound, her shoulders shaking. At first, Ling Qi was nonplussed, but it quickly became clear that her friend was laughing. The sound was almost giggly with a sibilant quality to it, although her mind rebelled a bit at applying that term to Bai Meizhen.

"What - did Cui lie to me? We don't have to do this," Ling Qi said, looking away. "I just... I wanted to do something nice for you."

"It is fine," Meizhen said, lowering her billowy sleeve, a small smile on her lips. "It is just - I have not done something so childish in years. Only Cui would suggest such a thing."

"So, it's a no go?" Ling Qi asked, frowning. She had spent a lot of time looking for a nice isolated place too, figuring Meizhen would like some privacy to go swimming.

"Perhaps just this once as an indulgence. It would be a shame to reject your efforts," the pale girl said after a moment's pause, the humor fading from her voice. "You said you knew how to use the boat? I'm afraid the ones I am familiar with were powered by gi in one form or another."

Ling Qi nodded, her smile returning. "Yeah, it took a little practice, but I can probably manage not to tip us over." She was glad that Meizhen was fine with this; she had feared her friend would reject the idea. "So don't worry. After all, this one is powered by Qi too."

Bai Meizhen gave her a flat look. "That was terrible."

Well, yeah, it was. It had sounded better in her head.

Ling Qi smiled sheepishly and headed down to the shore, followed by her friend. They spent the rest of the afternoon out on the lake. It was relaxing, even if Meizhen had to show her how to not tangle herself up with the line. It was a little more difficult to coax Meizhen out into the water, but after Ling Qi dove in, stripped to the bottommost layer of her gown, the other girl had reluctantly followed.

Ling Qi envied her friend's grace in the water, but she supposed it was to be expected given the geography of her home, Thousand Lakes. Besides, Meizhen wasn't so ethereal and elegant once Ling Qi had a chance to mess with her a bit. Even the proud and elegant girl could not help but retaliate against her splashes and horseplay.

On the other hand, Ling Qi found the fishing dull, but she didn't mind doing it for her friend. It was a little disturbing to watch her friend swallow a still wriggling fish whole and hear its bones crunching as they were crushed in her throat. But Ling Qi kept her reaction to the unsettling sight from her face, choosing to be pleased instead. She had a feeling that Meizhen had only eaten in front of her because Meizhen had momentarily forgotten herself after playing around.

Her friend's dietary oddity aside, Ling Qi had a lot of fun splashing around in the water and relaxing with her back against the other girl's in the boat. Eventually, the sun sunk all the way below the horizon, and they settled the boat back on the shore, sitting side by side with their legs dangling in the water.

"Thank you, Ling Qi. This was nice," Bai Meizhen said quietly, her hand resting atop Ling Qi's. Her snow white skin looked even more ethereal now, damp under the light of the half moon above.

"Not a problem, Bai Meizhen," she replied. "You've done a lot for me. You still do. I'm just glad that we're friends."

"As am I," Meizhen said quietly. "... I would not be averse to you calling me by name in private."

Ling Qi blinked then smiled. That was kind of a big deal for a noble like Bai Meizhen, right? "Sure thing. You can do the same with me."

"Would you turn this way for a moment then, Qi?" Meizhen asked quietly.

Curious, Ling Qi did so, turning her eyes away from the stars to look at her friend, who was leaning forward and...

Meizhen's lips were cool and dry and had a faint coppery taste. The blood from the fish earlier, she supposed. It only lasted a few seconds before she felt Meizhen pulling away, removing her hand and drawing her legs up to her chest.

"My apologies. That was deeply inappropriate. I hope you can forgive me," Meizhen said softly, looking out across the lake.

Ling Qi's first response was an odd, slightly strangled sound. Her second attempt was a bit better. "I - You- I mean, it's fine, I guess?" The statement sounded like a question to her own ears. "I just- I don't-You're a girl," she said inarticulately, blushing hotly as she turned away. If it had been anyone else that kissed her, Ling Qi would have screamed or slapped them or probably worse if she had a knife on her. She didn't know what to do.

"I know," Meizhen said plainly. "It will not happen again. I can only ask that you forgive my... poor impulse control. Grandfather always said I was too emotional. I am sorry. I didn't mean to ruin things with you."

"No, it's... Don't worry about it," Ling Qi muttered. She was a little angry; she didn't like being taken advantage of like that, but it was Meizhen, her best friend. "I guess it's my fault too for pulling you out here when you were tired. Sorry, Meizhen."

Her friend hummed softly, giving her a worried look. Ling Qi managed to smile, hoping they could just ignore the whole awkward moment. Meizhen seemed to relax at her reaction. "Yes, I apologize again. Perhaps we should head home. A few hours of sleep might do me well."

And so, on that unsettling note, the night ended.

# **Chapter 75 - Melodies 1**

The following days, Ling Qi threw herself into training and meditation to distract herself from the confusion and uncomfortable feelings that filled her thoughts. With such frantic focus, the second level of the Argent Mirror Art came to her swiftly. It was not a comfortable experience; the art was focused on self-reflection and clearsightedness, and further mastery only left her less able to hide from her thoughts.

She found herself thinking over past events. Su Ling's words came back to her, as did her actions since her stab-induced vision. Had she been more affected by her elements than she thought? On reflection, she did feel like she had changed as of late. Was that due to her arts or simple evolution of the self? Ling Qi wasn't sure, but she resolved to be more mindful of such things in the future.

The other matter which her self-reflection brought up was more recent: Meizhen and what had happened at the lake. Ling Qi... did not feel that way. She did not think of Meizhen as anything more than a good friend and had felt nothing but surprise and confusion during that moment. But it was clear that her friend did feel differently. Even the clarity of Argent Mirror did not grant her knowledge of what to do about Meizhen's feelings though.

Ling Qi had time to think while sitting in the Medicine Hall. Ling Qi couldn't afford to miss her treatment; the curse, while fairly mild in its current form, could rapidly worsen if left unattended for more than a week or two. It was, according to the words of the Medicine Hall disciple treating her, meant to inflict a sort of wasting sickness on its victims. She wondered if its relatively mild first stage was meant to cloak its spread.

That was a matter for Elders. She had more than enough concerns of her own without getting involved in something so far above her head. She wished Su Ling luck in looking into medicines. After the treatment was over, she found herself with a free afternoon.

Ling Qi decided to stay a little longer at the Medicine Hall. She had asked around and been told that Li Suyin was doing chores in the area and should be finishing soon. Upon reaching the doorway with a sign indicating the end of the 'free' part of the hall, Ling Qi leaned against the wall to wait, entertaining herself by idling studying the tiny formation characters etched into wood around her.

There was the usual stuff she had grown used to seeing on Sect buildings, simple repeating patterns to ward against basic wear and tear, as well as patterns to increase durability and fire resistance. The somehow orderly tangle of characters etched into webs at each of the four corners were beyond her skill level though; she was pretty sure she would regret tampering with them or trying to bypass the warded door. Which made sense, considering this hall was Sect property.

Ling Qi continued to study the top right inscription circle for potential weaknesses as she waited. It was about a quarter hour later that she heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the doors.

Li Suyin emerged as the door opened, a distracted look on her face. Suyin's short hair was tied back and hidden under a cloth, and she wore a long grey smock over the front of her gown like an apron.

Smudges of dust were apparent on her cheeks, as were blots of ink on her fingers. Ling Qi supposed they must have had her cleaning and organizing things in the storage area.

"Li Suyin, how have you been?" Ling Qi greeted, straightening up from the wall.

Her friend blinked as she glanced up, noticing Ling Qi. "Oh, Ling Qi, hello," she said, smiling slightly as she let the door drift shut. Ling Qi couldn't help but note the faint throb of the qi running through the wood as the door closed and the formation sealed itself again. "I've been doing well. I'm sorry for not visiting you when you came in," she apologized, looking chagrined. "I've just been kept so busy, and I was assured Su Ling and you didn't have any serious injuries…"

"Don't worry about it," Ling Qi replied, following her friend as the girl moved to start walking toward the main section of the hall. She didn't know how much she could say on the recent mission so she elected to just change the subject. "They must be working you hard. I hardly see you at our place anymore."

Li Suyin caught her eye, clearly understanding her meaning. "Ah, yes. The mornings are a very busy time for the hall so I have to be available for assignment. Well, for a few more weeks at least," she corrected. "If I can pass the second exam and officially become an assistant, I will receive a little more latitude in the matter."

Ling Qi hummed to herself, looking her friend over out of the corner of her eye. "So they make you do a month or two of grunt work before they actually show you anything important?"

Li Suyin flushed, fidgeting with her sleeves. "W-well, I wouldn't call it that. It's important not to waste actual Medicine Hall disciples' time with insufficiently dedicated assistants. Besides, I have been receiving instruction," she replied a bit defensively. "Even if it's not exactly orthodox..." she added under her breath.

Ling Qi gave Suyin a concerned look as they rounded a corner, the sounds of the entrance hall starting to reach their ears. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you see..." Li Suyin begun somewhat anxiously as they entered the main hall.

"Assistant Li." A flat female voice cut off her words before Suyin could continue. Ling Qi swung her gaze around to find the speaker, who had been leaning against the wall herself before stepping out in front of them.

What she saw was... strange. The girl who had spoken was almost as tall as her and was even more lanky and thin than Ling Qi. She was pale with slightly gaunt features and dark circles under her eyes and black hair tied back in a loose and careless tail. Some kind of face mask hung loosely around her neck.

The girl wore a bizarre and almost skin tight dark green silk shirt under a black leather vest with similarly figure-hugging pants tucked into knee-high heavy leather boots. Her arms were likewise covered to the elbow by gloves of some kind of scaly animal hide. Her qi hung about her like a cloud of weblike strands, ominous and twitching; she was fully in the third realm.

Suyin seemed to recognize her given the way she hurriedly bowed her head. "Ah, Senior Sister Bao, my apologies. I did not know you would be waiting." Li Suyin glanced at Ling Qi, who raised her eyebrows, looking between the blue-haired girl and the newcomer. "Ling Qi, this is Senior Sister Bao Qingling. She has been gracious enough to allow me to assist her."

"I thought Inner Sect disciples weren't allowed on the outer mountain," Ling Qi said a little dubiously, not quite liking the way the older girl had simply glanced over her and promptly dismissed her.

"The rule does not apply to Medicine Hall disciples assigned to this hall. Outer Sect riffraff can hardly be trusted with complex procedures," the older disciple answered disinterestedly, words that should have sounded malicious or arrogant seeming matter-of-fact.

Li Suyin laughed awkwardly, glancing nervously at Ling Qi. Ling Qi simply gave her a reassuring look. Even if this Bao Qingling's attitude was grating, she wasn't going to say something dumb to an Inner Sect disciple just for being abrasive. Besides, she was probably partially at fault for the girl's presence what with the curse and Sun Liling's recent rampage.

"I see. I guess I should be thanking you for taking care of my good friend Li Suyin, Elder Sister Bao."

The girl looked at her a little longer this time although her gaze remained apathetic. "Mm. You are welcome. Assistant Li has a good hand for delicate matters. It seems this year's Outer Disciples are less useless than usual," she said bluntly. Ling Qi had a feeling that that was as close to an acknowledgement as she would get from the girl. The Inner Disciple's gaze returned to Li Suyin. "Assistant Li, I require another set of hands for the preparation of today's procedures. Come along."

Bao Qingling turned away from them, walking away toward the exit of the hall without even waiting for a response. Li Suyin shot Ling Qi an apologetic look. "... I am sorry, Ling Qi. I will have to talk to you later. Thank you for coming to visit me. We can catch up tomorrow I'm sure."

"Don't worry about it," Ling Qi said easily. Maybe she would be bristling if she was the same person she had been when she first came to the mountain, but she had come far enough to recognize the difference between a generally abrasive attitude and targeted contempt. She couldn't say she liked the older girl though. "Just... don't get caught up in anything weird, alright?"

Li Suyin laughed quietly, apparently taking her words as a joke and nodded before hurrying after the retreating figure of the older girl. Ling Qi shook her head. Since Li Suyin was busy, she would start preparing to meet the tutor she had hired.

The next day, she received a note to meet an hour after noon at the gate that marked the entrance to the main road of the outer mountain. Her tutor would be a boy named Ruan Shen. It wasn't far from noon by that time so she was soon on the path down the mountain. Sore and fatigued as she still felt, she stuck to the road instead of using the more direct path of hopping down the cliffside, but even then, it wasn't a long walk anymore.

The gate was a tall arched structure, a dozen meters high or more, stretching over a road wide enough for several horses to pass side by side. She wasn't the only disciple on the path but neither was there a crowd or heavy foot traffic so her gaze quickly caught on a figure that seemed likely to be her tutor.

Ruan Shen looked a few years older than her, although she was aware of how little that could mean, and was fairly tall with a head of shaggy and untamed black hair that faded to light blue at the tips. His bangs hung down over his eyes, concealing his face somewhat as he plucked at the strings of a lute of some kind.

Ling Qi always had trouble remembering the exact names of the different instrument types, but now that she thought of it, his name on the note had been written with the same character as the instrument, the ruan, so that seemed a likely guess. He glanced upward as she approached, idly scanning the light traffic with a lazy gaze.

She could admit her tutor was pretty handsome. Clearly, he kept up on his physical cultivation given what she could see due to the loose blue and white robe he wore. It hung pretty far open in the front; she had no idea how he kept it from falling off his shoulders. Ling Qi averted her eyes from that quickly enough, any admiration she might have felt quashed under awkward memories of Meizhen's lips and the resurgence of her own insecurities.

Shaking her head, she dismissed such thoughts and picked up her pace. It didn't take long before the older boy's gaze came to rest on her, his eyes assessing despite the seemingly permanently amused expression on his face.

"Hey there. I suppose you're Ling Qi?" he asked, raising a hand in greeting. A few of the other disciples passing by glanced their way but only momentarily.

Ling Qi crossed her arms, some awkwardness surfacing despite her efforts to keep her thoughts in order. "Yeah, that's me," she said, before wincing. She pulled out the note with the Sect seal to show him. "I mean, yes. I am Ling Qi. Thank you for taking the time to teach me, Senior Brother Ruan," she corrected, coughing into her hand. "I suppose they must have given you a description?"

He chuckled slightly, pushing himself up from the pillar he leaned against and lowering his instrument to his side as he fished a matching seal-marked note from his pocket to confirm his identity. "Yeah, they did. No reason to be so stiff though. You can call me Shen if you'd like. It won't bother me."

"Senior Brother Shen," Ling Qi responded after a moment as she stopped in front of him, dipping her head. If he said it was fine, she could relax a little. "I haven't done this before. What exactly are we going to do?"

He hummed thoughtfully, looking her over, and Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably. It wasn't that he was being a pervert or anything, but his eyes were disturbingly piercing. It almost felt like he was looking through her, but she was having trouble feeling his qi at all.

"Well, as much as I like the idea of having a cute little junior sis," he began before pausing and giving her another look over. "Or not so little as the case may be."

Ling Qi frowned at him. ... Some errant part of her mind felt the need to point out that he hadn't retracted the cute descriptor. "Is there a problem?" she asked politely.

"Nah, nothing like that," Ruan Shen said, waving his free hand dismissively. "I'm just gonna need to test you a bit. Gotta see what kind of melodies you have in your repertoire before I can teach you. Not

too many disciples follow the musician's path so I hope this isn't just a whim on your part. That'd just be real sad."

Ling Qi drew herself up, summoning her flute to her hand. "I'm not an amateur," she said with a hint of fierceness. "And I'm not just dabbling. My music is one of my best skills."

Her tutor studied her expression then laughed. "Well, I'm glad. Why don't we find a better spot though? As much as this bunch would enjoy the free concert, I think we'd do better to go without distractions today. Follow me."

She wasn't entirely certain what to make of the other disciple. But for all that her instincts cried out at the idea of following a stranger to an out of the way place, he had the Sect seal, and tutors doing something untoward with their authority was supposed to be punished pretty heavily.

In the end, she followed him out a short distance into the foothills, and they stopped in a small clearing at the top of a steep hill studded with several large boulders. For the first day, Ling Qi played for him, first with her flute then with other instruments as he tested the limits of her musical knowledge and ability.

Ruan Shen was mostly unreadable that day, offering little except simple instruction and the occasional pointer on improving her technical skill or correction for errors, but... she thought he seemed impressed or at least, not disappointed. Her tutor cheerfully instructed her to meet him at the same spot the next day.

Things settled into a routine. Ling Qi would work on cleansing a head meridian at the argent vent in the morning then swing by the Medicine Hall to chat with Li Suyin when the girl had time. Despite the less than stellar introduction, Li Suyin was apparently enjoying playing assistant to that Qingling girl. She was mostly tasked with preparing ingredients and helping with time-sensitive tasks, but the older girl apparently thought aloud enough that Li Suyin was picking up a fair bit of knowledge just from listening in, along with the occasional borrowed scroll.

In the afternoons, she would go to her tutoring sessions, which seemed to largely consist of improvised duets and musical tests accompanied by discussions on music theory and its relation to qi and cultivation. In the evenings, between hunting with Han Jian's group and training with Meizhen, she reached Late Silver.

Sometimes, the training with Meizhen even managed to only be half again as awkward as they had been before the lake celebration.

## **Chapter 76 - Melodies 2**

Her efforts to help Su Ling took place at night. She met the fox-eared girl at the vent, and they went from there, taking the narrow natural paths that lead higher on the mountain.

"Tell me I'm not the only one who thinks there's something weird with that girl Li Suyin is training with," Ling Qi said as the two of them climbed a short cliff face with mostly effortless ease.

Su Ling grunted in response, easily finding foot and hand holds as she moved up the rockface herself. "Not really my business. Suyin's actually pretty secretive in her own way."

"I guess so, Ling Qi said grudgingly, eyeing the top of the cliff. She tensed her muscles and pushed, leaping up the remaining five meters or so to catch the edge and pull herself up over the cliff edge. Her recent push through to Late Silver was a nice increase in ability. "It still bugs me that she won't talk about any of the details of what that girl has her doing."

"Might be because you can get pretty nosy about the shit you do care about," Su Ling called up, giving her an annoyed look. Ling Qi simply grinned cheekily down at the silent accusation of 'showoff'. "You're not her mother. Let her do her own thing."

Ling Qi made a dissatisfied sound and crossed her arms. "Maybe I'm just being paranoid," she admitted.

"Yeah, you don't see me prodding you about whatever you're getting up to with that guy you've been hanging around with," Su Ling said as she pulled herself up over the edge and stood, dusting herself off.

Ling Qi rolled her eyes at the implication, but she got the point. "You know it's just music practice."

"Course I do," Su Ling replied, unruffled. "Which is the point." Ling Qi lowered her head a bit in acknowledgment as they started out through the scraggly trees clinging to the steep mountainside. "Not that I'd blame ya. From what I saw, that is a pretty fine hunk of meat," Su Ling added blithely.

Ling Oi shot her a withering look, "You too? I get enough of that from Gu Xiulan."

"Eh, nothing wrong with lookin'." Su Ling shrugged. "Anyway, still not sure why you're doing this, but-"

"Because I want to help my friend since I know she's taking on extra work," Ling Qi cut in irritatedly.

"... Yeah, alright," Su Ling acknowledged. "I need to collect a lot this week since I'm gonna be trying to break through to the second."

"Good for you," Ling Qi said encouragingly as they wove through the rough terrain. "So, how is the kid from the town doing?" She didn't want to get too involved, but it was important to Su Ling.

"He's not great, but he's stable," Su Ling replied. "I can't produce the quality of pill that the Medicine Hall can, but I guess he didn't get the full whammy either. Makes sense since the asshole was planning to use the kid. Wouldn't do much good if the kid kicked it just from being near to the ritual."

Ling Qi could only nod at that. She was glad the other girl was doing well at her self-assigned task. Conversation lapsed after that as they instead focused on gathering the herbs that Su Ling needed.

Between her nights out with Su Ling and more sporadic hunts with Han Jian, she managed to pull in a decent amount of spirit stones thankfully. Ling Qi had been spending them like water for the past few weeks, so it was good to stock up.

She didn't have much time to dwell on her financial woes though because every waking moment not dedicated to one of her other tasks was being spent keeping the kiln burning on full blast as the egg inside wobbled and twitched on occasion. According to the research she had done, the most likely time for hatching was the hours leading to dawn or just after, so the last segment of her time vanished just like that. Ling Qi was extremely glad that she could go a week or two without sleeping at this point.

On the third day of her tutoring, they finally moved past mundane music practice and qi theory to beginning to work on their art techniques. Ling Qi was reluctant to show off Forgotten Vale Melody, but well, that cat was firmly out of the bag she supposed.

Ling Qi didn't hold back as she filled the sunny hilltop with mist and stalking shadows and the haunting melody of the forgotten vales. Sitting still like she was, unworried about combat, she could almost see the misty mountain valleys and frightening vistas the song was meant to depict. It was beautiful in a dark way, or so she liked to think.

Ruan Shen, for his part, hadn't moved from atop the flat-topped boulder he used as a seat during their lessons, his normally smiling expression thoughtful as Ling Qi allowed the notes to fade and the mist to disperse, floating away on the breeze.

"That's not a bad tune you have there," he mused, idly scratching his chin as his eyes followed a wisp of dissolving mist. "Not really my style, but no, it's not a bad one at all. It seems a little sad for a beauty to be pouring her heart into something so melancholy though." Ruan Shen idly strummed a chord on his instrument.

"Please stop that, Senior Brother Shen," Ling Qi said, giving him an unamused look. Ruan Shen liked to tease her and get sidetracked on pointless things. The first few times, she blushed, but by now, she didn't even react. "I didn't come here to get teased."

He just grinned at her, which simply made her eyebrow twitch in further irritation. "Heh. I've said it before, right? Every lady that cultivates is a beauty in her own way," he said easily. "And man, that title just doesn't get old. I'll say it again, you've got a real good tune there. I won't ask where you got the work of a master; it's none of my business. But I gotta ask, have you played anything else before you started these lessons with me?"

Ling Qi frowned, rubbing her thumb thoughtfully along the cool wood of her flute. "Not recently. I haven't had time really. I just have so much to do."

"Kinda figured," her tutor replied, his normal expression of amusement returning. "Aside from that one, your songs are stiff. You've got the technical stuff down, you don't miss any notes, and you know all the little details of how to play when it comes to your flute, but today's the first time I really felt any soul in your music. You were alone for a long time, weren't you?" he asked casually, even as Ling Qi

stiffened at his assertion. "Yeah... lonely, afraid, hungry, and hurting," he continued blithely. "Whoever gave you that song matched it to you well."

Ling Qi's grip on her flute tightened, and she scowled at the older boy. "Don't just assume you know things," she snapped.

"Ha, what a scary look." Ruan Shen chuckled. "Sorry, don't be mad, my little junior sister. I won't pry into things. Music really is one of the purest expressions of the spiritual arts. At least, so I've been taught," he mused, strumming a cheerful ditty on his ruan. "It's the closest you can come to a pure expression of emotion and feeling without the weirder stuff, and that makes it great for channeling your qi. You've noticed that song of yours is pretty versatile, right?"

Ling Qi forced herself to relax. "Yes. So why doesn't everyone use music?"

"Not everyone's got the right attitude for it, and not everyone agrees. Plus, musical arts need a fair bit of set up to really get going. It takes time to reach your crescendo and a lot of stamina and concentration to pour out your heart all through a fight too."

Ling Qi nodded. It made sense from her own experience. Musical arts were versatile but also time consuming and qi intensive. "So, what's your advice, Senior Brother Shen? How can I improve?" The weird delight her tutor seemed to get out of her calling him "Senior Brother" was kind of annoying, but it was also useful for getting straight answers. She could tell that he was playing up his reaction though; the sharp-eyed boy was a lot more perceptive than he let on.

He grinned down at her. "I can show you a few things: how to really get a feel for the qi going into every note and the way it flows from your fingers and breath. What you need the most, if you're gonna focus on this though, is some time on other songs. You gotta cheer up a little, write something yourself, something that you can really put your all into."

She frowned suspiciously up at him. "What - I'm supposed to develop a new art myself?"

"Nah, nothing like that. Even I'm not ready to do that yet. I guess I should ask: is that all your music is to you? A tool for fights?" he asked, an out-of-place serious note in his voice.

Ling Qi fell silent. It was true that she had played almost nothing but Forgotten Vale Melody since she had arrived on the mountain, but she was simply so busy, she didn't have time for frivolous things.

Yet she had made time to take Meizhen out swimming. She had let Gu Xiulan drag her along shopping or trying out sweets. So that wasn't exactly true.

She felt a pang of sadness. Playing her flute had been one of her few pleasures before she came here, something she could only do when she was sure she was safe. But now that she could sleep soundly and walk openly and unafraid, she had stopped doing it, except to fight or train.

"... I don't want it to be," she said, breaking the silence that had fallen.

"Well, there you go then," Ruan Shen said brightly. "Let's get started on a couple little exercises..."

From there, her tutoring took on a more active turn, and she found herself fixing a number of little errors and bad habits in her more qi-dependant musical skills. More than that though, she found herself

relaxing a little and having some fun with her music again as she was encouraged to try new things and play new pieces.

#### **Bonus 12 - Plots and Plans**

The ball rebounded off the tree trunk and shot off into the air. With a lazy effort, she tracked its arc as it bounced between branches and finally shot back toward her. It hit her palm with a satisfying thump. Idly, she tossed it lightly up and down. Sun Liling had to admit, she kind of missed the weight that the silly old toy used to have. She looked down at the pale grey ball, running a calloused thumb over the simple formation array that made it always return to her hand.

Here, without any of these foreigners around to see, she allowed herself a moment to feel homesick. Dad was gone and her Mother had run off back to the Peaks barely a moment after the funeral had ended, but she still missed Kailasa. She still missed her little cousins, the dumb scrappy little twits, and Grandfather most of all. She missed the sunflower fields and the tension in the air, knowing that every speck of dirt outside the crater walls would try to kill her given half a chance. It was too damn cold here in the east.

With a twist of her wrist, she dismissed the ball back into storage, as well as her petty complaints. She really had been stuck here too long if she was whining like that, Sun Liling thought wryly. The cage she had been stuck in was gilded well. A nice little manor house in the hills, probably some lifelong disciple's summer retreat or something. She hated it, hated not being able to go past the ward stones that marked the yard, hated just having to sit around. These easterners might be able to just sit inside all day to cultivate, but she needed to *move*, needed to run and fight and kill.

She let out a disgruntled sigh as she slid off of her perch on the roof, landing in the garden with a thump. It was her own fault. She'd let her blood get too heated and gone a little too far in her fight with Cai and her cronies. It had been a dumb move to open up her bond that far with Dharitri. As she thought the spirit's name, she felt awareness blossoming in her thoughts, blooming like the petals of a hungry flower.

'And why should you have hidden the full panoply of your glory, my dear battle-sister? Why should the fear of the soft children of the east shackle you?' The musical voice of Dharitri echoed in her thoughts. 'You have wept and bled and killed for your power. Why should you not wield it?'

'Because of what happened,' she drawled back silently. Hadn't Grandfather told her that folks in the east still saw the Lady of the Sunflower Fields as a foreign, hostile spirit? But she had forgotten in the heat of the fight. She'd worn Cai and that monster she wore down, Kang was crumbling in the face of the Bai, and when she thought about facing that nasty little snake and crushing her in a fight, she'd just gotten too excited.

So here she was, grounded for a month to this insultingly peaceful manor. The worst part was that she couldn't even complain, not without looking spoiled and making Grandfather look bad. Putting her arms behind her head, she began to stroll through the garden. It wasn't much, but it was better than sitting entirely still.

The Sect wouldn't dare do more than this, and it wasn't like her cultivation had really suffered for it... much. The lack of battle had slowed her down, but the experience of fighting most of the relevant folks in her year had given her enough to chew on for the most part.

Losing galled her though, despite the circumstances. She should just taken a hit from Cai and speared that girl, Ling whatever, as soon as she summoned that mist. It had been a surprisingly effective battlefield technique, coming from a nobody.

'The Kang losing to the snake was expected, but the Lu should have done better. You should punish him,' Dharitri grumbled. Images of broken flesh and bright flowing blood flickered through her thoughts.

Sun Liling rolled her eyes. She'd give Lu a good kick and a ribbing, but that wasn't exactly what her bloodthirsty spirit had in mind. She'd long since dismissed Dharitri's whispering invitations to cruelty as background noise. In her thoughts, Dhartiri sulked at her dismissal in an affected way and returned to her own meditations. She would be fine, once they were able to kill something again.

Maybe she should try to get in a little more cultivation today. Maybe the Sun Facing Petals? That one was pretty sedentary, as far as her arts went. Sun Liling paused then, glancing toward the boundary stones. Looked like she had something to take care of first.

"Quit lurking," she barked at the empty space below the trees. Whatever it was, there was not a drop of blood in its veins, but the warmth of flowing qi was not so different at this range. There was a long moment of silence in which Sun Liling continued to give the empty space a supremely unimpressed look. Finally, something shifted and a young man stepped out, the air around him shimmering with tendrils of purple mist.

Well, it looked like he did anyway. She considered the possibility of an illusion, but Dharitri hissed a negative in her ear. Some kind of body double construct then?

The man was tall and thin, handsome in that effeminate way that was all the rage in court. He wore robes of dark black and green, and she didn't sense a weapon on him, not that that meant much. But it wasn't like a disciple was going to attack or challenge her when she was on time out, and if he turned out to be an assassin, well, he was bad at it for a start, and it wouldn't be her first run-in anyway. She was aware of the sort of protections Grandfather had bound to her person after Dad fell in the north.

"Greetings, Princess Sun," the construct said, offering an obsequious bow.

She raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms under her chest. "Sup," she replied drolly. The whole affected barbarian thing was a pain, but that was the persona the easterners expected. "What brings you out to my pretty little cage?"

He straightened up, and Sun Liling narrowed her eyes as she studied his face. There was no point trying to read the expressions of a fake, but the fluctuations in the qi that carried his words worked just as well.

"I believe we may be of some mutual aid to one another," he said carefully. "I am an individual who finds the Cai heiress' imposition of order to be disagreeable as well."

"Oh, why do ya think I'm bothered by it? I had my challenge. I wouldn't say I lost, but neither did she. I can respect that," Sun Liling said carelessly.

"Then why did you rebuff her attempt at reconciliation in the aftermath?" he asked, raising a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

She considered him for a moment. It looked like he might actually be well informed. The Cai had been as subtle as she could be, coming out here to talk. Of course, Sun Liling's condition of kicking out the Bai in exchange for bringing herself and Kang back in had been roundly refused; the heiress hadn't even considered it. She could say a lot of things about Cai Renxiang, but the girl bought her own propaganda. It made her pretty predictable.

"Hmm," she considered, drawing out the hum. "You're going to have to give me a reason why I should bother working with someone who just came out of nowhere."

"Of course," he replied, and she sensed a bit of piqued pride. Something she had said? Nah, it just reminded him of something. "My contacts throughout the Outer Sect are quite extensive. Many of my peers rely upon my ability to swiftly gather resources to avoid wasting their own precious time on mundane matters so they are willing to listen when I speak. With my infrastructure and connections and your funds, charisma, and leadership, I believe that it should not be difficult to end Cai's farce of a government that her supporters are attempting to impose. Will you allow me to present my case?"

She supposed that she didn't have anything to lose. It wasn't like she was opposed to going another round. "Sure thing. Gonna need a name first though."

He bowed again. "My apologies, Princess Sun. This humble craftsmen goes by the name of Yan Renshu."

# **Chapter 77 - Hatchling 1**

The musical experimentation helped quite a bit, she thought, in letting her reflect on the difficult situation she was in with Meizhen. She was still angry at the breach of her personal space, but more than that, she was worried about her friend. Although Meizhen remained as harsh and unflinching as always during their training together, outside of it, she found the other girl avoiding her eyes and keeping a distance that she hadn't before. Someone who didn't know Meizhen as well might not have picked up the difference, but Ling Qi did.

Ling Qi couldn't say that her own attitude had not changed either. Although she attempted to act normally, she felt awkward around the other girl and that affected her behavior. Despite the occasional teasing word from her friends, she really hadn't seen it coming. At all. She had been vaguely aware that this sort of thing existed, but it was something old wives gossiped about. Now, she wasn't sure if she should feel awkward going to the springs with Xiulan or meditating with Suyin or any number of things. At home, she was certainly more careful to avoid wandering out of the bathroom in her underclothes or a towel.

In the end though, despite the fact that things were beginning to settle, or perhaps because of it, she felt the need to talk to the other girl to make things clear, which was difficult because Meizhen had taken to avoiding her outside of training. So, after a few days of trying to get a hold of Meizhen, she finally stopped Meizhen before she left the training room in their home.

Her friend looked back at her with the same blank expression she always wore when they were doing combat training as Ling Qi lowered her hand, already feeling the awkwardness increasing.

"Thanks for stopping, Meizhen," Ling Qi said, nervously toying with a few loose strands of hair as she considered what to say. "I think we really need to talk."

Her friend stilled but nodded, folding her arms in front of her stomach as she turned back to face Ling Qi. "I see. Did you have a question about the mental exercises? You are nearing the completion of the beginner's set," she said coolly, but Ling Qi could detect a note of worry in her voice because she was pumping qi into all her senses via Argent Mirror. She really didn't want to screw this conversation up.

"You know that's not what I'm talking about," Ling Qi said with a bit more heat than she intended. "I mean, this whole... thing. You liking me," she said, holding her composure thanks to art thrumming through her channels. "I just... I don't really know what to think here."

If Meizhen had been still before, she was a statue now. "I apologized for my misconduct, did I not?" she said quietly, and Ling Qi saw her long sleeves shift, hiding her clenched hands. "It was extremely inappropriate and foolish of me to do such a thing."

"Yeah, it was," Ling Qi admitted, looking away. Intimacy of that sort had always frightened her. Her mother's ill treatment at the hands of her clients had been one of the greatest reasons for her running away, and the things she had witnessed in the streets did not improve on her opinion. Physical relationships were all about power and control, and she was definitely the weaker party here. She wanted to trust Meizhen - she did trust Meizhen, but some part of her was still terrified at Meizhen's

interest. When she looked back, her friend's expression was just as blank as before. "You are my friend, but please, don't ever do something like that again. I'll be more careful not to be... insensitive myself, alright?"

"I already promised that I would not," Bai Meizhen replied, and even with Discerning Gaze running, Ling Qi couldn't detect a change in her tone. "It was a mistake and nothing more. Excuse me. I have a task I need to attend to."

"Meizhen," Ling Qi called after her, a sinking feeling in her gut telling her that she hadn't helped matters. "I... I did have fun that night, and I hope you did too. I still appreciate everything you've done for me."

The pale girl paused at the door, glancing back over her shoulder with a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes. "I appreciated your effort as well," she said simply. "It is for the best that we avoid such overt familiarity in the future though - for the both of us."

Then she was gone, disappearing through the doorway. Ling Qi felt a hollow. She didn't know how to fix this, if she even could fix this.

Desperate to bury those feelings, Ling Qi threw herself back into her other tasks and cultivation. She spent her days tending to the kiln, keeping the fires inside roaring and hot as the egg within pulsed, drinking in the heat voraciously. When not working at that project, she poured her efforts into her music. If Ruan Shen noted her slide back into less upbeat melodies, he didn't comment on it.

It was near the end of the week that her constant care of the egg finally bore fruit. The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon as Ling Qi fed more of the fragrant wood Su Ling had supplied her with into the kiln when she heard a sharp crack like a firework going off. She looked up, startled as colorful sparks erupted in another series of tiny blasts, and the egg wobbled violently. She felt a sudden cold as the blazing heat radiating from inside the kiln dropped precipitously, the flames flaring and consuming the wood she had just fed in at a monstrous pace before guttering low, reduced to mere embers in an instant.

For the first time in days, Ling Qi's troubles fled her mind. Excited, she watched the veins of green on the egg go dark as a spider-web of cracks appeared on its surface. Without thinking, she reached in, gently pulling the egg off of the shelf she had built for it, ignoring the brief stinging of the still hot shell on her hands. Something like that wasn't enough to do her any real harm anymore.

She cradled the egg in her lap as it shook and cracked, bits of shell flaking off and crumbling to ash as they landed on her gown. She soon found herself looking down at the tiny, blunt face of black scaled tortoise with eyes that were a bright, solid green. It blinked up at her in confusion and let out a plaintive sound, a high-pitched mix between a chirp and a squeak.

Its stubby forelegs followed it out of the crumbling shell as it stumbled forward, revealing a dark green shell formed of dull triangular spikes. Suddenly remembering that she should be doing something, Ling Qi rubbed her thumb along the little creature's head, brushing away some leftover ash.

"Look at you. You're wonderful," she breathed out, unable to contain her grin. She had a spirit beast. It was warm to the touch, hot really, and it blinked up at her with an adorably guileless gaze as his stubby

little foreclaws scrabbled at her dress, slipping on the sleek fabric. She could feel its - no, his - qi, bright and hot as a newborn flame. Her spirit had been born right into the first realm.

She quickly remembered that spirits were often born quite hungry, and while continuing to pet the little fellow with one hand and make reassuring sounds, she summoned a small grade one core she had acquired from hunting out of her ring. She smiled and lowered her hand, amused by the way his little eyes immediately fixed on the sphere in her hand.

Then she blinked as she heard a hiss, and something snapped the core right out of her hand. There, protruding from the back of her spirit's shell where his tail should be, was what looked like the front half of a black scaled serpent with bright red eyes. A puff of smoke and ash escaped its mouth as it swallowed down the core and nuzzled against her hand even as the tortoise head let out a distressed squeak.

That... that hadn't been in any of the books she had read.

She rallied herself quickly enough, pulling out another small core for his first - primary - turtle head. She made sure to feed the snake half of her little spirit too, and belatedly remembered to begin bonding him. Unsurprisingly, the snake turtle didn't resist at all, his newborn qi easily yielding to hers even as he nudged at her hand expectantly, clearly still hungry.

Within a few moments, she felt the connection form and shivered as she felt a rush of heat and vitality flood through her channels, even as the qi in her dantian dropped precipitously. What little discomfort from the hot ash piling on her dress vanished in an instant, and she shook her head before looking down to find both of her new spirit's heads peering up at her inquisitively. She could feel his qi more clearly now, fire and wood in aspect, and could tell that he was still very hungry.

Even as she began to draw out the remaining low grade cores she had collected this week, she had to wonder; just what *was* he? And more importantly, how much qi was she going to need to tether to the little fellow if he needed that much at birth?

What little remained of her week was largely devoted to caring for her as yet unnamed spirit, taking care of his constant hunger and keeping the kiln lit as he seemed to enjoy sleeping in it. She could feel that she could dissolve his physical form and draw the spirit into her dantian, but she didn't want to do that just yet, perhaps because her best example of a good relationship between cultivator and spirit was Meizhen and Cui

The longest she spent away from him was her last lesson with Ruan Shen, which ended with the older boy passing her a dog-eared and battered looking book on songwriting, composition, and philosophy at their parting, along with a casual encouragement to keep working hard. She wouldn't necessarily say she liked the older boy yet, but he seemed nice at least.

While she wasn't entirely happy with how the week had gone given the way Meizhen was avoiding her still, at least something good had come of it.

#### **Interlude - Sima Jiao**

A writhing knot of spectral flesh exploded violently, dissolving into the cool night air with little more than a chorus of wails. It was but one of many shredded by silver-edged shadows that flitted through the night, barely visible to the eye.

This was, Sima Jiao mused irritably, incredibly tedious. The new basin crawled with malevolent life, and due to the multitude of shadows in the tumble of broken trees, buildings, and earth, he was all too aware of each and every one of the possessed corpses, wailing spirits, and knots of diseased flesh flowering and sprouting from wood rotted into a liquid slurry.

Disgusting and unpleasant, a lesser man might have retched. Not Elder Jiao, of course, though his was a title that both amused and irritated him. Right now, he leaned more toward irritation. A moment of will focused a fraction of awareness to the top of broken building, and his body coalesced from the darkness, loud eye-searing yellow bleeding out of the shadows as he grew something solid to anchor his spirit once more.

He was rather proud of this robe with its glittering psychedelic purple embroidery patterns - and not just because he was certain it had made the old goat at the meeting flinch. Not physically, but he had a sense for that kind of thing.

"This is beneath me," the grey skinned man said with an air of long-suffering. "Really. Being sent to do disciple work. This is insulting."

"The Core Disciples are all deployed, dear. You know that."

He didn't bother with anything so plebeian as turning his head toward the soft, musical voice of Xin. There wasn't much point; pretending at physical limitations was rather pointless when they were alone. He could see her slowly coalescing a body from moonbeams and starlight regardless of which way his physical eyes faced.

"Besides, you were not doing anything important, my lazy husband." His wife formed her avatar seated on a weathered beam that stuck from the ground like an exposed bone, wearing a simple gown of shimmering liquid night glittering with stars.

He took a moment to admire her pale, bare feet, idly kicking beneath the hem even as hundreds more of the plagued abominations were torn apart by blade and shadow in a widening ring. It did not stop him from letting out an aggrieved sigh at her words. Beautiful as Xin might be, she could be so cruel and lacking in understanding at times.

"I was, in fact, quite busy," he responded with great dignity, crossing his arms over his still chest. "I will have you know that I was nearing a breakthrough on a very important-"

"You were playing with that old chariot again," she interjected, an amused note in her voice as her pale blue lips quirked upwards and her bright red eyes crinkled in amusement. "I do not see why. It is not as if you even need such things," she added lightly. Her qi coiled and mixed with his, the equivalent of a teasing caress. "You've forgotten your hands again, dear."

Sima Jiao glanced down at the empty end of his sleeve and grimaced, a quick flick of his qi resolving the issue. Even if it was unnecessary, it was a poor idea to forget such things too often.

"I would not expect a woman to understand a man's needs in such things," he said aloud, idly directing the placement of the formation anchors on newly cleared land. "That I do not need it is not the point. It is a classic made by Grandmaster-"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted again with a dismissive wave, drawing a dour look and a weighty shift in qi from her companion. Xin did so enjoy needling him when they were alone; he would have to get her back for that later. "Should we not focus on the task at hand? You can get back to your tinkering more quickly that way."

"Something so trivial is hardly worth focusing on," he dismissed. It could have been far worse, he supposed, but that it had happened at all was grating. "That musclebrained lump certainly has much to answer for," he grumbled. "We were told the eradication of the Thunder Crow tribe was complete, and yet, here we are, dealing with a vengeful apprentice."

"I am sure Sir Zhou's subordinates are receiving very firm reprimands," Xin mused. "Still, it is not entirely their fault. We both know that this is... unusual, yes?" In the space between eye blinks, Xin was beside him, entangling her fingers with his as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

There did remain *some* advantages to physicality, Jiao mused.

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied, the majority of his attention still spread through the basin as he continued the extermination. It was a little irritating that the barbarian child had been slain by an arrow; death imprints pulled from a bow were less clear than those from a blade. "Gnawing Ones." Despite the relatively lack of clarity, the imprints had been clear enough to see pale, long-faced figures loping in the dark. A great deal of flesh and spirit had been offered in return for the tools of vengeance.

"Not the first we've heard such things," Xin noted aloud, unnecessarily, but it did help to vocalize things at times. That was the entire point of such puppet play after all.

"Of course we have," Jiao replied with a touch of arrogance as the formation stones activated, and the spirits of the land shrieked as qi began to drain from them like water from a holed barrel. Plants withered and died, and rot became dust. Someone else, Ying perhaps, would have to restore the growth. "Our histories contain all that there is," he continued without missing a beat, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It is still troubling to find yet another foe where once there were only the hysterical accounts of those delving far too deeply under the earth. Perhaps this is the threat that will see the Empire stop squabbling like children."

"Unlikely," Xin said with an amused laugh. "What would humans be if they did not squabble and fight over every little thing?"

"The men of the Empire are cut from a finer cloth," Sima Jiao proclaimed with theatrical pride. He knew his wife could sense his true feelings on the matter though, regardless of whatever foolishness flowed from his lips. He had retired for many, very good reasons.

"Of course, dear," she replied, rising on her toes to press a cold kiss to his similarly unheated cheek. More amusing puppet play to go along with the far more intimate twining of their spirits. "Did you notice? The one who uncovered this was that little girl from the test."

"Was it now?" he drawled, amused. "And I thought it was the half-fox."

"It was both, I suppose," Xin agreed. "Still, I think she is doing well."

"Do we truly need to have this conversation again?" Jiao asked with a long suffering sigh, finally deigning to turn his head and look at his wife directly. "The last thing our peaceful retirement needs is the involvement of your disciple projects."

She pursed her lips. "It would not be an issue if *someone* would get me with child," she replied dangerously. "My sisters talk. Perhaps I should consider their advice."

"Unnecessary. Completely so," the Elder reassured the irate spirit, genuine concern tingling through the core of his being. "Perhaps in a few decades," he added placatingly as the wails of damned spirits rose around them. "We should allow things to settle first after all, one way or another."

"Perhaps," Xin mused, seemingly willing to drop the subject, much to his relief. "In any case, I will allow you to finish your work, dear. I will be out with several of the other ladies of the mountain tonight since you have such an important project in the workshop."

His relief may have come too soon, Sima Jiao thought, as the woman at his side dissolved into starlight. He would have to be a bit wary for the next few nights. Well, he supposed retirement would be boring if it were entirely without conflict. At least he could be reasonably certain of finishing the inscriptions on the rims of his chariot before Xin returned with ideas. He swore that the ice spirit on the peak was a bad influence on her, along with that wretched ape of Hua Su's. Interacting with the ice creature's spawn made Xin want one of her own.

For now, with the greater concerns already reported to the Sect Head, he needed to finish up with this nonsense.

# **Chapter 78 - Hatchling 2**

It had only been a single day since the egg had hatched, and Ling Qi was already feeling harried. Her spirit's constant hunger and desire for her attention consumed hours of her time. She had run out of grade one cores in short order and had been forced to put off research into his nature in order to get more.

There was a minor lucky break when she had left him in the garden atop the still warm kiln to retrieve some items from her room, only to return and find that he had gotten into the wood pile. It looked like he enjoyed gnawing on the spiritually infused wood almost as much as the cores given the smoldering end of the log she had found him under.

So she had the wood as a stopgap at least. It only took a bit of effort to break up one of the larger pieces and store the smaller sticks in her ring for his consumption. She scooped up the little snake turtle.

"What am I going to do with you?" Ling Qi murmured, resting her hand atop the little spirit's shell. His eyes, both sets of them, stared up at her.

Hungry, safe, cold.

She could feel vague sensations from the odd spirit though their connection. There was nothing so coherent as words, or even images, just jumbled and primal sensation. While she already knew that she wouldn't be dealing with a mere animal, this was something more like a child. Her assumptions about the species of her spirit had been shattered, and now, she didn't know what to do. She needed to research, but she could hardly leave her spirit alone.

The only person she might have trusted to watch over him was Bai Meizhen, but her friend was out right now, as she had often been since last week. Ling Qi did her best to ignore the pang of sadness she felt at that. This left bringing him along. She was wary of the idea; her instincts whispered that it was a bad idea to openly advertise her precious spirit to the Sect at large yet.

Recalling Elder Su's lectures on the subject, she knew that it was a poor idea to dematerialize newborn spirits because their self and identity was not yet stable. This was the opposite of the problem at the higher end where the greatest of spirit beasts couldn't be dematerialized at all due to being too concrete in their self-identity.

The little tortoise let out chirping cry, startling her from her thoughts and bringing a chagrined smile to her lips. She wasn't going to get anything done just standing here. She would just have to follow old habits and take a more circuitous approach to moving around for a little while. The serpent coiled atop his shell let out a plaintive hiss, and the feeling of hunger projected in her thoughts intensified.

"Be patient," she chided, brushing her thumb along cool, black scales. "I need you to hold still now. I'm going to have to go out to get some things." She paused and grimaced as she realized that he probably couldn't understand her and that she still hadn't given him a name. A few moments of contemplation solved at least one of those problems. She furrowed her brows and concentrating her thoughts on the tendril of vigorous, fiery qi tethering them together, doing her best to project her

meaning: safety, silence, the promise of food, and of course, affection. Even if she hadn't thought of a name yet, her spirit was still absolutely precious to her, an irreplaceable treasure.

That thought made her blink, even as the spirit in her arms let out another chirping cry and withdrew into his shell, huddling inside. The little serpent let out a soft hiss and puff of soot before it followed suit.

"That's a good child," Ling Qi sighed in relief, drawing on observations from her past to project a parental sort of tone. "Just hold on for a bit, okay?" She tried to give a feeling of confidence and assurance.

Ling Qi felt like she was onto something for a name, but she didn't want to make a hasty choice. A light leap took her to the top of the wall around her home's garden, and a second brought her to a narrow alley where she could disappear without being noticed.

Her first stop was the archive where she acquired a few bestiaries to search through. The second stop was a nice, isolated stream she had found in her quest to find a decent swimming and fishing spot for Meizhen. She still had the fishing gear she had prepared for the event it in her ring.

Grade one fish weren't much smarter than normal ones. It seemed her best bet for acquiring cores cheaply and easily. Soon enough, she settled on the bank of the stream with a fishing rod in one hand and a book in the other.

Her spirit poked his head out of his shell when she stopped moving, and although he eyed the water warily, he soon trundled off of her lap to explore the nearby grass and underbrush. She kept an eye on him, but it seemed safe enough. This wasn't a dangerous part of the mountain.

Her efforts to discover exactly what he was were both successful and not. She had thought she had seen something about snake-turtles before, and the bestiary she had borrowed quickly jogged her memory. She had a feeling that she had dismissed the idea subconsciously; after all, it seemed unreal that she had managed to acquire one of the four 'legendary' beasts. Dragons and phoenixes were associated with the Imperial house, and the great white tigers of the east had their own fame. She suspected the bond with tiger spirits was one reason why Han Jian's family had the status it did.

The "xuanwu," or serpent tortoises, were not referred to nearly as often in tales, mostly because she lived in the far south of the Empire. They were apparently native to the far north. Xuan Shi's family might be associated with them given his family name and the fact that the bestiary noted that "Savage Seas" was the province where they were most common. As a constantly raining, storm-wracked archipelago of volcanic islands comprised mostly of sheer, wave-worn cliffs, the province didn't sound very hospitable to her.

This was also where the bestiary grew less useful. Xuanwu were supposed to be creatures of earth and water with a few listed subspecies of mountain and heaven instead. There was nothing on fiery subtypes in the books she had taken from the archive.

Ling Qi pondered that even as she went through the rest of the books, pausing to clean the occasional catch and offer their cores to her unnamed spirit whenever he came trundling back to demand attention and pats. He gobbled up the cores and sticks of wood greedily, sometimes with a bit of squabbling

between his two heads. By the time the sun was reaching its zenith, he had crawled into the embers of the campfire she had built to roast the rest of the fish she caught and fallen asleep.

The research hadn't been fruitless, she supposed, even if much of the information she had gotten was useless for her particular variant of xuanwu. Still, she knew, for example, that although their heads might bicker and behave in separate ways, they weren't really separate entities, just two sides of the same mind. She could probably use some of the notes on their care too.

Ling Qi stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, working out the stiffness of several hours spent sitting still. She would have to move on soon. She had quite a few other things to do today after all. She just had to figure out what she was going to do with her spirit before she could keep him dematerialized.

She heard a creak then and the rustling of leaves. A knife was in her hand in an instant as she jerked her head around to look at the treeline behind her. She blinked in surprise when Gu Xiulan landed lightly on the ground a half dozen meters downstream, giving her a peevish look. The hot-tempered girl had changed her look with her hair no longer in a single braid, but instead, a number of more elaborate smaller ones held in place with bright red clasps and pins. Her spirit had also grown, reaching Mid-Yellow.

"What in the world are you doing out here?" her friend asked irritably as she strode up, hands on her hips. "You left me waiting," she added with a sniff and a toss of her hair. "You are lucky I bothered to look for you."

Ling Qi grimaced sheepishly. She had agreed to meet Xiulan over lunch, hadn't she? She hadn't thought she was that late. "I'm sorry. I lost track of the time," she said apologetically. "How did you find me though?" she asked. She hadn't told anyone where she was going.

Gu Xiulan huffed and dropped herself elegantly down next to Ling Qi, hands resting in the grass. Ling Qi caught sight of the other girl's bare calves for an instant before Xiulan folded her legs to sit more properly. Ling Qi tried to feel interest or attraction at the sight but there was nothing.

"I am more than capable of tracking down a friend I know well by their qi," Xiulan said haughtily. "What are you doing out here?" she repeated her question, wrinkling her nose as she studied Ling Qi's face and glanced down at the small pile of fishbones sitting by the campfire.

Ling Qi could feel the other girl's disapproval, and she glanced away, flushing, all too aware of the grease and soot spotting her lips and chin from her casual meal. She had meant to clean up before leaving. Ling Qi coughed into one hand awkwardly and dipped her other into the water, using the cool stream water to wipe her chin clean.

"I needed some small grade one cores, and it seemed wasteful to leave the rest," she replied. "Since I needed to do some reading at the same time..." Ling Qi gestured to the books sitting in the grass beside her.

Gu Xiulan leaned forward to glance across the titles and raised an eyebrow, a smirk starting to grow on her lips. "Oh? Looking into spirit beasts? I-" Her increasingly smug expression froze as she narrowed her eyes, looking Ling Qi over more closely. "No, you already found one, didn't you?"

Ling Qi cocked her head to the side curiously. "Is it that obvious?" she asked.

"Unless you have mastered a new fire art in the last day or so," Xiulan said dryly. "Now that I think about it, I suppose it is rather obvious given the source of qi that appeared in your yard a month back. An egg - or did you discover some old ritual while hiding in the bookshelves at night?"

"The first one," Ling Qi said happily. She reached into the embers of the campfire where her xuanwu was napping and scooped him up, unmindful of the still hot embers. He awoke at her touch, blinking up at her as his stubby little legs pawed at the air. The serpent part remained asleep and coiled on his back. "See? He just hatched. Isn't he adorable?" She couldn't help but gush a little as she presented her spirit to her friend, cradling him in her arms.

Gu Xiulan peered down at him with furrowed brows, expression going from surprise to an almost ugly expression of envy before smoothing over into resigned irritation. "... Hmph. I am never going to surpass you in anything of meaning, am I?"

Ling Qi blinked at the bitterness in her friend's tone.

"Really. A xuanwu. Of course you would manage to find something like that." The bitterness was gone by the time Gu Xiulan was finished speaking.

Ling Qi shrugged, not really sure what to say as she settled him on her lap. "I think I'm going to call him Zhengui," she said instead. The name's characters would be read as "Precious" - an adorable name for an adorable spirit - but amusingly, the sounds that comprised the name could also be pronounced as "True Tortoise," a call back to when she met his "father," or "Really Expensive," which she hoped wasn't prophetic. "I've been trying to figure out how to take care of him." She glanced down in surprise as the little tortoise let out a chirp and clambered down off of her lap, his snake "tail" hissing irritably as the jostling woke it up.

Zhengui made another curious sound as he crossed the distance between Ling Qi and Gu Xiulan, letting out a plaintive squeak as he butted his tiny head against the other girl's leg. "I suppose he is rather cute," Gu Xiulan said ruefully. "That name may be a tad ill-fitting as he grows though," she added as she reached down, running her fingers along his knobby shell. Ling Qi felt a flash of something like jealousy as he chirped happily and tried to climb into Xiulan's lap. "Oh? Are you cold, little one? I suppose Ling Qi isn't the warmest girl…" Some of her humor seemed to return as Zhengui nuzzled her hand.

"I can be plenty warm," Ling Qi grumbled, giving her xuanwu a betrayed look as he snuggled into Xiulan's lap and his serpent head swayed, following the sparks dancing on Xiulan's fingers.

"Hardly, Ling Qi," Gu Xiulan sniffed. She glanced to the side as if distracted by something. "Well, in any case, I suppose it is not as impressive now, but I did want to show you something," she said after a moment's quiet thought. "Ling Qi, meet Linhuo." The air between them distorted, and actinic sparks erupted from the suddenly heated air. A marble-sized sphere of blue-white fire appeared and quickly swelled, taking on a vague humanoid shape some fifteen centimetres high. Snapping, sparking strands of electricity spread from its back into wings as it crackled like a campfire, somehow managing to convey a curiosity and cheerfulness with the sound.

Ling Qi studied the spirit with surprise as it fluttered closer, hovering a few inches from her face. Looking closer, she thought she could see the vague contours of eyes in the wisp of flame that made up its face. No, the spirit's qi had a feminine tinge to it.

"Hello," Ling Qi said curiously, raising a hand unconsciously, the winged flame landed in her upraised palm like a butterfly, tickling her palm. Linhuo was rather pretty given the colorful embers that made her form. "What is she, Gu Xiulan?"

"A Heaven Spark Fairy," Gu Xiulan replied with a tinge of pride. "My Elder Sister was able to get me a pass to leave the Sect grounds for a day. We went north where a forest fire had been sparked. It was beautiful. Fairies like her are born when lightning sparks great fires, although they rarely outlive the blaze they are born in. Elder Sister Yanmei said that Linhuo would have great potential for future growth."

"She's cute," Ling Qi mused as the fairy wandered across her palm before buzzing back into the air to hover over Zhengui, flitting from side to side curiously, only to jerk back as the tortoise tried to take a nibble at her. "Hey, no biting," Ling Qi chided, reaching over to take her own spirit back, doing her best to convey disapproval even as she tucked him back into her own lap and ignored the little spirit's plaintive squeak.

"She is quite a pretty little flame, is she not?" Gu Xiulan said with a laugh, seemingly mollified for the moment as her own spirit alit on her shoulder and let out an unhappy crackle. Linhuo gave off the impression of glaring at Zhengui. "In any case, shall we get going? I do believe you still owe me a meal."

"Sure thing. Sorry for making you look for me, Gu Xiulan," Ling Qi replied as she pushed herself to her feet. At least she could still talk to Xiulan normally. The other girl was obviously bothered by her good fortune, but it didn't get in the way of their relationship. She was glad for that; she wasn't sure what she would do otherwise.

It was nice to relax a bit and simply chat about idle things with the other girl over a meal, but soon enough, they parted ways with a promise to meet the next day. Ling Qi began to get back into her routine of cultivation, now with the addition of Zhengui either at her heels or in her arms. She continued to train with Meizhen as well, despite the awkward distance between them and her friend's renewed aloofness.

It made her sad, but there wasn't really anything she could do about it. Meditating at the vent remained peaceful - more silent really - given that Su Ling had secluded herself for her breakthrough attempt and Li Suyin was keeping odd hours. As a result, Ling Qi was often alone at the vent, but it didn't worry her as it would have mere months ago. She was not an easy target anymore.

## **Chapter 79 - Hatchling 3**

Much of her time and attention still went to Zhengui, keeping him from wandering off, eating strange things, or any number of other troubles he tried to get himself into. She was glad she had gotten more patient since she began cultivating or Zhengui probably would have driven her to her wit's end.

Luckily, Zhengui seemed to be very much a creature of the day so by the time the sun had fallen and the bright half moon had risen, he was well asleep for the night atop the hearth, granting her the free time to visit the archive for a proper study session. Recent events, her own actions, and the vision she had after the intra-council battle had made her worry about what exactly she was getting into with her cultivation of Eight Phase Ceremony.

Her knowledge about great spirits was quite low. She was never a particularly devout person, and the only reason she had never stolen from a temple or a shrine was because it was obviously and objectively bad. People got cursed that way; she had seen it happen once or twice.

She could vaguely recall her mother making offerings to the Bountiful Earth or the Winds of Mercy for health and good fortune, but those were things everyone did. It was just good sense. Those two were the most popular spirits among mortals, even if the average person only knew enough to avoid offending them.

She herself had made an offering to the Grinning Moon after observing some members of a street gang doing the same while talking about a big job. The sight of a half dozen dirty, rag-clad men clustered around a crudely painted white crescent on the wall of an alley had stuck with her. They burned sticks of expensive incense and rice cakes while praying for good fortune. When some fellow street rat had stolen her flute and pawned it off, leaving it sitting in a heavily guarded antique shop, she had felt the need for some luck herself and for revenge against the ass who had taken it in the first place. After her offering to the Grinning Moon, she had gotten both.

What was happening now was more than a casual offering though, and she wanted to learn more about her apparent patron spirit before she went any further with Eight Phase Ceremony. This brought her once more to the seat across from Xuan Shi. This time, the odd boy actually looked up from his book, Voyages Of Yu Long: The Thorny Heart.

Ling Qi considered her approach and decided that formality would be for the best here. She had gotten used to being casual among friends, but with the upcoming meeting, she felt that she should probably polish her etiquette.

"Brother Xuan," she greeted with a slight dip of her head. "Could I trouble you to speak with me for a time?"

He regarded her silently, but after a brief glance down at his book, he set it aside. "Speak, Sister Ling. What troubles cloud your thoughts?"

He didn't exactly sound enthusiastic about speaking with her, but she supposed he never did.

"Quite a few things. I won't trouble you with most of them," Ling Qi replied dryly as she took a seat. "Do you know what this council meeting is intended to be about?" She figured she could break the ice with something that would concern both of them. And besides, she was curious about a few things outside the moon.

Xuan Shi did that thing he often did, staring at her silently before answering. "The words are not mine to speak. No storm lies upon the horizon to my knowledge." He drummed his fingers on the table top thoughtfully for a moment. "The vagabond has gone silent, the bloody princess remains caged, and the hound licks his wounds and trains, seeking ascendance."

Ling Qi took a few moments to parse that and nodded slowly. So the meeting should be untroubled, unless something else came out of nowhere.

"You know, I think I understand everyone else's motives, but why do you stand with Lady Cai?" she asked thoughtfully. "Your family is important enough that you don't need to subordinate yourself, right?" Ling Qi had begun to pick up basic background knowledge by this point in the year. Savage Seas might be the smallest province in the Empire, but a ducal family like the Xuan was still a potent backing.

Once again, silence reigned for a time before she received any response. "Ships do not spring from stone and barren cliff," Xuan Shi answered in a measured tone. "Few can match the quality of those built of the Emerald Sea's bounty. Masts line the straits as thick as graves. Always more are needed to hold back the ravages of the Sea Folk."

That was, Ling Qi recalled, the name for the barbarians of the northern islands, out past the safe seas on the Empire's coast. She supposed that was a sensible enough reason to stay close to the Emerald Seas' heir; relationships between major families were important for trade. She suspected he wasn't telling the whole truth though, even if she couldn't place a finger precisely on why.

She hummed to herself in response, and this time, it was her turn to remain awkwardly silent. She had gone through her prepared topics for small talk.

"Well, I guess I'll get to the point," she said eventually. "You mentioned some interest in moon arts when last we spoke. Could I ask you for some information on the Phase Spirits or some advice on which books to read about them?"

Xuan Shi furrowed his thick brows. "A strange request," he said. "The Guiding Moon is the matron of sailors and those who journey. It lights the night, providing safety and comfort, banishing darkness, and showing one's true path when things lie occluded. Even here, this should be known."

"I had a pretty spotty education," Ling Qi replied evasively. "What about the Grinning Moon and the Bloody one?"

"The waning and waxing crescents are dangerous spirits," he replied shortly. "Mercurial and unmerciful... yet not to be ignored. A captain who plans a night attack or ambush without an offering to the Grinning Moon is a fool. I will not speak of the Bloody Moon. Although it be in favor at court, such skullduggery is foul." Xuan Shi shook his head then pointed over her shoulder, indicating a set of shelves in the far right corner. "Knowledge of spirits can be sought out on the shelves yonder."

"Thank you for your time, Brother Xuan," she replied politely as she stood up. "My apologies for interrupting your reading."

"It is no trouble," he replied to her back as she moved off to begin her research in earnest. "Have care in your search."

Ling Qi paused and then nodded. She wasn't sure why she would need to be careful, but she would take the warning to heart.

Over the course of the next few days, Ling Qi's cultivation improved steadily with the help of a reduced number of pills and elixirs while she practiced her other skills. She continued gaining further mastery with the bow as she reached the third star of the Falling Stars art, mastering a Meteoric Shower technique that allowed her to fire several arrows in rapid succession. In the evenings, she studied or played music, sometimes playing a light tune while deciphering particularly dense blocks of text and sometimes keeping Zhengui from trying to gnaw on the pages.

Her study of the moon phases bore fruit, even as her studies forced her to incidentally grow more familiar with a number of other spirits and information about their worship.

The Guiding Moon, or full moon, was, as Xuan Shi said, widely well-regarded. Reputed to be a boon to travelers and sailors in particular, it was strongly associated with divinatory techniques. If all phases of the moon were related to mystery in some way, then the Guiding Moon was about 'revealing mystery'.

The Hidden Moon, or new moon, was its exact opposite, a spirit that thrived on secrets and lost or hidden knowledge. It was a spirit that hoarded and coveted knowledge and arts.

Information on the two crescents was more difficult to find. Information in the older books seemed to match what she already knew. The Bloody Moon, or the waxing crescent, was regarded as the spirit of vengeance and assassins, of lives taken in the dark, unseen. The Grinning Moon, or the waning crescent, loved tricks and thievery, rewarding cleverness and ingenuity. Newer books painted both moon phases differently though. The Bloody Moon smiled upon those who sought out and dealt justice to those who committed misdeeds And the Grinning Moon smiled upon clever investigators who unveiled the foolish conspiracies of those who violated Imperial law, Ling Qi wasn't sure what to make of it. It didn't seem to fit what she knew.

The Reflective Moons, the two half moon phases, were regarded as one entity. They were linked to self-reflection and contemplation and peace and togetherness. Diplomats often invoked them at the beginning of volatile negotiations.

The last two phases were discussed in a summary fashion; the author apparently did not think much of the two gibbous phases. The Mother Moon, or the waxing gibbous phase, had a somewhat obvious area of interest given its name. And lastly, the Dreaming Moon, or the waning gibbous, held dominion over creative arts, altered states of mind, and "other such frivolity and decadence."

With so much to focus on and Zhengui taking up much of her time, she had little time to tag along with Han Jian and the others, especially since they seemed to be getting busier themselves. She and Xiulan met for lunch each day of course, but that was for relaxation. Xiulan would brag about the duels she

had won and Ling Qi would pester Xiulan for thoughts on her clumsy, initial attempts at musical composition. They avoided more serious topics.

Still, she did find a chance to get down to the training field and speak with Han Jian early on the day before the council meeting. Ling Qi arrived to see the ground being torn apart by the passage of Heijin, set to the sound of Han Jian's commands. The young tiger had accompanied the hunting group a few times over the past couple of weeks, with an irritable air.

It seemed the cub had finally acquiesced to actually following orders though, given that the two of them were practicing combined combat maneuvers. Ling Qi only watched for a moment before turning her eyes away and loosening her hold on her qi; she didn't want to seem like she was trying to spy on them. She loudly cleared her throat as well, but she doubted the sound would reach the pair through the dust and winds kicked up by their practice.

Zhengui watched the scene from her shoulder with curious eyes. It had taken some practice, but he could perch there without falling as long as she wasn't moving erratically. It had taken a bit longer to convey to him that her hair was not edible. She glanced at her spirit to make sure he wasn't slipping then raised a hand to wave to Han Jian, who had paused to look over at her, the golden glow around his shoulders fading.

"Ling Qi, I'm surprised you had the time to come this early," he said in greeting, lowering the practice blade in his hand as Heijin padded over to sit by his side. The tiger cub eyed Ling Qi, or rather, the xuanwu on her shoulder, warily. The two spirits' first meeting had involved Zhengui taking a nip at Heijin's tail. She was coming to realize that her spirit was a bit of a biter, in addition to being a glutton.

"I have been pretty busy," Ling Qi admitted. "It's been awhile since we've had a chance to talk on our own, hasn't it?"

Han Jian smiled ruefully. "Yeah, things have changed a bit in the last few months," he replied easily, a touch of something like regret in his tone. "So, looking to chat about what our lovely overlord is plotting this month?"

"Is that your type?" Ling Qi asked with a raised eyebrow and a slight smile. "I wouldn't have guessed." She bit back a comment about not letting Xiulan hear him say that, not sure if it was appropriate given how strained the relationship was between them.

Han Jian gave her a flat look as he sheathed his sword. "No. Not at all. Please don't joke about that kind of thing," he said, deadpan.

Ling Qi couldn't help but laugh a little and shook her head, drawing an irate hiss from Zhengui as he wobbled with the motion. She 'heard' Heijin grumble something indistinct, but he quieted at a sharp look from Han Jian. Something had changed between those two since the battle with Sun Liling.

"I actually just wanted to know what's wrong. You've been distracted lately, and I'm pretty sure I've seen you signing things to Han Fang when the rest of us are busy. Are you planning to do something on your own?"

Han Jian's smile faded. "You've gotten perceptive, haven't you?" he asked rhetorically, glancing away. "I do things outside the group too."

"You do," Ling Qi acknowledged. "I should know after all." It was Han Jian who had decided on his own to meet and help her in the first month at the Sect. "I just thought I could offer some help."

"It's something private," Han Jian answered quietly. "I think we both know that everyone has their little secrets."

This time, it was Ling Qi who broke eye contact. Given that she had been disappearing along with Bai Meizhen and her other friends every day for months, some conclusions were obvious. Han Jian had never brought it up before. It made her a little sad, but she had never mustered up the resolve to try and work something out between the two groups after the rocky joint training session.

"I didn't mean to pry. I really did just want to see if you needed help with anything," Ling Qi said apologetically.

"I know," he replied with a slight shrug. "You're a surprisingly honest girl when it comes to some things, Ling Qi. ... I do have to look out for my charges first though. We are in competition."

"Well, I guess I can only wish you good fortune then," she said with a slightly forced laugh. "How will this affect the upcoming weeks then?"

"We won't be around for hunting next week," Han Jian said, turning to head toward the benches at the edge of the training area. Ling Qi fell in beside the boy. "After that, I was thinking we would start exploring some more dangerous areas. Less focus on hunting and more on discovery. You're welcome to come along if you have the time."

"Sounds fun," Ling Qi said breezily. Just because they had to compete for an Inner Sect slot didn't mean they couldn't still be friends. "Did you have a location in mind?"

"The upper peak might be a good spot to start. There has to be a few things hidden up in all that snow," Han Jian said lightly, seemingly relieved that she had taken the conversation well.

Ling Qi blinked then let out a laugh, drawing a curious look from Han Jian. "Well, you're probably not wrong, but let me tell you a story about a little girl and a blizzard..."

She didn't much appreciate her plight being laughed at, but... it was nice. She was glad Han Jian was understanding about her keeping secrets.

### **Chapter 80 - Council**

The end of the week and the day of the council meeting both came quickly after that. Unfortunately, things with Meizhen didn't improve. The girl showed up for their training sessions but vanished just as quickly thereafter, brushing off all attempts to draw her into conversation.

By the time the last day came around, Ling Qi had decided to simply give Meizhen the space she clearly desired. This meant that she ended up walking to the meeting alone. Given the hours she kept, it was perhaps unsurprising that she ended up arriving early to the meeting as it was set just after sunrise.

She found herself at the pavilion with only Huang Da and Xuan Shi present. The studious boy didn't look to be any help either, sitting with his hands clasped across his stomach and his head down, face hidden by his wide conical hat.

"Good morning, oh lovely night lily," Huang Da greeted her as she ascended the steps to reach the table. Ling Qi narrowed her eyes at him. Huang Da seemed vaguely sulky to her in the way he slouched at the table. She couldn't help but assess him. He had reached Mid Yellow and Mid Silver, although his physical achievement seemed recent. At Mid Yellow and Late Silver, she was pulling ahead of him then.

"... Good morning," she replied a touch sourly as she took a seat a few places down from him. "I haven't seen you outside of council meetings for months. Have you given up then?" she asked flippantly, watching him for reactions.

Huang Da's hand clenched into a fist. "My apologies, Ling Qi. I had such plans... but it seems your beauty has outshone me. I have been ordered by my father to cease all pursuits and focus on cultivation." He sounded extremely unhappy at the order. "Alas, it seems it was not to be..."

Ling Qi gave him a suspicious look but did not otherwise respond beyond making a small sound of acknowledgement. No matter how she looked at it, that explanation set off all sorts of alarms. The creep didn't seem like the type to give up easily so that order must have been pretty serious. What would provoke such an order?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Cai Renxiang and Gan Guangli. The light that shone around the girl was brighter now, her presence weightier, and her qi radiated from her like the light of a star. The other girl had definitely broken through to the third realm, but it wasn't complete like Meizhen's yet. Gan Guangli, for his part, was firmly at the late stage of the second realm as far as her senses could tell. He was also dressed differently now, wearing white and gold under lacquered steel armor. Heavy spiked pauldrons rested on his shoulders and armored greaves and gauntlets concealed his limbs. Only his head remained bare.

Ling Qi's gaze was drawn to the third person with them, a short, thin boy with feathered black hair and light green, loose robes. A scholar's cap rested on the unknown boy's head, and he walked with easy confidence in Cai Renxiang's shadow, hands clasped behind his back. He wore square framed eyeglasses, which was strange; no cultivator should need such a thing. Perhaps they were a talisman? Ling Qi met his grey eyes and received a smile in return. He was at the peak of the second realm.

Cai Renxiang nodded politely to each of them as Gan Guangli pulled out a seat for her. The new boy seated himself at her side. The others arrived shortly afterward with Meizhen arriving last. She still sat beside Ling Qi and even nodded to her, but Ling Qi couldn't help but feel the distance between them.

She was sure Cai Renxiang noticed as well since her stern gaze briefly passed between the two of them. Cai Renxiang did not comment though, instead moving to begin the meeting.

"Good morning," she began curtly, looking at each of them in turn. "Allow me to open the second official meeting of this council and extend my apologies for the interruption of the last. I appreciate the support of each one of you in this difficult period. Before we begin to attend to our business, I must first introduce our new member." She nodded to the faintly smiling boy at her side. "This is Fu Xiang. He will be representing the interests of the previous year's Outer Disciples."

The scholarly boy bowed his head to the rest of them. "Thank you for having me," he said politely. "I am glad to be given this opportunity to prevent chaos and conflict. I do hope we can all get along." It was a bland introduction for a somewhat bland boy, but Ling Qi felt that there was something more to him, a sharp edge that belied his friendly words.

Still, she played her part, sending back a polite greeting along with everyone else, even as she shared a glance with Han Jian. She wasn't alone in her suspicion. Cai Renxiang continued speaking once the greetings were complete.

"The focus of our next month's efforts will be twofold. First, we must ensure Princess Sun's ability to cause chaos is curbed as much as possible since she herself cannot be fully pacified," Cai Renxiang said. "Miss Ling and Miss Gu have made some efforts in that direction already," she acknowledged, "but we cannot cease putting pressure upon her allies. Her primary conspirators are still at large. Fu Xiang, I believe you have information on this matter?"

The older boy inclined his head. "I do. The rebel Ji Rong has been seen among the older years. It seems he has endeared himself to a certain... formidable lady by the name of Chu Song. Unfortunately, as a ruffian herself, she is unlikely to listen to reason and hand him over," he said smoothly. "For now, I would suggest patience. Dealing with that girl and her friends would be a poor decision at this point in time. It would be best to leave it until we have further support among my yearmates."

After a beat to allow the rest of them to digest Fu Xiang's information, Cai Renxiang continued, "Thank you. In regards to Kang Zihao, his location is well known. Huang Da?"

"The dog cowers in his kennel, licking his wounds. The actions of our wonderful ladies Gu and Ling have cost him support, and the actions I took in support of their efforts have done more still," Huang Da reported proudly.

Ling Qi glanced briefly at him; she wasn't sure how to feel about the boy taking his cues from her. She didn't miss the frost in Bai Meizhen's eyes when she glanced at the boy as well.

"Well, it's not quite so clear cut," Han Jian cut in. "My own sources have seen him creeping out into the mountains. He was spotted making his way into the territory of the great wolf which presides over the region's packs. It is likely that he is securing a source of spirits for himself and perhaps some of his followers."

"I see," Cai Renxiang said, resting her fingers against each other. "Good work, Sir Han. That coincides with reports of increased spirit beast attacks upon disciples under my protection. We will have to resolve this," she said decisively. "Is there any other information on the Sun rebels?"

"There has been some discussion of supporting her among my peers," Fu Xiang answered. "Many of them are quite spiteful and resent the imposition of your authority upon them. While the Princess is, by all accounts, somewhat reckless..."

"She is not a fool," Bai Meizhen interected coldly. "The Sun do not fail to take advantage of rebellious sentiment."

"Quite," Cai Renxiang replied. Ling Qi blinked in surprise when a smile that could almost be called warm briefly appeared on the heiress' face directed at Meizhen. "Which leads into the next topic of discussion, the expansion of my authority over the remaining Outer Sect disciples."

Ling Qi sighed and leaned back in her seat as conversation ebbed and flowed. She paid attention, but there was little she could add to the conversation. This talk of favors traded and potential weak points in factions was all a bit above her head. At least it seemed like Cai Renxiang had a plan for the potential issue Han Jian had raised.

Eventually, the meeting wound down, moving on to more interesting but less pressing topics like the council's finances. As a direct member of the council, Ling Qi would be receiving a salary of twenty five red spirit stones a week simply for wearing the band and offering assistance to any other members in trouble. She had a strong feeling that it was meant to be a mostly symbolic salary given the likely amount of resources available to most of the council members, but with Zhengui devouring her previous source of weekly income, she was hardly going to complain. Her finances were starting to get rather tight. The clothing she had been promised by Cai Renxiang was on its way as well and would be delivered at the end of the following week.

That thought in itself was a bit bizarre to her, and she found herself contemplating the vast differences in her circumstances compared to her pre-Sect days as the meeting reached its conclusion.

"Your efforts and time are all appreciated." Cai Renxiang spoke as she had throughout the meeting, clearly and decisively. "You are all free to leave as you wish." Ling Qi held back a sigh of relief as she began to stand, along with Han Jian and several others. The heiress continued, "Miss Bai, could I ask that you remain behind for a moment? There is a matter I would discuss with you."

Ling Qi glanced between them but didn't pause. Going by the flicker of surprise on Meizhen's face, she hadn't been expecting it either.

"That is acceptable, Lady Cai," Meizhen said slowly as she stood.

"I am glad. Would you accompany me then?" Cai Renxiang replied formally. "I am afraid I must ask that we speak on the move."

Ling Qi saw curiosity in many gazes, but despite the knot of uncertainty in her stomach, she didn't say anything as Meizhen glided past her with only a brief acknowledging nod. She was curious what the Cai heiress wanted to talk to Meizhen about, but she had no real reason to follow and listen in. Shaking her head, she began to leave.

"Miss Ling, may I speak with you?" She glanced to her side where Fu Xiang was approaching with a friendly expression.

"Is there a problem?" she asked, a bit more bluntly than she intended. The scene between her friend and Cai was still itching at her thoughts.

"No, not at all," Fu Xiang said, gesturing dismissively. Ling Qi saw over his shoulder that Han Jian had lingered, signing something to Han Fang. Han Jian caught her eye and offered a smile. She appreciated the silent support. "It is just that I have come to understand that you are the one to speak to in regards to more subtle matters," Fu Xiang continued pleasantly, drawing her attention back to him.

"I suppose you could say that," she said warily. "Huang Da isn't bad either." The words tasted like ash, but in all fairness, it was true, and maybe he would go bother Huang instead.

Fu Xiang pursed his lips and glanced toward Huang Da, who had already descended the steps and was strolling away. "I would prefer not to entrust more than is necessary to a Huang, if it is all the same to you, Miss Ling," he said after a moment's consideration. Ling Qi could understand that.

"Alright," she replied. "So what is it?"

He eyed her consideringly over the top of his glasses. "There are a number of plans I have for furthering the council's power that could use your touch. I hoped to invite you out to speak of them, perhaps over tea," he said. "Not now, of course. I would not be so presumptuous."

Ling Qi shrugged uncomfortably, feeling awkward. "... I'll consider it. My schedule is pretty busy."

"Of course," he agreed with a dismissive flick of his sleeve. "If you could find the time, I would deeply appreciate it."

She nodded once and made her excuses. It looked like the council was becoming more active. At least the curse should be out of her system soon.

### **Chapter 81 - Elder Ying**

The unopened letter resting on the desk in her room stirred several conflicting emotions in Ling Qi as she stared down at it. Guilt because she had completely forgotten about the burgeoning correspondence with her mother in the rush of events, faint hopefulness that she would be able to reconnect with her, and regret when she recalled how flippant she had been in her own letter. Would this just be a cursory response from a woman who probably couldn't fathom Ling Qi's current circumstances?

Ling Qi sighed and broke the plain wax seal on the letter. She would just have to read it and find out. *Ling Qi*,

I am glad to know you are well. I do not deserve the consideration you have given me, but I cannot in good conscience refuse. Let us not speak of past mistakes. If you were a poor daughter, it is only because I was a poor mother. I am only glad that you still live and have done so well for yourself. You have done better on your own than I could have ever hoped.

To answer your questions... the city has been quiet of late with the recent passing of inspections. There are few troublemakers about. I am certain things will return to normal in a matter of months, but for now, the peace is kept.

Your other questions are more difficult to answer. I suppose you are old enough now that there is little need to honey my words, but... no tincture is perfect in function. You have a younger sister, if one only half related by blood. Given my age and the circumstances, my employment ended shortly after the pregnancy became obvious.

Please do not exert yourself further for us though. I say this not as a plea for more as your gifts are already far in excess of what I deserve or need. Biyu, your half sister, is as healthy and well as can be expected.

Returning to your circumstances, you say you are among the best of the Outer Disciples? I am pleased for you. I always knew you could reach high with focus and effort, although it seems my chosen methods to push you were poor in effect.

I cannot begin to understand the trials of immortals, of course, but are you well? Have you found friends? You always had trouble getting along with other children. Has anyone troubled you? The great families can be dogged and unrelenting at times and cruel to others.

*I have no right to ask, but I would like to know more of how you now live.* 

With love,

Ling Qingge

Ling Qi reread the letter a few times before leaning back in her seat, idly reaching down to pat Zhengui's shell as he stirred in her lap, letting out a questioning squeak as he peered up at her.

A half sister, huh. She didn't know how to feel about that. She was glad her mother was well though and glad that her mother was interested in her life. She still wasn't really sure how to handle that though.

For now, Zhengui needed his morning meal, which meant a trip to the market. He didn't particularly like the fish cores so she would have to see if she could trade for something more palatable. It would be a stopgap until she could do some hunting tonight on the way to a Sect job.

She would still need to hurry though. She had chosen a week's worth of lessons with Elder Ying as her reward from the mission with the barbarian shaman, and her first lesson was today.

Once she had gotten to the market and traded a few fish cores in for an assortment of other minor cores at a small loss; Ling Qi began the climb up to the pavilion where the Elder's note had indicated that they would meet at. She was nervous about exposing Zhengui to the Elders' attention but she strongly doubted they were unaware of him. Elder Ying was unlikely to be unaware of what happened within her own trial.

The pavilion, a sturdy stone construction made for meetings and meditation, was much like the others that dotted the mountain. It was also deserted so after peering around nervously, Ling Qi sat down on one of the plain wooden seats and set Zhengui down on the table, fishing out a couple of cores to feed him with. She couldn't help but smile a bit at the enthusiastic sounds both of his heads made as she offered the little spheres for them to eat out of her hand. She had to gently deny the serpentine head when it tried to steal from the other. The little smoke breathing serpent was the more gluttonous of the two heads.

Should she consider a way to more easily refer to the two heads? The two heads were the same being according to all the information she had, but it was hard to think of it that way when they squabbled with each other. Maybe she could split the name between them? Zhen for the serpent and Gui for the tortoise head?

Her smile dimmed as she remembered that Meizhen was still avoiding her. The other girl wasn't unfriendly when they did see each other, so much as distant and closed off like she had been in the beginning of the year. Meizhen wasn't comfortable around Ling Qi anymore. Ling Qi did not notice her hands clenching into fists until Zhengui let out a plaintive sound and nudged his head against her hand.

His concern was a simple, unformed thing, but she appreciated it all the same, patting him on his rocky shell in thanks. The little serpent twined affectionately through her fingers, rubbing his head against her thumb.

"At least I have you, no matter what. Right, Zhengui?" she mused. People could be so difficult to deal with sometimes.

She blinked then as a pulse of qi washed over her, earthy and rich. A moment later, the matronly figure of Elder Ying materialized before her, seemingly arriving from nowhere. Elder Ying's brown eyes regarded her warmly from her lined face.

"Good morning, Disciple Ling," she said kindly. "Are you prepared to begin?"

Ling Qi hastily stood and bowed, scooping Zhengui up. She felt a spike of nervousness as she saw the Elder examining him, but the old woman's eyes quickly rose back to her face. "Of course, Elder Ying, I do not want to waste your valuable time."

"I am certain that you do not," Elder Ying replied, the corner of her lips quirking upward in a slightly amused smile. "But you have a question. Please ask it, and feel free to continue doing so. A student can hardly learn by leashing their curiosity."

Ling Qi hesitated. Were her thoughts really so transparent? She supposed they must be to an Elder.

"I... just want to be sure that there are no concerns about my spirit," she admitted carefully.

"Understandable," Elder Ying said. "But your worry is unfounded. His parents may have been the companions of a dangerous criminal, but spirits are not so chained by such things. Be at ease." Ling Qi was relieved at the Elder's calm words, even as she was uncomfortable at the powerful woman's gaze.

"I see. Thank you for your wisdom, Elder Ying," Ling Qi replied, her unconscious grip on the spirit in her arms loosening.

"It is no trouble, young lady," the older woman said dismissively. "Take my hand if you would," she continued warmly. "Today will largely consist of lecture and theory so we will relocate to my garden, a much better venue than this dreary place."

Despite herself, Ling Qi relaxed in the face of the Elder's friendly demeanor and stepped forward to take her hand. Ling Qi blinked, and they no longer stood in the pavilion. She wobbled on her feet as if she had come to a sudden stop from a run then took in her new surroundings.

Ling Qi now stood on a small, stone tiled square in the center of a well-organized garden. Small tiled footpaths lead away in each cardinal direction. She could see dozens of different types of flowers and at least three types of fruit trees in her immediate surroundings arranged in orderly and artful patterns. A light breeze carried the mingled scents of the garden to Ling Qi, and that, along with the soothing flow of the qi in her immediate vicinity, filled her with a certain serenity, her stress and worry fading.

"It is lovely, is it not?" Elder Ying said warmly, releasing her hand. "It is quite a lot of work to maintain, but I find the effort to be worth it. Go ahead and take a seat on the bench, young lady."

"It is beautiful," Ling Qi agreed, turning her head to take in more of the garden. "Do you really maintain all of this yourself?" she blurted out, immediately feeling foolish. The woman was an Elder; of course she could take care of even a garden this large entirely on her own.

"I manage with a little assistance," the old woman chuckled. "As you have discovered for yourself, a cultivator is hardly ever alone, are they?" Ling Qi flushed in embarrassment, glancing down at Zhengui. Both of his heads were peering around in wonder... and hunger. She resolved to keep a close eye on him. He would probably try to take a bite out of anything he could reach. "But I do enjoy doing some of the work by hand. It is a good way to remain connected to the world," Elder Ying mused. "Now, I believe you wished to learn about the subject of spirit beasts?"

"That was part of my request, Elder Ying," Ling Qi replied politely, carefully keeping Zhengui from scrambling out of her arms as she took a seat on the simple stone bench indicated to her. "I want to know how to care for Zhengui properly."

"An admirable goal," the Elder said warmly. "I will not speak too much about things such as diet and hygiene; the books you have been studying should be sufficient for that task," Elder Ying continued thoughtfully. "Let us speak on less mundane matters. Tell me, Disciple Ling, what is the difference between a spirit and a human?"

Ling Qi frowned in thought, thinking back to her lessons with Elder Su. "Humans have more flexible cultivation systems. We have more channels and more robust dantians capable of greater expansion. Our bodies are full of impurities though, and it is more difficult for us to gain access to our qi. Most humans have so much impurity in their body that it is effectively impossible for them to ever awaken to the Path of Cultivation."

"You have listened to Junior Sister Su's lectures well," the smiling woman praised, sounding amused. "But do you know what that really means? What exactly are the impurities you speak of? And why do they trouble humans but not beasts or pure spirits?"

"That... did not come up," Ling Qi admitted. "My apologies, Elder Ying. I do not know." She was pretty sure the gunk she had woken up covered in after breaking through was an example of impurity, but it wasn't as if she had ever studied it.

"That is fine," Elder Ying said, folding her arms over her stomach as her gaze drifted back to her garden. "Some of the impurity is mundane: poorly healed tissue, foul or useless things in the food and drink we consume, and things absorbed from our environment. This type of impurity affects even spirit beasts. Humans are born with a great deal of impurity however. This is due to our origin, which differs from other life in the world. Do you know the tales of the Nameless?"

Ling Qi furrowed her brows, idly sending soothing thoughts to the excitable Zhengui; she materialized a stick of fragrant wood for him to gnaw on from her ring without even looking at him. "Nameless" did jog a distant memory. A story told by her mother maybe? It wouldn't come to her though.

"No, Elder Ying," she said self-consciously.

The Elder hummed thoughtfully. "Once, uncounted ages ago, long before the Sage Emperor arose and ended the Age of Warring Kings, before even the fall of the Dragon Gods, the world was not as it is today." Ling Qi leaned forward, listening intently. "Spirits walked, flew, and burrowed freely through the world, which held to order and form only at their whim. There were no humans then, and beasts and spirits were born purely from the churning turmoil of the elements, most of them mere fragments and extensions of greater spirits with little true will of their own.

"Not all were pleased with this arrangement. The spirit which we know only as the Nameless Mother was one of the greatest of the Great Spirits, mighty even by the reckoning of their kind, and she grew to despise the disorder of the world and the loneliness of her existence. She came to desire companionship of beings who were not simply her thoughts given temporary form. She sought her fellow Great Spirits,

but their incomprehensible company left her unfulfilled for Great Spirits were as alien to one another as such beings often are to us."

Ling Qi thought about her own isolation in the streets. "So what did she do?"

"She tried for a time to create something which she could converse meaningfully with, but no matter what she attempted, her creations were little more than dolls moving at her whim," Elder Ying said, a note of sadness touching her voice. "She tried again and again to no avail, using every element and combination she could think of. When her latest attempt, dolls shaped of clay and river water, had failed yet again, the Nameless Mother despaired and broke into tears over the clay dolls, which held no will of their own. Her despair was not for naught though as the sound of her tears brought the attention of another Great Spirit. He found the dark vortex formed by the Mother's emotions a great curiosity, and when he beheld her crying over the dolls, a strange feeling came to him."

Ling Qi's lips quirked up for a moment. Of course it did. A man coming upon a crying woman - well, that was an opportunity, wasn't it? She supposed that wasn't where the story was going though since this was a story about spirits and the description was likely symbolism to make it comprehensible.

Elder Su paused, giving her an amused look, as if her thoughts were heard, and Ling Qi ducked her head, flushing.

The Elder continued, "Each Great Spirit was their own unique being with little connection to one another, yet this spirit felt strange at the sight of the Mother's tears. He felt a pain as if he had come to harm. At first, he imagined it an attack and withdrew in suspicion. Eventually though, he found that he was not wounded, and once again, he grew curious, filled with a desire to understand. He returned and considered the scene. Soon, he came to the conclusion that the Mother's pain had caused his and set about to correct the problem. The dolls were the obvious problem, but he could find no damage. Filled with her essence, they were active fragments, just as such things should be. Yet they were without motion or will as the Mother was a being of order and stillness. The other spirit, however, was a being of chaos and motion, and so, he considered that perhaps the stillness was the problem. He extended his own essence to the dolls and made them dance."

Ling Qi couldn't help the slight snort of laughter that escaped her lips. Surprisingly, Elder Ying, did not reproach her and let out a quiet chuckle herself.

"This story makes Great Spirits seem very simple," Ling Qi noted. "Is that intentional?"

"Most likely," Elder Ying answered kindly. "You must understand that the beings of this time had no real comprehension of communication with one another just yet. The world was new, and they were in many ways as children. There are many treatises on the evolution of Great Spirits, if the subject has your interest. For now though, simply keep that in mind as we continue. Now, this, of course, startled the Mother, who had been so embroiled in despair that she had not noticed the approach of the Other. She grew excited for the dolls before her acted without her will. She could perceive the existence of the other Great Spirit before her though, and it quickly became clear that he was the source. Her mood fell as she realized it was only another Great Spirit playing with her discarded creations."

Ling Qi cocked her head to the side. What must it have been like, to simply be fundamentally unable to communicate?

"The other spirit saw her plunging mood and thought furiously about a solution. To a being such as him, it was obvious. The dolls needed more motion. He poured greater essence into the effort, going so far as to no longer puppet the dolls, but to infuse them with himself." Elder Ying smiled. "And so, his essence mingled with the Mother's, and from it was born two things: understanding and the very first humans."

"So we are different because we were created?" Ling Qi ventured a guess. "We aren't... natural the way spirits are?"

"That is roughly correct," Elder Ying replied. "To summarize the rest of the tale, from their new understanding, the Mother and the Father found happiness and fulfillment for a time, but other spirits found their mingling of essence, the 'impurity' wrought by allowing oneself to be affected and changed by another being, to be repugnant and an abomination. The two were attacked and most of their first human children slain, but this proved a mistake, wrought by the other spirits' ignorance and incomprehension. The Father and Mother were mighty beyond compare, and the assault enraged them. They slew an uncounted number of their brethren and severed a vast section of the primordial chaos, reshaping it into the world we know today. They sacrificed everything, even down to their names, to forge a world where their children could live and prosper. This is why Great Spirits can no longer interact directly with the world, and its nature is no longer ephemeral but ordered and solid."

"If impurity came from the mixing of essences, does that mean that in order to reach the pinnacle of cultivation, you have to be alone?" Ling Qi asked.

Elder Ying gave her an approving look, but Ling Qi could see the hint of sadness in her eyes. "That is the contradiction of cultivation, yes. With each step taken closer to the divine, it becomes more difficult to maintain your connections, and it grows easier to isolate yourself as your peers grow fewer and fewer in number. After all, a Great Spirit is a unique existence, utterly separate from even other aspects of the same concept." The Elder shook her head, letting out a sigh. "Such things will be beyond you for some time. Instead, let us speak of how this knowledge relates to your cultivation and the cultivation of your connection with your spirit…"

Ling Qi listened intently as Elder Ying spoke, explaining how to better feel the differences in the energy, how to detect more closely the part of her own energies bonded to Zhengui, and how to hone and refine that connection along with the qi in her dantian. She learned how to feel her spirit's resistance to purification and how to overcome it without simply breaking the resistance down with force as most young cultivators did. It was enlightening, but she could tell this was only the beginning.

# **Chapter 82 - Relaxing Hike**

The lessons with Elder Ying proved a stark contrast to the rest of her day. She was not sure when she had become acclimated to having friends and acquaintances around or perhaps it was the echo of Elder Ying's story, but she did not like being alone again. Meizhen was nowhere to be found, Li Suyin was busy with work, and even Su Ling appeared to be hiding out in seclusion still, going by the sealed entrance to her cave. Gu Xiulan was busy with that business Han Jian had talked about last week as well, which left her with little to do except care for Zhengui and play with him to take her mind off things. She supposed the very loneliness that dogged her helped in a way; she had not felt quite so in sync with the melody of the vale for quite some time.

There were no great insights this time nor new sections of the song when she mastered the fourth measure of the Forgotten Vale Melody art, just refinement of what she already knew. Peeking ahead at the notes of the fifth measure though, she could tell she was nearing the end of the melody as recorded in the jade slip. The sixth and final measure would require her to break through to the third realm to fully understand and cultivate. Even the fifth would require her to step into late yellow, but she was close enough to that precipice that it didn't concern her too much.

By the time she had ended her practice, night had fallen, and Zhengui had fallen asleep for the night. Once she tucked him into the modified kiln shelf and set a low blaze burning, she set off.

As she left the mountain and traversed into the forest, flitting through the trees, she let her worries and concerns about her friends go for the moment and simply focused on the task ahead. While she couldn't say she'd ever stolen from spider spirits before, the covert acquisition of items - or harvesting the Dreamspinner webs as the Sect job described it - wasn't anything new to Ling Qi. It felt liberating to stop worrying about all the complicated problems that had arisen in the past months and get back to something simple.

The lethargic weight of the curse on her limbs was an irritant, but it was just another minor obstacle. She wouldn't need to fight after all, and although she could temporarily purge it with Argent Mirror if necessary, she wouldn't fail like that.

Even with her speed and stamina, it took awhile to reach the spider nest, but it was obvious when she did. Ahead of her, she could see dozens of towering trees joined together by vast shrouds of glistening white webbing that seemed to sparkle with a multitude of colors, hypnotic in the way they shifted with even the slightest breeze. In fact, she was momentarily entranced by the patterns in the webs before she mastered herself, ejecting the minor influence. She would need to be careful inside; the webbing she was to collect was the finer silk from deeper in the nest, but the effect would be stronger there.

Ling Qi began by circling the perimeter of the nest, figuring out the best approach. As she skulked through the underbrush near the web-draped branches of the nest, she caught her first sight of the spiders themselves. The smallest were the size of a big man's hand while the larger ones were the size of dogs, their jittering movements eerie to her eyes at that size. Some clung to the webs, completely still, while others skittered through the branches, spinning and repairing webs or tending to wriggling cocoons of worrying size. Birds and beasts of all kinds lay trapped in the webs. Although she had been

provided simple leather gloves stitched with formations to counteract the web's adhesive to collect the webbing, that wouldn't help the rest of her.

After thoroughly scouting the perimeter, Ling Qi began her approach, intending to slip in through a pair of less heavily webbed trees that saw little traffic from the nests inhabitants. She was a little rusty, she thought. Her lack of practice had made her movements a little less sure, but the grace and calm granted by the dark qi in her channels and the moon shining dimly overhead was enough to steady her nerves and keep her from making any mistakes. She slipped between the trees like a shadow, avoiding attention from the spiders skittering and whispering overhead as she ducked and wove her way through the maze-like interior of the nest.

It was tense, and her heart beat loudly in her ears when she glimpsed a truly massive arachnid, easily the size of a full grown horse, pass above her. Its spearlike legs and wriggling fangs were an unnerving sight, even to someone not particularly afraid of their kind. The fact that its cultivation matched hers didn't help. Despite the dangers, Ling Qi couldn't help but grin, feeling a thread of excitement that she had not managed in some time. Her fellow disciples had been far less guarded than this.

Surrounded by dozens of spirit beasts, she slipped deeper into the nest, focusing hard on avoiding being entranced by the psychedelic colors of the shifting patterns in the webs, ignoring the faces and scenes shifting in the tunnels of webbing around her. Dreamspinner spiders trapped prey in illusions woven of the final, drugged thoughts and dreams of their previous prey; the effect grew stronger with more contact with the web.

Soon, she reached the inner nest where the webbing grew thicker still, hanging in solid sheets between the branches, each strand as thick as a finger. Ling Qi hardly dared to breathe. The strongest of the dreamspinner spiders would be here so she would need to be quick in filling the bags once she got started.

Ling Qi's hands trembled as she began to collect the webbing. It was thick and viscous, resisting the cut of her knife as she gripped it tightly, qi circulating through her fingers to force them into absolute stillness. Minimum size for pieces should be no less than two handspans, she recalled, so she cut quickly but carefully, slipping fluttering sheets into the enchanted bag at her waist before moving on.

Despite her best efforts, her actions did not go unnoticed. As she hurried to fill the seemingly bottomless bag, she could hear chittering begin to arise around her, the sounds of spiders growing agitated. They had begun to take action against her intrusion. Ling Qi forcibly focused on her task, but she became bolder in her collection of the webbing. The spiders were already aware of her anyway so she might as well harvest greater sheets of silk. She darted away from skittering shadows and began to cut down entire sections of webbing.

And still, the bag was not full. Just how much was she supposed to collect?!

She could hear the spiders now, a growing vibration traveling through every web and branch as scores of legs trod the paths of the nest and shadows grew thick. She couldn't stay hidden forever like this. When a cat-sized spider leapt at her face from a branch above, fangs waving, she had enough. She lashed out with her fist, punching the leaping spider hard enough to reverse its momentum and send it tumbling back into the undergrowth. She seized the web she had been working on and ripped, putting

her full strength into the motion and tearing down the entire sheet, a piece of webbing large enough to make a man's cloak.

Then she ran, her skin prickling and sparks of color forming in the corners of her eyes from the slow build up of contact with the webbing. She did her best to avoid the aggressive spiders as she hurried to stuff the huge piece of web into the mouth of the bag. Of course, she found that *now* it was full and half of the sticky white material flapped from the top of the bag. She summoned her flute to her hand, no longer worried if the web fell out as the ground trembled with the angry sounds of the spider nest. Even as dark qi flooded her limbs, obscuring her passage and allowing her to blink through spaces too small for her to consider before, she prepared to play if necessary.

The next few minutes were harrowing as she sprinted as fast as she could, the world reduced to a blur around her as she fended off the spiders in her path, quick strikes sending the smaller ones flying even as she tumbled under, leapt over, or otherwise avoided the larger ones. More than once, she used the skittering beasts as stepping stones, her boots coming down on carapace and beady eyes to launch herself through gaps in the webs, black qi trailing behind her limbs.

By the time she had left the nest behind, her heartbeat thundered in her ears and she was short of breath and qi, heavily drained from constant activation of Sable Crescent Step... but she had left her pursuers behind.

Her laughter rang out through the dark forest as she caught her breath. That... had been a lot of fun despite more than a few close calls. She would have to look into more jobs of this kind.

Ling Qi returned to the Outer Sect mountain after that, turning in her full bag of Dreamspinner web in trade for a credit of Sect Points to her account for the completed job. By the time she had settled everything and cleaned up from the jaunt, the sun was already rising, and it was time for her next lesson with Elder Ying.

### Chapter 83 - Crackdown 1

The focus of the lessons remained on her connection with Zhengui, the way her own qi affected him and vice versa. While Zhengui was too young to benefit from any such lessons, he did get to enjoy the fruits of the Elder's garden. The little xuanwu was kept occupied during the long sessions of meditation by gnawing on fruits half the size of his own body. Ling Qi was glad her gown was self-cleaning, else it would probably have ended up quite stained.

She felt her connection to the little spirit growing more refined and with it, her ability to communicate with him. His thoughts were still simple and direct, but she was beginning to see signs of greater development in the curiosity, affection, and other more complex emotions now blossoming alongside simpler ones like fear and hunger. Elder Ying believed that he would begin grasping some of his abilities in no more than a month. Strong spirits did not remain in a state of infancy for long. Indeed, when she examined him, Ling Qi was sure that Zhengui was already several centimeters longer than he had been at hatching. For now though, she could only continue caring for Zhengui as he grew.

In the wake of her lesson, she had other tasks. Ling Qi still shied from the thought of facing Meizhen and forcing the talk that she felt had to happen and her other friends remained unavailable as well so she decided that she might as well see what the boy from the council meeting had wanted. It would be rude to ignore him, and she did have some free time in the afternoon.

It helped that she had received a note the previous day, left on her doorstep. The venue he wanted to meet at, a little sect run teahouse in the market area, seemed safe enough. The location meant it couldn't be an ambush since as far as she could tell, the market area was the one place on the mountain where violence was absolutely banned by Sect law. She would keep an eye out on leaving, but the meeting itself should be safe.

The teahouse in question was a humble place toward the edge of the market area with a dim interior populated by a scattering of tables at which disciples chatted and mingled. Simple paper dolls flitted about serving the disciples, somehow supporting the weight of dishes and tea. Ling Qi gave the place a wary once over as she paused in the doorway, but no one even looked up at her entrance.

She entered, skirting the edge of the room to head for the line of closed booths lining the rear wall. Fu Xiang had said he would be taking his tea in the third booth from the left.

She carefully pushed the door open, the simple bamboo and paper screen sliding easily on the track. Inside was a small polished wooden table surrounded on three sides by a bench upholstered with a simple, unadorned set of light green cushions. Fu Xiang sat on the right side, and looked up as she opened the door, idly adjusting the lenses perched on his nose with one hand while cradling of a cup of dark, red-tinged tea in the other. The pot and a second cup rested on the tabletop.

"Oh, Miss Ling. I was beginning to imagine that you had decided not to come," he said lightly. "I am glad I was wrong."

Ling Qi's lips almost twisted into a frown. The booth was smaller than she liked, but she was already here.

"I was delayed somewhat. I am currently taking lessons from Elder Ying," she replied evenly. "I could hardly end such things early." She stepped inside and seated herself across from the boy. She paused briefly when the door rattled and began to close on its own but brushed it off as a formation effect.

"Of course. It was a little thoughtless of me to set the meeting time without your input," he apologized. "In my defense, you are somewhat difficult to track down. Please do not think poorly of me, Miss Ling."

Ling Qi studied him; Fu Xiang's unfailing good humor rubbed her the wrong way. It was a slight thing, but she found herself wary of the older boy.

"It was not any real trouble," she replied carefully and was surprised when he moved to pour a cup for her. It was a weirdly humble action, and it threw her for a second. Going by the amused sparkle in his eyes when he met her gaze, he was aware of it too.

"It is a local blend. I've grown quite fond of it," he commented idly as he set the pot back down. "Would you care to order anything before we begin?"

She accepted the cup with only a slight suspicious glance and shook her head. "No, this is fine. What did you want from me?" she asked, a bit more bluntly than strictly necessary.

"I suppose being direct is fine too," he said, taking a sip of his own tea. He gestured, and Ling Qi stiffened as she felt a shift in the air. "Just a precaution," he assured her, meeting her gaze. "We won't be overheard now."

"Is that really necessary?" Ling Qi asked, arching an eyebrow in her best impression of Meizhen's skeptical face.

"It is better to be over prepared than under," he shot back. "I think we both understand how a lack of caution can lead to ruin. I know better than to think the world will be so forgiving."

"You aren't wrong. You also haven't answered the question. What do you want from me?"

"A little cooperation, no more. I have, if you will excuse the arrogance, very good eyes and ears," he said with a touch of pride. "I know many useful things, and yet, without more... tangible evidence, making use of those things can be difficult. My word is not exactly of high worth," he continued blithely.

It wasn't hard to work out the implication. Ling Qi took a careful sip of her tea, keeping an eye on him over the rim. "So I suppose you want someone to acquire that 'tangible evidence' of yours?" she asked dryly. "Are you sure Lady Cai would approve of that kind of underhanded dealing?"

"I am quite certain," he replied with a slight grin. "Justice cannot be dealt to those who hide their misdeeds after all. Investigation into corruption is an important task, and it is why the Lady approached me. I am, for example, close on the trail of the one who attempted to frame you, Miss Ling."

Ling Qi stilled but then nodded. "So what is your proposal exactly?" she asked. Information brokers and climbers - she knew his type well enough, and she had a measure of how far she could trust the boy. It might be worth helping him out though; it would give her leverage for favors in the future, if nothing else.

"You are a cold one aren't you?" he commented idly, examining her. "You could at least give me a little more reaction to work with."

"I'd rather not," Ling Qi replied dryly.

"Fair enough." He shrugged. "At the moment, I require a cache of letters from the home of a young woman in my year. They contain information that will grant Lady Cai leverage in future meetings. I hope you will not mind that I do not share more exact details just yet."

"Understandable," Ling Qi said. That didn't sound too onerous, even if preparing properly would probably be time consuming. There was obviously something more personal in it for Fu Xiang though. "What's in it for me?"

"Besides the glory of working for Lady Cai's cause?" he asked rhetorically, leaning forward slightly. "Knowledge of a trial site that has yet to be uncovered this year. We are not in competition after all."

So Fu Xiang was aiming for a production slot for the Inner Sect? That was useful information. The idea of another trial was appealing too; she had come out quite well from the last one.

"I'll consider it. I hope this isn't too urgent. I am already very busy this week. I intend to participate in the subjugation of Kang Zihao tomorrow, and I still have my lessons for the remainder of the week."

"Of course," he responded, dipping his head slightly in acknowledgement. "If you have not made your decision by the end of the week, I am afraid I will have to seek other avenues though. It is *somewhat* time sensitive."

Ling Qi nodded tersely, taking a longer sip of tea. It *was* pretty good. She was thankful that Fu Xiang's request was relatively straightforward. She doubted he would renege on their deal if she went through with it. For all that he said his word wasn't worth much, if he didn't at least keep his deals, she doubted Cai Renxiang would have brought him onto the council.

Ling Qi lingered a bit longer to be polite and finish her tea, but they soon parted ways. Ling Qi had cultivation to do. Specifically, she needed to begin thinking seriously about which phase of the moon she would like to follow for the next phase of her cultivation art.

Ling Qi considered them all as she meditated and drank in the starlight from the yard of the archive building. The Grinning Moon had been good to her, and the thrill of her last job had reminded her of how fun it could be to slip in and out of danger. She had shied away from danger as a mortal... but maybe she didn't need to any more.

She was not yet sure, which might be why the thread of dark qi nestled in her dantian since her encounter with the Grinning Moon after the fight with Sun Liling's forces faded away. She had little time for introspection come morning though as she was met with the irresistible force that was Gu Xiulan on the warpath.

Well, that might have been an exaggeration, but apparently, since they were both going to be participating in the subjugation mission against Kang Zihao today and Ling Qi's new gown had been delivered that morning, they absolutely needed to go out together beforehand to ensure that they looked their best.

Ling Qi was dubious of why precisely it was important to look good when hunting down and beating up an enemy, but she didn't grumble. Gu Xiulan's cheerful, if overbearing, banter was better than the silence of the past couple days.

It did mean she had the displeasure of feeling like a doll again as Gu Xiulan insisted on fussing over her while she changed into her new gown. The gown that Cai Renxiang had commissioned from a Core Sect apprentice of Duchess Cai was a garment far more luxurious and complicated than any Ling Qi had ever worn before. The gown had many layers of black silk hemmed with white, and a dark blue mantle wrapped around her shoulders, hanging down her back like a pair of wings.

More importantly, she could feel the power in it, the way the formations woven throughout the fabric empowered dark and water natured qi as it flowed through her channels. The sheer toughness of the silk, superior to even steel, stitched itself back together when it was cut. And if she focused enough qi into the mantle, her feet would leave the ground, granting her flight for the short time her qi reserves allowed.

Of course, Gu Xiulan chose to comment on none of this first.

"It is so understated," Gu Xiulan said with a pout as she looked her over with a critical eye. "I would have expected something flashier given Cai's own propensities," her friend added, plucking at the waist-length cloak that covered Ling Qi's shoulders. "And really, what is this? I can hardly see you under there."

"I like it," Ling Qi mused. The wide mouthed sleeves hung over her hands, and there were several concealed pockets in the lining. They were bigger on the inside too. It was nothing like a storage ring, but it would certainly make carrying her knives easier. She idly fingered the white sash cinched tightly around her waist. The layers of the gown should have left her feeling overheated, but instead, she felt pleasantly cool. She turned and the fabric swirled lightly around her legs, not catching or impeding her motions despite only being modestly split up to her calves. The motion created the illusion that the dark violet flowers decorating the lower half of the gown were blowing in the wind.

"I suppose the shoes are rather nice," Xiulan admitted grudgingly, crossing her arms under her chest as she considered the soft-soled calf height boots included with the outfit. "Still, it is a little plain..."

"Right? Who could have imagined that someone I've spoken directly to all of twice would have a better handle on my tastes than one of my friends?" Ling Qi said dryly, quickly stepping over to the end table to catch Zhengui before he fell off the table. Zhengui had been trying to reach the dangling end of a potted plant placed on a higher shelf.

"I only want what is best for you," Xiulan replied haughtily. "It is hardly my fault that you fight me every step of the way. If you had your way, no one would ever look at you."

"And if you had *your* way, I'd catch fire from embarrassment," Ling Qi retorted, turning to face her friend as she flicked her wrist, drawing out one of the sticks Zhengui liked to gnaw on. She rolled her eyes as she saw Xiulan give her a sly look, parts of the other girl's hair sparking and igniting as she opened her mouth to speak. "You know what I meant," Ling Qi cut in before Xiulan could speak. "Besides, look, the cloak comes off easy enough."

She breathed out, and the qi infusing the garment shifted, the darkly colored mantle dissolving and exposing the back of the gown, which was embroidered with white flower petals.

"That is better, I suppose." Xiulan allowed the fires in her hair to fade, leaving not a single hair scorched. "You could still do with something more eye catching. Perhaps a few hair ornaments..." she mused, eyeing Ling Qi's braid speculatively. "A bit of silver wire woven through your braid might catch the light well, or perhaps a gemstone clasp at the base."

"If you have any suggestions, I suppose I can take them," Ling Qi sighed. "Just remember, we do have to be at the meeting point on time."

"Of course," Xiulan said dismissively. "We have more than enough time to pick up a few complementing accessories and touch things up a bit. Presentation is a must when cowing one's lessers after all," she added brightly, the golden ornaments in her hair jingling as she took Ling Qi by the wrist and turned to lead her out.

Ling Qi rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself. It might be fun to try something new with her hair, she supposed. She was on a rather tight budget at the moment, but window shopping would be a good way to relax before the action started.

## Chapter 84 - Crackdown 2

Ling Qi had fun shopping about with Xiulan, and by the time they arrived at the meeting point, she was actually considering wearing her hair loose for awhile, perhaps just gathered in a tail with braids on either side of her face. She had seen a few ornaments she liked, and there were oils for keeping even her rebellious locks relatively straight. It hardly occurred to her to wonder just how badly Xiulan had corrupted her.

They arrived at the meeting point together to find Gan Guangli, Han Jian, and four others she did not recognize already present. It seemed Cai Renxiang wasn't taking any chances of failure.

"Greetings, Miss Ling and Miss Gu!" Gan Guangli said boisterously as the two of them entered the camp, cheerfully waving an armored fist.

"Ling Qi, Gu Xiulan," Han Jian greeted more quietly. "I see Lady Cai made good on her promise." He wore a new outfit as well with a breastplate, vambraces, and greaves of pale, nearly white, metal over darker gold cloth, marked by tiger-like stripes. The lightly armored outfit was fit for an officer's formal wear.

"Of course," Gan boomed. "You look resplendent, Miss Ling. Armed as we are, we cannot fail to punish the villain."

Xiulan shot her a smirk, and Ling Qi coughed into her hand. "Yes, well, what is our plan exactly? I know the intent is to catch him on his way back from the wolves' territory, but..."

"We've discovered the cave where Kang Zihao has holed up," Han Jian interceded smoothly. "Step one is to have these four fan out with their talismans to set up the field preventing the use of transportation techniques." He gestured to the four first realm cultivators.

"A vital task," Gan Guangli said grimly, "else the villain might simply use an escape talisman to flee. However, it shall be up to the five of us to ensure he is captured swiftly."

"Five?" Ling Qi asked, glancing around. "Is Han Fang here too?"

"He's around," Han Jian said with a smile. "In any case, we would like you and Xiulan to hang back while Gan and I go to confront him and give him a chance to surrender."

"Should we really be doing that at all?" Ling Qi asked with a frown. "Why not just rush in while he's unready?"

"It would reflect poorly on us." Surprisingly, Gan Guangli was the one to answer in an unusually level and serious tone. "Those who would keep order cannot appear as villains, or there will only be further chaos."

"In that case, are we not using too much force? Even if he has achieved a partial breakthrough since we have seen him last, it does seem a tad dishonorable," Gu Xiulan mused.

"Ah, but because we are being honorable, we must make sure our force is sufficient to his potential threat. Of us, only Sir Han has a spirit beast fit for battle. We must assume that Kang Zihao has

acquired the aid of least one additional spirit, if not more." Gan Guangli broke into a wide grin then and resumed his usual booming tone. "And we cannot allow the miscreant to defeat Lady Cai's justice!"

"True enough," Gu Xiulan replied with a dismissive wave. "I shall enjoy teaching that cur of his a lesson."

"I'm sure," Han Jian said dryly. "In any case, while Gan and I take the front line, Ling Qi, we'd like you to focus on hindering his movements with your mist. The talismans won't stop him from running, and he is faster than us. Xiulan is our fire support obviously. Han Fang will be supporting us as needed."

"Not going to lay out some complex strategy?" Ling Qi teased.

"A simple plan is one not easily disrupted by the flow of battle," Han Jian said wryly.

"Indeed. If one weaves too many plots, they will only tangle their own feet," Gan Guangli agreed, clapping Han Jian on the back. The shorter boy hid his wince well.

They planned a bit longer, working out the details of their positioning and synergies, but soon, the strategizing was done and they set off. The cave Kang Zihao had taken as his hideout was a short distance from the mountain proper, nestled amongst the rolling foothills that extended to the south.

Hiding among the leaves of a nearby tree brought back memories of lurking in alleys and under awnings, waiting for a favorable mark. The inky black silk of her new dress seemed to bleed into the shadows at the edges, breaking up her profile further. But it still felt awkward to be wearing such an expensive dress out in the woods, no matter how useful it was.

Thankfully, Ling Qi did not have to spend too long in contemplation of the fact that she was wearing something worth more than a house. She kept her eyes fixed on the cave entrance, a wide crack in the hillside large enough for two men to pass through shoulder to shoulder. As Han Jian and Gan Guangli approached, making no effort to conceal themselves, she carefully raised her flute to her lips, preparing to play the Melody of the Forgotten Vale.

"KANG ZIHAO!" Gan Guangli bellowed as they came to a halt at the entrance of the cave. "Show yourself and face justice for your betrayal!"

Ling Qi grimaced as a veritable storm of birds took flight at the noise. Gan Guangli really did have quite a set of lungs. Still, she remained tense. The darkness of the cave did not block her vision so she would see Kang Zlhao before the others if he came out swinging.

However, after a tense moment while the echoes of Gan Guangli's shouting faded, she spied a white clothed figure coming around the turn at the back of the tunnel. Kang Zihao emerged, not with weapons drawn, but with his head held high and his hands raised for peace.

"It has come to this then?" the handsome boy asked sorrowfully as he halted just inside the entrance.

"Are we to continue this charade about a childish squabble being a matter of betrayal?"

"It is no such thing," Gan Guangli rumbled, looming ominously.

"Yeah, one way or another, I get what the Sect is doing," Han Jian said. "We're learning the lesson of what chaos gets us. And your bunch broke their word for what? The laughs?"

"You are the ones seeking lessons where there are none. Is the Sect not a place to work out youthful enthusiasm? To test one's limits? We have fought. Now we have lost and paid our dues. It is you who are acting the bully, seeking me out in numbers when I have sought only peace for cultivation."

Ling Qi frowned. He wasn't wrong, but did it matter? It wasn't like Sun Liling's forces *weren't* going to strike back, right?

"Do not play the fool," Gan Guangli retorted angrily. "You are gathering forces for your counterattack. Are we to believe that you will ignore the plight of your allies and the shame of defeat?"

"Come now. Cease with your inflation of my threat. So a few people have lost their goods to your... canny operations. That is hardly reason for grudge; it is just the Sect working as intended. As to your other accusation? I am building my strength, as is my right," Kang Zihao scoffed. "Lady Cai is taking her game too far."

"... It's not just a game. The chaos and uncertainty is hurting everyone," Han Jian stated evenly. "And the fact that you so easily dismiss the losses of those you supposedly lead says it all. So much for pride and honor."

Kang Zihao's noble mien cracked as he shot a venomous look at Han Jian. "I will not be lectured on pride by a dustdigger of the Golden Fields! What right do *you* have to demand my surrender, to punish me?"

"The right of justice," Gan Guangli answered, his booming voice echoing down the tunnel. "Our cause is just, and our order will benefit the disciples of the Outer Sect. Need there be another reason?"

Ling Qi saw the moment when Kang gave up on words. His eyes narrowed, his muscles clenched, and a blur of silver appeared, resolving into a gleaming shield as he rushed forward, seeking to break out of the encirclement through Han Jian. Ling Qi smiled and called her mist and its hungry phantoms. Bluebell flames bloomed in the woods to her right, and she caught the silhouette of a tall, bald figure leaping down from the hill above.

It wasn't a very long fight.

## **Chapter 85 - Elder Ying 2**

Ling Qi lifted her hand from Zhengui's shell and wiped away the sweat that had beaded on her forehead while she concentrated. Her spirit lay on the ground before her, his serpentine tail curled around his shell as he slept. Scattered fragments of beast cores lay all around him, the only sign of the week's worth of hunting income that she had fed into the all consuming furnace of his stomach.

"That was well done." She looked up as her teacher, Elder Ying, spoke. The Elder was seated on a stone bench across from her, watching her with an assessing eye. "You maintained control of the beast qi without my aid this time. What changed?"

Ling Qi considered the question as she looked down at her spirit beast. It took focus just to sense the flows of energy from the cores as Zhengui sucked them down his twin gullets and even more to try and guide where the wild, chaotic energies went.

"It felt like there was something helping me this time," she admitted. "Was that the connection you spoke of, Elder?"

"It is," the elderly woman agreed. "A well formed spirit bond flows both ways. If you have succeeded in merging your intent with your spirit's own natural digestive and cultivation processes, then I believe our lessons are done."

Gently picking up the slumbering spirit, Ling Qi set Zhengui in her lap, brushing her thumb over the warm, smooth scales of his serpent head. "Will it really be alright to accelerate his growth like this?"

"So long as you are careful in your guidance," Elder Ying replied. "Spirit beasts retain echoes of experience from their parentage, far exceeding the meagre instincts that are a human's birthright. He will not come to harm or be damaged by the process."

Ling Qi nodded in satisfaction. "Thank you very much, Elder Ying."

"You are welcome." The Elder smiled. It was easy to forget, sitting here in the garden, that the woman was not just a friendly old granny. "As this is to be our last lesson however, I do have something for you. It does not satisfy me to only offer such basic tutoring given the magnitude of the trouble you uncovered."

Ling Qi felt her pulse speed up, and she was sure that a flicker of excitement reached her expression. Still, she managed to dip her head and force out a courtesy. "Elder Ying is too kind. Your lessons have been more than enough."

"Nonsense," the old woman dismissed as she stood gracefully, showing none of the difficulty one would expect from a woman of her apparent age. "I ensured your friend would be well stocked with ingredients for her new furnace and so I will ensure that you have an art with which to practice your bond with your spirit." There was a flash and a stick of dark green jade appeared between her fingers.

Careful not to dislodge Zhengui from her lap, Ling Qi eagerly reached out to accept the token. Her arts were still few in number; she needed every one she could get her hands on. She sent a few sparks of qi circulating through the jade slip and peered at the exercises and information that appeared in her mind.

Then, she paused and frowned, looking through it again. Was this really right? This art seemed totally unsuited to her. But she couldn't just *say* that to an Elder. What if this was some kind of test?

Elder Ying cut off her racing thoughts. "I imagine you are confused. The Thousand Ring Fortress is an art which teaches its user to emulate the primal resilience of an ancient tree. It is not the sort of art you can see yourself practicing."

Ling ducked her head, ashamed that her thoughts had been so clear. "I am not ungrateful, Elder Ying..." she began.

"I know," the older woman said gently, holding up a hand to silence her. "I am not offended. I know how rushed these early days can feel as you scrabble for power, afraid to branch out on an experiment. However, it does you no good to decide your Way before you have even begun to truly walk it. Cultivate this art. Consider its lessons. There is more to resilience than merely standing still and taking blows."

After a moment of hesitation, Ling Qi nodded and carefully stood up, still holding Zhengui. "I will take your advice to heart, Elder Ying," she said, bowing low. While she was still unsure, it was foolish to ignore an Elder's advice.

"I think you will find it less ill-suited than you think," Elder Ying replied with amusement. "I see before me a remarkably tough and enduring young lady after all."

In the days that followed their final lesson, Ling Qi followed the Elder's advice and cultivated the Thousand Ring Fortress art. The art was old and well polished and had been developed by a once powerful but now defunct family within the Emerald Seas province. It allowed users to join themselves to the qi of the land and become like one of the mighty trees that still stood in the deepest forests of the province, vital and sturdy. And as a tree was not a forest, users of the art could extend this vitality to their allies. It made Ling Qi wonder how the Elder had gotten a hold of it.

Thankfully, it proved easier to cultivate than she had feared, and she quickly mastered the first pulse of the art; the practice she had gotten with wood qi from tending to Zhengui proved invaluable, and sparring with Xiulan in preparation for challenging some older disciples proved to be the perfect training tool for it. Cultivation of the Thousand Ring Fortress art also granted her insight into spiritual cultivation, and she reached Late Yellow during the spars.

Xiulan was too quick and accurate for Ling Qi to dodge all of her attacks, but her new Ten Ring Defense and the Deepwood Vitality techniques proved their worth in blunting the heat of her fires. However, Ling Qi did not have enough meridians to make use of both the Thousand Ring Fortress and Sable Crescent Step arts so it was only useful in practice for the moment.

Their preparations actually proved overambitious. As it turned out, most older disciples did not exceed her in cultivation, although there were a few close calls due to the skills and arts of her opponents. It was kind of odd fighting people she had no grudge against and who had no grudge against her beyond annoyance at her and Xiulan for being 'upstarts'. She wouldn't call the duels friendly, but they were hardly the stuff of grudges either.

It was a pain to realign her meridians away from Thousand Ring Fortress every time they finished sparring to go find more challenges. But she supposed she couldn't complain when their winnings from the duels were paying for Zhengui's food and refilling her distressingly low funds.

"It's weird that they aren't stronger, isn't it?" Ling Qi asked as she strolled beside Xiulan. Fighting in her new gown was liberating; she could use her defensive arts with impunity given the way the dress enhanced the efficiency of her qi use.

"It's strange that you are so strong," Xiulan retorted, giving Ling Qi an exasperated look. "Even if you are one of those talented enough to be scouted by the Ministry, your growth is quick. The majority of cultivators remain at the upper reaches of the second realm for years, honing their abilities before attempting a breakthrough."

"I suppose," Ling Qi replied dubiously. It still seemed strange, but she supposed she was just receiving a skewed experience. Thinking about it, if she stripped out the eight strongest disciples from her year, there would only be a handful of strong disciples left. So it stood to reason the older disciples would, as a group, be similarly weakened by the loss of their eight strongest to the Inner Sect last year. They also hadn't gone specifically looking for the strongest disciples either, just the ones Xiulan could goad into a duel. "Are we going to go out again tomorrow?"

"I think it might be best to give it a rest," Xiulan admitted. "Well, unless we want to try something more dangerous," she added with a sharp smile. "How would you feel about challenging that girl mentioned at the council meeting? The one sheltering Ji Rong."

"That might be a bit much. If Cai Renxiang is avoiding outright antagonizing her, let's at least wait until our spirits can contribute a bit more," Ling Qi said, playing the voice of reason even if the idea was a little thrilling.

Xiulan sighed, disgruntled. "You are right, of course. I was getting ahead of myself."

"How have you been anyway?" Ling Qi asked idly, watching her friend out of the corner of her eye as they strolled down the path to the training grounds. "I've noticed you've been getting along better with Fan Yu."

Xiulan's expression soured a bit as she caught Ling Qi's eye, tossing her hair and turning up her nose in a haughty fashion. "It is not as if he was not already devoted to begin with," she replied waspishly.

"That's not what I mean and you know it," Ling Qi said evenly. "Are you alright, Gu Xiulan? The last few months have been rough."

"I am fine," Xiulan said hotly. "I am doing well, am I not? Perhaps not to your absurd standard, but well enough. Even Father has praised my progress."

"I'm not talking about cultivation," Ling Qi replied, thinking on her own social troubles. "Maybe I'm projecting a little, but you don't seem happy with the way things are."

Ling Qi knew the fiery girl well enough to notice the hurt in her eyes whenever Xiulan was forced to interact with Han Jian these days. It didn't fill her with confidence about her own problem with

Meizhen. She eyed her friend as the girl's fists clenched and the air grew hazy; she could feel the updraft from the heat.

"Yes, you have your little spat with Bai Meizhen going on, do you not? I suppose you finally managed to prick her pride. It is hardly the same thing."

It kind of was, not that she would dare give any hint of that. She bit back her initial harsh response with an effort and the cooling influence of Argent Mirror. "I am only offering to listen," she said instead. "If you need someone to talk to."

They stopped and Xiulan met her gaze, embers burning in her brown eyes. The heat flared, but then the girl looked away and her expression fell, taking the temperature with it. "You are going to get burned some day," she sniffed, her normal demeanor returning.

"I'm a big girl. I can handle it," Ling Qi replied easily, allowing the tension to leave her shoulders. "Besides, I have Zhengui to help with that."

"Hmph. I suppose so," Xiulan acknowledged. "In that case, do try to act surprised when I take you out to meet Cousin Tai next month. It is supposed to be a surprise," her friend added, picking up the pace of her walk.

Ling Qi paused and blinked, not understanding what she meant, until memories of a conversation with Xiulan right after her breakthrough returned and her eyes went wide. "Hey, don't joke about things like that," she said reproachfully. Xiulan simply smirked and began to walk faster.

"You are joking, right?" Ling Qi asked incredulously. "You better be joking!"

She didn't know if the other girl's snort of laughter was an affirmative or not.

### **Chapter 86 - Council Work 1**

If she could talk to Xiulan, then surely she could manage to talk with Meizhen, and restore... something of what they had.

In the end, she had to sit up in the front room of the house for most of the evening, doing her best to calmly meditate as she waited for Meizhen to come home. Zhengui was resting, dematerialized for the moment. They were still practicing with it; he got antsy if she kept him that way while he was awake.

It was difficult to keep herself calm, but she somehow managed, practicing the breathing exercises of her cultivation art and breathing in the miniscule filaments of stellar energy that could reach her here. She couldn't be upset, distracted, confused, or any of the other emotions that wanted to surge out of control when she talked with Meizhen.

She just wanted her friend back.

She hated what Meizhen had done without her permission

She didn't know if they could go on as they had before.

Was that all the other girl had wanted of her?

It was a chore to clear her thoughts at the best of times, and right now, it seemed truly futile. She drummed her fingers on the tabletop, glancing at the door. Meizhen should be home soon. She usually came back in the evenings, going to her room and then sweeping right back out again. Knowing that much didn't count as stalking, right?

Ling Qi twitched as the door swung open and her friend stepped in, clad in the snow white gown she had received from Cai Renxiang. It had a near invisible scale pattern with pale blue serpentine coils and waves embroidered about the lower hems. The pale girl paused on seeing Ling Qi but began to immediately walk toward the bedrooms with only a slight nod of acknowledgement.

"Meizhen, can you stay a moment?" Ling Qi asked, breaking the tense silence between them for the first time this week.

The other girl paused again, not fully turning around. "I have a number of tasks that need to be seen to. Perhaps later."

"Meizhen, please." Ling Qi's voice cracked. "We haven't said a word to each other in days. Please talk to me."

Meizhen turned around, shoulders tense and pale face set in an expressionless mask. "I am hardly your nursemaid," Bai Meizhen said coldly. "We lead busy lives."

Ling Qi clamped down on the angry retort that wanted to come forth, settling for letting out a breath. "Not that busy," she replied evenly. "You've been avoiding me. I can even understand why. The things I wanted to say... They didn't come out right last time," she said, her voice dropping with every word.

"I see," Bai Meizhen said, seemingly unmoved, but Ling Qi caught a flicker of emotion in her golden eyes. "What did you mean to say?"

Ling Qi hated hearing her friend so closed and cold again, speaking to her as if she were a stranger. "I can't give you what you want. Was that your only reason for treating me like a friend?" she asked quietly. She could feel Zhengui stirring in her dantian, awakening at her distress.

Her question finally had an effect. A flush of shame rose on Meizhen's cheeks, caught off guard. "No! Of course not! I am not so debased as that," she said, a touch of anger in her voice.

"Then why?" Ling Qi asked plaintively. "I have said foolish things before. I probably will again. Why does this mean I have to lose my best friend? I don't want that. Do you?"

"Of course I do not!" the serpentine girl snapped, eyes flashing. Ling Qi met her gaze with barely a flinch, the effects of her training. "Do you understand how difficult it is to... to see your revulsion?" Her voice wavered toward the end, and she broke eye contact. "Clearly, we are both better off without one another's company."

Ling Qi could admit that there was some part of her that was uncomfortable around Meizhen now. Oh, sure, girls and women could be just as vicious physically as any of the thugs on the streets, but she had always felt safe that she wouldn't be assaulted in the way her mother and mother's ... coworkers had been. She disliked the loss of that illusion.

"I may not be able to respond the way you want, but I don't feel revulsion at all," she said firmly. "What you did made me uncomfortable, but what kind of garbage person abandons a friend because of a little discomfort?" A person like her, a thought whispered in the back of her head. Ling Qi quashed it; she wasn't like that anymore.

Meizhen stared up at her, her expression openly hurt in a way that seemed completely alien on the stoic girl's face. "I should simply leave this instant," she said quietly. "Whatever you say, the fact remains that my eyes do not lie. I have seen the way you shyaway whenever I grew close. Do you truly mean to lie to me and say that you feel no disgust whatsoever?"

Had she done that in the immediate aftermath? Ling Qi thought back, thinking hard, and... yes, she could recall moments when she had jerked her hand away when they were in danger of touching again or stepping back without thinking. It had never been conscious though. As she met the other girl's eyes, she could see Meizhen's resignation. She wouldn't give up. She willed the other girl to see her sincerity.

"I feel nothing of the sort," she said clearly and slowly. "I feel sad and pissed off and a dozen other things, but disgust isn't one of them."

Meizhen's shoulders slumped and she looked away. "... Damn you." The vulgarity was bizarre coming from the normally unfailingly proper girl. "Why are you so persistent?"

"Too dumb to know when to quit." Ling Qi managed a weak smile. "Can we please try at least?"

"Fine," Meizhen replied, not looking up. "I will cease going out of my way to avoid you. Will that be enough to satisfy you?"

Ling Qi's shoulders slumped. Even if she had headed off the worst case scenario, she knew she had a long way to go to rebuild the trust the other girl had for her before. "Yeah, that'll be enough. I'm sorry for upsetting you so badly, Meizhen." It was the only thing she could really apologize for.

With Ling Qi's ascension to Late Yellow last week, she had fully reached the top of the second realm. By the reactions of those around her, it was a prodigious accomplishment given that she was a match for most of the Outer Sect disciples, even those a few years her senior. It seemed obvious to her that there must be something else which was holding back those who wished to take the next step into the third realm. She wasn't doing anything unusual after all; surely talent didn't make *that* much of a difference.

It wasn't like she spent all of her time cultivating either. She had been incredibly busy over the last few months, but she had more time than ever to act too since she could get by on a single night of sleep every few weeks. Even then, she had been spending a lot of time on her friends and other matters.

She was going to cut down on her extracurriculars this week though so she made her rounds, informing the people who might care to know that she would be focusing on her cultivation this week. Suyin and Su Ling's cave was empty, but undisturbed, so she left a letter. Similarly, tracking down Han Jian or Han Fang proved fruitless; she left a message with Gu Xiulan when she stopped by the girl's home to chat about their plans for a little get together on the weekend. Meizhen was going to train with her again so she didn't need to be informed. That just left one thing to wrap up before she started her cultivation.

She went back to the tea house to meet with Fu Xiang again. Access to another trial site and the potential rewards within was simply too good to pass up. Ling Qi had wondered why Fu Xiang would offer such a thing, but a little investigation into the matter had revealed the likely reason. Namely, trials open to first year disciples were closed to the older ones. The same went for a number of other things, including the Argent Vents and other major sites on the Outer Sect mountain. She supposed that was one more reason that the older disciples could stagnate, even though supposedly, there were still a few trials and other opportunities hidden away for them.

She would worry about the implications of this later. For now, she had to concentrate on the conversation with the cheerfully smug boy sitting across from her.

"Miss Ling, you have no idea how pleased I am to see you again," Fu Xiang said lightly as the door to the booth closed with a click. "Have you considered my offer then?"

"I will do it," she replied, then added, "provided you haven't been hiding something dealbreaking in the details."

"Understandable," Fu Xiang acknowledged, idly pushing his eyeglasses a bit further up his nose. "I assure you, I do not intend to hide anything that could decrease your chances of success. However, understand that the target will not be one of my less motivated peers like the unfortunate individuals who rose to Miss Gu's baiting."

"I didn't think they would be," Ling Qi shot back. "I wouldn't expect that kind of person to be worth this kind of effort." She was aware that the target would almost certainly be formidable in some way; this effort to gain leverage on them wouldn't make sense otherwise.

"Then we remain on the same page," he said, spreading his hands. Ling Qi could not help but notice the lack of tea on the table between them this time. Was he in a hurry? "The target is a young lady by the name of Wen Ai of the Ebon Rivers' Wen family, if that means anything to you."

Ling Qi debated on playing it off like she usually did, but the lack of information would really only hinder her. "I'm afraid it doesn't," she replied, leaning back in her seat. "I'm still learning the biggest names." Her effort to learn the basics of the political scene really only extended to the most important or immediately relevant families.

"They are a fairly new, if wealthy, family," Fu Xiang explained without missing a beat. "They hold a count title. Nothing that should be too troubling for one of your obvious talent."

"Why don't I feel happy at all about being praised like that by you?" she asked dryly before she could catch herself. This guy just reminded her too much of the sort of shady guys who hung out in the corners of bars, ready to figuratively skin a client down to the bone.

"You may take it as you will," he said with a laugh, seemingly not offended. "The point is, she is well liked among my peers and has many friends."

"So influencing her means influencing them," Ling Qi concluded. "You sure blackmail is the way to go about this though? Seems like it could backfire."

"Perhaps," Fu Xiang admitted, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. That was another thing she noticed with more observation. The dark haired boy was rarely still, always moving in some small way or another. "However, our Lady is not so crude. She only intends to ask that Miss Wen counsel patience and non-interference to her friends. Such sticks do not make for reliable allies after all."

Ling Qi hummed noncommittally. Ultimately, she only cared about this faction war insofar as Cai's regime failing could harm her and her friends. "So what is the target? Just a bundle of letters?" She was curious about what might be in them, but it was probably just love letters or something else socially scandalous. She figured the Elders wouldn't tolerate anything actually illegal.

"A small jade lockbox full of them," Fu Xiang replied, his smile growing as he gestured. An ornate jade box about three handspans wide appeared on the table. "Do give Miss Wen some credit. She is not so careless as to leave letters lying about. This is an exact copy of the lockbox, and I expect you to replace the original with it. It should provide a bit of ambiguity as to when her bedroom was broken into, assuming you avoid raising a fuss."

Ling Qi eyed the box warily. "So you spy on girls' bedrooms? I'm not feeling my trust growing."

"My intentions are pure," he protested, smile unwavering. "Besides, you can hardly complain when it is my voyeurism that will give you the full details of her home's security to break into at your leisure."

"That is a good point," Ling Qi agreed grudgingly. It was a little unsettling though. Su Ling and Li Suyin's idea of hiding out in a cave seemed better all the time. "Well, tell me those details. I want to get this done."

"Of course, Miss Ling," Fu Xiang said easily, a flick of his wrist bringing a sheaf of well folded documents to his hands. "Shall we begin with the alarm line laid at the outer edge of the grounds?"

Ling Qi sighed and leaned forward, glancing over the meticulously copied formation filling the page. She was going to be here for awhile yet going by the number of documents he had just placed on the table. Maybe she should order some tea herself.

#### **Bonus - Precious!**

#### Today would be the day!

[Heaven-Struck-Sparks] fluttered ahead and above, holding a delicious treat just out of reach. It smoldered so sweetly, the aroma tickling both of his senses. She was not going to keep it from him today! [Growth] self strained his stumpy limbs, blunt claws digging into the dirt as he charged through the garden grass, using all of his strength to quickly drag his heavy shell. [Renewal] self struck out, straining the length of his thin body as he tried to capture the end of the treat.

#### No!

[Heaven-Struck-Sparks] had flown out of reach. Cheater! With two sets of eyes, he tracked the waving stick of aromatic wood, so very far away. From both mouths, he let out a simultaneous chirp and hiss of complaint. Only crackling and popping sounds answered him, the laughter of his foe. Zhengui was cunning though, together he/they saw the fairy droop in the air tired by her load. She would have to land and burn soon!

Zhengui lunged, only to find his stubby claws churning air. The fairy had tricked him again, there was a hole here! Tipping forward, he flailed for purchase. Around him, grass stirred and a single stalk bent as to grasp his shell, but he was too heavy! [Renewal] self hissed a recrimination as they pitched into the hole.

Cold hands grasped his shell before his snout could hit the moist dirt at the bottom, and he found himself hauled up, the world spinning wildly as he rose up into the air. He looked up and let out a plaintive chirp as he saw Mother looking down at him. [Renewal] self let out a happy hiss, and nuzzled at the gray ring on her finger, knowing that it held many treats. He didn't need that stupid stick anyway, Mother always had treats!

Mother sighed, making the mouth sounds down at him. Zhengui could not understand the mouth sounds, but he felt like Mother was disappointed. He let out an apologetic squeak, [Growth] self would pay attention next time! [Renewal] hissed softly. He blamed [Growth]! No Fair, he was just trying to get first treats!

Mother shook her head, shifting to hold him in the crook of her elbow. Beside her, the other human [Dying-Sun-Embers] made some mouth sounds, and Mother laughed. He glared across at his foe, the tricky fairy, hovering by her human's shoulder, the last fragments of wood burning and popping in her fire. [Heaven-Struck-Sparks] crackled, laughing at him. He would show her one day! His Mother was better than her human anyway, even if her hands were cold. One day, he would make mouth sounds that would make Mother laugh too!

[Renewal] preened as Mother absently brushed her thumb over his brow ridge. Mother made sounds again, and though he did not understand the noises, he could feel her intent. It was time to visit [Old Mossy Mountain]. No wonder Mother had not gotten treats out yet. [Old Mossy Mountain] had the best treats of all! [Renewal] hissed one last challenge to their foe as they left [Dying-Sun-Embers]' home, who snapped and sparked all too cheerfully back. Next Time!

As they left, Zhengui nestled more deeply into the crook of Mother's arm. Both of his selves watched the other humans that Mother passed by with curious eyes. Humans were very strange, most of them were weird and blurry, it was very hard to tell what they were without looking very closely! Mother was even more difficult to see, Zhengui could not name her at all! But that was okay, because she was Mother and that was a good enough name, just like his. He was the Zhengui, the precious, and that was more important than his nature.

Still, he wriggled in her grip, serpentine eyes gazing up at Mother's face. He wandered why she was different though. It had to be very hard not to know yourself. He wondered if that was why Mother was sad sometimes. It was always the worst right after [Lonely-Royal-Serpent] spent the afternoon shouting their nature at Mother. [Lonely-Royal-Serpent] was scary, and Zhengui did not like her much, even if she was kin to [King-Killer-Jewel], who had very pretty scales.

Mother liked her though, so Zhengui would try not be scared! Mother looked down at him then, so he chirped happily, nipping at her dress. Mother should cheer up! It was time to visit [Old Mossy Mountain] and they would have fun. Zhengui would get treats, and Mother would get to listen to the noises. Even if he didn't understand, he knew Mother liked listening to the mountain rumble.

Mother smiled, sensing his intent, even if she didn't really understand either. That was okay though, because he could feel the wind rippling. Hooray! Mother was going to fly the rest of the way! Zhengui saw the other humans looking at mother with envy. Silly humans, obviously you aren't as good as Mother. You had better not be mean though, or Zhengui would bite you!

Mother rose into the sky then, and Zhengui chirped and hissed with joy, he couldn't wait to go to the garden!

## **Chapter 87 - Council Work 2**

Studying through all of the security formations laid upon Wen Ai's home was incredibly tedious, but if she was going to bypass them without breaking or defacing the schemes, it was an unfortunate necessity. She still wasn't a fan of spending an hour in a cramped booth with a guy she didn't particularly like. At least he wasn't a creep like Huang Da.

Once the review was done, she got to work on her other mundane tasks, including going out to hunt and stockpile cores for Zhengui so that he wouldn't go hungry while she was cultivating. She would have to make sure to ration them out though lest the little glutton eat them all in one go.

She supposed that might be a little unfair. He was growing at a pretty fast pace so his appetite wasn't just gluttony for the sake of it. When he had hatched, Zhengui could be held in one hand, but he was now almost at the point of spanning both. Zhengui seemed to have found the trick of sitting on her shoulder without falling off of it by this point so she didn't need to awkwardly carry him around by hand.

The day passed quickly as she gathered cores and spiritually infused fruits and wood for Zhengui. Once he was safely and comfortably asleep in his kiln, Ling Qi made her exit, slipping out of the girls' residential area to head higher up the mountain where the older Outer Disciples lived.

Like the first years' living area, it lay nestled in a small valley behind powerful warding totems, which thankfully didn't bar her passage. The layout was different from what she was used to; there were fewer homes overall, but none of the truly tiny ones like the hovel Su Ling and Li Suyin had been living in prior to truce end. She supposed that made sense. Many of the shops in the market had attached living spaces so maybe other older outer disciples lived outside of the residential area set aside for them.

Ling Qi focused on the mission at hand as she flitted over the rooftops, unnoticed by the handful of girls out and about in the neatly paved streets. There were signs of battle damage here and there and at least one home too broken to live in, but the damaged areas all seemed to be under the process of repair despite the fact that Cai Renxiang's authority didn't extend this far yet.

Ling Qi scanned ahead carefully before each jump, checking for signs of security. This caution lead her on a roundabout path to a cozy home in the upper left quadrant of the area. Ling Qi briefly wondered when she had come to see a stand alone home larger and more opulent than any home in the outer reaches of Tonghou as 'cozy'.

Dismissing that thought, she carefully observed the residence from a nearby rooftop then slowly circled it as she confirmed the information Fu Xiang had given her. The information she had been given seemed pretty accurate.

As Fu Xiang had informed her, the home appeared empty in the early hours of twilight; Wen Ai typically remained out cultivating until well past midnight. Ling Qi would have plenty of time to slip through the defenses, and she waited for the last light of sunset to slip from the sky and shroud her in comforting darkness before she began.

First came the alarm laid around the perimeter. It was much more secure than the basic formation she knew. The one she knew could be bypassed with a bit of simple qi control, but Wen Ai's alarm required Ling Qi to carefully watch the flow of qi through the encircling scheme and control her own to match its frequency. Even with that, it was only possible to bypass the alarm by entering at just the right spot.

Ling Qi passed into the yard without a sound and pressed herself against the wall, hidden by one of the decorative flower bushes that dotted the girl's outer yard. The next obstacle was her best point of ingress, a small window in the home's kitchen meant to let out heat and smoke. It was too small for anyone but a small child to fit through, especially with the wooden bars breaking it up. Yet for her, it wasn't an obstacle at all.

Ling Qi had told Fu Xiang that she would enter through a larger window on the other side of the home, taking advantage of a flaw in the trap formations, but this was better. Qi flowed smoothly in her channels, and her limbs grew blurry and grey. The moment she had sight of the kitchen, she was inside. Blinking from one place to another like that was still very disorienting though, and she wavered for a moment before regaining her form.

Even leaving aside the difficulty of placing too many formations in close proximity, wholly lining one's home with traps was a good way to end up having one of them explode in the occupant's face. Ling Qi She would be mostly safe until she got to opening the chest containing the box of letters now.

She crept through the halls, idly noting the many flowers in vases, hanging from planters on the ceiling and more. Wen Ai seemed to have a theme, albeit understated.

Wen Ai's bedroom was tidy and neat with minimal furnishings. It pained Ling Qi to ignore the chest in the corner and a closet full of no doubt expensive clothes, but she had a simple goal and that was to acquire the letters and replace them with the fakes without being noticed. Perhaps she could look into doing a few more personal heists in the future.

Her target lay under the girl's bed, and soon, she had the polished wooden footlocker dragged out where she could get a good look at it. This was going to be the tricky part. The formation seal on its lock was no joke.

Ling Qi had never been so thankful to have hairpins sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of a cultivator's life. She felt the tense qi of the trap waver on the edge of going off several times when her control wavered or when her makeshift tools scraped wrongly. Eventually, the lock clicked open, and she was able to access the items inside the footlocker. In addition to the jade lockbox with the letters, Ling Qi could see pieces of beautiful jade jewelry, a small hand sized painting of a girl she presumed to be Wen Ai and a boy she did not know, and most temptingly, a single jade slip. It took all her willpower not to snatch it, but she had a job to do and a missing jade slip would defeat it. Ling Qi quietly removed the box of letters and placed the one full of blank fakes in its place then closed the locker, the formation's automatic re-locking working in her favor as she slid the locker back under the bed.

With her target secure in her storage ring, Ling Qi slipped out of the house, her heart pounding in her ears. That had been a whole different sort of tense than the mission in the spider nest but satisfying all the same. She resisted the urge to hurry as she sneaked back out of the residential district via the sheer cliffs at the rear, aided by short bursts of flight from her new gown. The feeling of flight was

intoxicating, but she didn't dare hold it for more than a few seconds at a time for fear of draining her qi overmuch.

Once she reached the top of the cliff, she took a few minutes to meditate and absorb starlight into her dantian to replenish her qi before heading to the arranged meeting point for the handoff. She met Fu Xiang precisely where he said he would be, in a secluded hollow on the east side of the mountain, and handed over the box. In return, she received a map and a page of notes.

Ling Qi took a brief look at it, but it seemed legitimate. The map pinpointed the location of the trial as being near the peak of the mountain, and the notes appeared to be a description of the warped space around it. Apparently, the warp turned the small network of crevices in which the trial entrance was located into a maze. The trial itself would accept up to two people at once but no more. It was more than she expected frankly so she wouldn't complain.

The two of them parted ways amicably enough, but as Fu Xiang pushed his glasses up with a finger, moonlight caught on his lenses, concealing his eyes behind the gleam. Ling Qi found Fu Xiang's wide smile of satisfaction disturbing.

# **Chapter 88 - Resurgence 1**

Given the early hour, Ling Qi decided to simply head to the vent and cultivate until the sun rose. She had a heart and spine meridians to clear if she wanted to make full use of her new Thousand Ring Fortress art, and even if the site didn't exactly help her to do so, soaking in the Argent energy helped her concentrate and focus. Besides, it would be some time until she would meet up with Meizhen for training.

Ling Qi would be lying to herself if she said that the first day training together with Meizhen again wasn't awkward. After their last few meetings, both of them had trouble meeting one another's eyes. Ling Qi tried to think of something to say to break the silence that didn't sound stupid in her head.

In the end, it was Zhengui who saved her from needing to when he attempted to wriggle out of her arms, chirping loudly and broadcasting his desire to get back to his kiln. Even as she looked down in consternation to meet the faintly glowing eyes of his serpentine half, she felt the tension between her and Meizhen somewhat draining.

"Sorry about that," she said apologetically, looking back up to meet Meizhen's eyes. "Looks like I've kept him out for too long." She turned away to set her spirit on the ground near the base of the kiln; she had thrown together a little ramp to let him trundle up to the opening on his own. "This is Zhengui. I didn't get a chance to introduce you earlier."

Meizhen pursed her lips, eyeing the little turtle and the serpentine 'tail' coiled on his back. "... If you chose the characters that I suspect you did, then your sense of humor remains terrible, Ling Qi. You should not treat a spirit's name so casually, especially one such as that."

Ling Qi grinned sheepishly, brushing a few stray hairs out of her eyes. "Well, it might be a little funny, but it's also appropriate. I think, whatever he is, he's precious to me, and I'll treat him right." Silence fell between them before Ling Qi clapped her hands. "So, what are we going to do today? I said I wanted to work on my movement art, but what do you want to do? And where is Cui anyway?"

"Cui is currently doing some growing," Bai Meizhen said vaguely. "I have assured her safety, but she requires some time alone. I believe I would be best served to practice my control. It is difficult to train it without a proper opponent."

"Your control of what?" Ling Qi asked curiously. "Did you learn a new technique?"

"I am not yet so far as to cultivate any techniques with it," Meizhen replied negatively, even as she gestured and a blade appeared in her hand. It was a thick curved blade that glistened with a mirror sheen and faded to a deep toxic green at the edge. Oddly, it had no handguard and the hilt did not seem quite large enough for a blade as long as it was. "My aunt was kind enough to gift me with my first flying sword. The attunement process was easy enough given its origin, but I have not yet mastered controlling it in tandem with my other arts."

Ling Qi blinked. She wasn't completely ignorant any more so she knew what a flying sword was. At the third realm and higher, a cultivator could control specially prepared and tuned weapons and talismans that could effectively fight autonomously from them.

"What did you mean about the origin?" Ling Qi asked curiously, taking a step closer to examine the blade; there was a pretty potent qi suffusing it. "Your aunt must have been pretty proud to send you something so nice, huh?" she mused.

Meizhen's expression was unreadable. "It is a fine gift, more than I deserve. I am only glad that I have not brought shame to my clan," she said after a moment. "There is a certain satisfaction to having dealt that Sun barbarian a defeat."

"Yeah, there is that," Ling Qi agreed, amused. "You didn't answer my other question though."

Her pale friend blinked but then nodded. "My apologies. It is made from a shed scale of her own spirit companion, Cui's mother."

Ling Qi glanced back down at the blade, which was nearly a meter long. Just how big was Cui going to grow?

"Huh. Yeah, I guess that would make it pretty easy to attune. So, I'll be practicing defense while you work on your offense?"

"That would be our normal dynamic," Bai Meizhen acknowledged, releasing the stunted hilt of the sword as it rose into the air above her shoulder with a slight wobble. "If you would release your mist as well, that would be preferable. I must maintain control even in adverse circumstances." Ling Qi didn't miss the touch of bitterness in Meizhen's voice when she said that.

Ling Qi hid her grimace and didn't comment on it. "Fair enough. I need to work on keeping all of my techniques up and running at the same time anyway," she said brightly instead.

"Have you continued refining your willpower?" Meizhen asked cooly as her normal weapon appeared in her hand and the two of them began to pace apart to reach a more appropriate dueling range.

"Well, no," Ling Qi admitted. "I haven't really had time."

"Then I shall endeavor to make up for lost time," Meizhen replied simply. "Let us begin."

Being on the other end of Meizhen's attacks was terrifying, as expected. With the 'hood' and mantle of water shadowing her face, leaving only her glowing golden eyes visible as Meizhen struck unceasingly with whispering, hissing strands of metal that cut through the air at impossible angles, the pale girl was like some phantom out of a horror story. Of course, Ling Qi had her own tricks, being little more than a flickering, flute playing shadow surrounded by immaterial phantoms in the mist.

It seemed like her friend was working on a more offensive style while using her new flying sword, unlike the reactive, counter build she had used in previous fights. Frankly, it was only the awkwardness of Meizhen's control of her flying sword and the way that it distracted from her other motions that let Ling Qi keep up as well as she did.

Still, despite the moment to moment terror of fighting the serpentine girl and the pain of the many superficial cuts she received when 'tagged' in the spar, it was nice to return to normality. She was also glad to get back into the practice of trying to resist attempts to disperse her mist. Such techniques were becoming more and more common among the enemies she fought.

The next few days continued in the same vein. Ling Qi spent the evenings and nights cultivating toward the third phase of Eight Phase Ceremony and the days steadily clearing the ever more difficult meridians that would allow her to channel greater and more diverse flows of qi without interfering in her other techniques. Her only interruption, other than daily sessions training with Meizhen, were her efforts to care for Zhengui, hunting for cores or simply playing with the growing and impatient little xuanwu.

His initial voraciousness hadn't faded, but Zhengui was beginning to show interest in other things, curiously exploring her favored cultivation spots. His guileless curiosity nearly gave her a heart attack at times though, like when he had poked his heads into the argent vent itself and nearly tipped into the seemingly bottomless crack from which the mist issued. Ling Qi had lunged to grab him by his snake half, gaining her a faceful of soot from the distressed serpent as she hauled Zhengui back out. It was the first time she found herself genuinely scolding him.

Her anger, alarm, and worry elicited genuine contrition from the little snake-tortoise though, and he had spent the rest of the morning either curled up in her lap or periodically bringing her shiny rocks and on one occasion, a still wiggling field mouse, chirping apologetically all the while. It was just too much. Ling Qi couldn't really stay angry at him, despite the fright he had given her.

Other than a few minor scares though, her schedule quickly gained the comfort of repetition. It wasn't to last.

On the fourth day of her twenty-fifth week at the Sect, Ling Qi found her cultivation interrupted. She had just finished opening the second of her meridians and had been carefully working through the post-opening 'cleanup' to ensure that the channel didn't close again when she felt something strange in the air, a wisp of qi she didn't recognize and too controlled to be a beast or a spirit.

Ling Qi swiftly rose to her feet, startling Zhengui, who had been resting in her lap. He let out a simultaneous displeased hiss and a surprised chirp as she dematerialized him.

"Who are you?" Ling Qi demanded, scanning the trees and straining her senses. There it was again, muted and distorted, hidden among the thick woods that cloaked the entrance to the vent.

All was silent for a long moment, and Ling Qi felt the urge to activate her gown and flee over the cliffside, but no, this was her spot, together with her friends. She wouldn't abandon it so easily. Her flute appeared in her hand, even as a knife fell into the other.

"Last warning! Reveal yourself or I attack." Ling Qi had a pretty good pinpoint on where the distortion was now, even if she couldn't precisely see anything.

"Tch. Should have known that guy would sell me junk," a deep but feminine voice grumbled. "Or maybe I'm just bad at this sneaking stuff?" The air rippled, revealing the speaker.

Ling Qi's first impression of the other girl was that she was tall. It had been years since Ling Qi had to look up to meet the eyes of a girl in her age group. The second was that the other girl was big in a way that Ling Qi wasn't. Ling Qi was pretty sure the dark skinned girl's biceps were as thick as her own thighs.

"Sorry about that," the muscular girl said with a hint of apology in her tone, tearing the remains of a paper tag of some sort from the front of the iron plate strapped across her chest. The iron plate was the only covering on the girl's upper body aside from the padded jerkin underneath, leaving the girl's arms and midriff scandalously bare. The lower half of the girl's body was concealed by the underbrush. "Had to make sure you didn't pull a runner. You're pretty fast by all accounts."

"You didn't answer my question," Ling Qi said coldly. There remained a good twenty meter distance between them, but it wasn't enough to allow her to leave if the other girl didn't want her to, especially since she could feel that the muscular girl was fully in the third realm.

"I didn't," the girl admitted. "My name is Chu Song. I suppose I caused you a bit of trouble since I told that demon's thugs to shove it when they came around for lil' bro Rong." Chu Song said it casually, as if it were a small concern.

Ling Qi studied the other girl, fingering the flute in her hand as Zhengui broadcasted worry and alarm into her mind. Chu Song felt like a storm-wreathed mountain to her qi senses, tempestuous and violent with an utterly immovable core.

"I suppose it caused some problems for Lady Cai," she acknowledged warily, straining her senses to sense out any other presences. She could feel two on the path she used to leave the vent, but they weren't close. "What do you want then? Revenge for the trouble?"

"Nah. I just promised that bloody princess that I'd keep you out of the ruckus she's raising." As Chu Song strode forward out of the underbrush, Ling Qi backed up, keeping an even distance. The other girl wore a pair of dark grey, baggy pants tucked into knee-high armored boots. "I didn't mind doing her a favor since I wanted a chat with you anyway."

Ling Qi glanced to the side, her heartbeat picking up. Sun Liling was back? She had known the princess wouldn't stay away forever, but there hadn't been any warning at all! She needed to get out of here. If Meizhen was caught up in this, she needed to back her friend up.

"I will stop you if you try to leave I gave my word and all," Chu Song drawled easily. "You shouldn't worry so much. That princess is only after that Cai demon at the moment. Miss Bai'll be fine."

"That isn't reassuring," Ling Qi snapped as she glared at the taller girl. The hem of her gown kicked up in a phantom wind. "We are kind of her allies if you can't tell."

"Are you now?" Chu Song asked dangerously, the snap of electricity from the air around her matching Ling Qi's own rising wind. "I wouldn't have figured you were actually loyal to that demon. If so, that's my mistake. I suppose we can duel if you really want to play the loyal dog."

"And get jumped by your friends on the path below while we fight?" Ling Qi asked acidly. "Don't make it sound as honorable as all that."

"You do have pretty sharp senses, don't you?" Chu Song asked rhetorically with a sharp grin. "But no, if you want to fight it out, we'll do it fair and square. On my word." She emphasized her statement by thumping a fist against her armored breastplate. "They'll only involve themselves if you try to run. I'll even leave out my spirit since yours isn't exactly combat-ready."

Ling Qi scowled. She hated being in situations like this, where she was missing so many facts. She didn't even know if the other girl was telling the truth about Sun Liling, although she seemed sincere about fighting 'fairly' if it came down to it.

## **Chapter 89 - Resurgence 2**

"I don't get it," Ling Qi said bluntly, relaxing her stance fractionally. She wouldn't bolt immediately because something was off here. She wanted to check up on her friends, particularly Meizhen and Xiulan, but she wouldn't help anyone by being reckless. "This whole scenario makes no sense. If you didn't want me to interfere, why approach close enough to be sensed at all? If you've been keeping an eye on me, you must know that I would have been cultivating for at least another hour."

"Really?" the taller girl asked in a not particularly convincing tone. "Well, I screwed up then, didn't I?" She idly toyed with the bone clasp at the bottom of one of her braids. "I guess I should have been more thorough in my scouting."

Ling Qi frowned at her. "If you're going to treat me like I'm an idiot, we don't have anything to talk about. How did you know about this place anyway? If you did something to Su Ling or Li Suyin..." She trailed off, staring the other girl down. She wasn't sure what she would do, but she would make the other girl regret it.

"That's a pretty good expression you have there," Chu Song said lightly. "But nah, it's not that hard to figure out, if you already know where the vents are. Not much other reason to come to this part of the mountain."

Right. Older disciples lost access to trial sites and other things meant for first years.

"So, why then? Why alert me when I would have missed all this on my own?"

"Who says it's started already? Or that it isn't already over?" Chu Song asked absently, leaning back against the trunk of a tree. Apparently, she was satisfied that Ling Qi wouldn't be running off immediately. "That would be awful convenient, wouldn't it? If you detected me right as things were kicking off?"

Ling Qi crossed her arms, slipping her knife back into storage. Her flute remained in hand though. She hadn't managed to detect anyone else yet, and the other two were maintaining position.

"So what's the point then?" She may be jumping to a conclusion, but she had no doubt that things would be kicking off soon, if they hadn't already started.

"I guess it'd be rude to keep deflecting you, huh?" Chu Song laughed. "Fine. I want you to stop supporting that Cai. It'd be pretty great if you could persuade MIss Bai or your other friends to do the same," she continued, spreading her arms. "That blunt enough for you?"

"I kind of doubt Bai Meizhen would be interested in siding with Sun Liling," Ling Qi said dryly. "That's kind of a non starter, isn't it?" She maintained her stance, even as she picked up another presence. A passing spirit beast in the woods? No, the movement was too regular.

"Nah, you're not getting it." Chu Song waved her hand irritably. "Don't be so conceited, Junior Sister. Those two might be strong, but the rest of us aren't exactly useless, even if you and your friend have been knocking around the pinheads of my year. There are a couple others worth noting that are still interested in advancing - or at least not rolling over for Cai."

"Still not hearing much in the way of benefit there honestly," Ling Qi said dubiously. The ridge on her right was the best route for escape in her opinion. If she activated her gown's flight and her movement art, she could rush to the top and run from there, using flight to glide down when she had a chance. "You might say that, but abandoning Cai Renxiang might as well be supporting Sun Liling. The rest of you never interfered before."

"I couldn't convince the others to care when it was just the first years squabbling," Chu Song replied, furrowing her brows. "Now Cai's messing with them too. I don't believe it's a coincidence that right after that slimy little sneak Fu Xiang joined up with her, Hei Boqin and Wen Ai started acting like we should just let her do what she wants."

Ling Qi didn't so much as twitch at the mention of Wen Ai. It looked like her little escapade was already having effects.

"Fine. So what are you trying to say - that you'll offer protection instead of Cai Renxiang then? I don't even know you. All I hear is a way to let Sun Liling rampage as she likes."

"I don't exactly like the princess either," Chu Song said sourly. "It may be the little dumbass's own fault for listening, but the fact remains that she's stringing my lil' bro Rong along. Cai's the bigger threat though. What she's trying to build... It's against the spirit of the Sect. I just want you and the rest of your friends to distance your ties. Stop working for the damn demon like she's your liege lord. Be allied if you want, but don't obey her and let her grow out of control."

Ling Qi studied the taller girl's expression carefully. It seemed that she was at least a little short-tempered. Ling Qi would have to be a little cautious in her responses.

"We already do that," Ling Qi began. "It's not like we swore or-"

Ling Qi tensed, her flute nearly rising to her lips as a thunderous splintering interrupted her words. She watched warily as the tree to the muscular girl's right fell backwards, crashing into branches and underbrush, the portion of the trunk that Chu Song had struck pulverized to splinters.

"You are, whether you admit it or not," Chu Song said lowly. "You're wearing that gown and that band, backing up her thugs with your presence. You go along with her goon squad to suppress others and take sites. You were ready to rush off and help her fight Sun Liling. Don't tell me you weren't - before your good sense kicked in," she accused. "At least talk to that Bai friend of yours. Someone like her shouldn't be subordinate to someone else. The same for that Han guy. Any other year and they'd both be the heads of their own groups. The last thing the Sect needs is to go the way of the province."

"... This isn't about Cai Renxiang, is it?" Ling Qi guessed shrewdly as she backed up a step, carefully avoiding any indication that she was going to flee. "Not really."

Chu Song blew out a calming breath before meeting Ling Qi's eyes once again. "A demon spawn is still a demon," she said bluntly. "It's pretty damn clear that she's following the same path as her mother, even if she doesn't have the power to do as she wants yet. No other dukes of Emerald Seas have ruled the way the Cai do. It's not right." Chu Song's words were full of absolute conviction.

Ling Qi was silent as she mulled over Chu Song's words. "Say I believe you. I still don't want Sun Liling running rampant. Bai Meizhen is my friend, and in the end, that makes that girl my enemy. Why should I just let her plan go off without a hitch?"

Chu Song held her gaze before shrugging her broad shoulders. "The girl isn't stupid. Maybe impulsive - but not stupid. She's not gonna rampage. What do you do when your allies are routed and scattered?"

Ling Qi blinked at the question. "You regroup and recover."

"Right. And if you know that, do you think a girl raised on the Butcher's knee doesn't?" Chu Song laughed. "She's busting out Kang Zihao and rallying people. At this point, it's all about bloodying the demon's nose and proving that she's not invincible. I might not like the princess, but she's just staking out her independence, not trying to conquer the Sect. So for now, we're allies," she said with satisfaction. "And that's how it should be. No disciple has the right to try and play Elder, just like no lord has the right to play Emperor."

Ling Qi could see the other girl's point, but she wasn't certain she agreed with it. Even if she did, she wasn't sure she would care to oppose Cai Renxiang regardless, not when she was the one benefiting from the girl's 'misdeeds'. In the end, did she really care to allow a threat to herself and her friends build itself back up in the name of some nebulous power balance? Was allowing Cai her absolute authority a bad thing if Ling Qi and her friends were positioned to be advantaged by it?

"I've heard you, but I hope you aren't expecting a decision right now. I won't just go off on my own. What happens now?"

"Well, now we wait..." Chu Song began, only to twitch as an odd ripple passed through the air, followed by a sensation like a net being torn. Ling Qi's eyes widened as she felt three familiar sensations. Bai Meizhen, Li Suyin, and Su Ling's qi all blazed at the edge of her senses, approaching rapidly from the forest side of the vent.

"Never mind then," Chu Song said sourly. "Let me turn the question back around on you. What now?" she asked while spreading her hands wide. "I gave my word. So are we going to fight or will you ask your friends to stand down?"

"I don't like being threatened," Ling Qi said quietly. "And whatever you say, that is what you were doing."

"That's fair," the tall girl agreed, her irritation seeming to fade, replaced by excitement. "I guess I won't blame you if you want to sock me in the jaw a couple times."

Ling Qi frowned. Her position had just gotten more advantageous, but it was hardly weighted entirely in her favor either. Chu Song's allies were approaching in a hurry. Cui was still out of commission while Chu Song presumably had a spirit beast, and the two below probably had at least one between them too, if the presence she had felt earlier in the woods was any indication. However, now that they were getting closer, she could tell that Chu Song's allies were only second realms. But Su Ling and Li Suyin also were not exactly the most combat-capable friends she had either.

Ling Qi's grasp on her flute tightened as she met Chu Song's gaze.

"It isn't my choice alone, is it?" she responded, even as she prepared herself for the fight to come in contradiction to her words. "It wouldn't be fair for me to drag Bai Meizhen into a fight without her knowledge." She strongly doubted that Meizhen would respond to this in any other way, but every second she bought talking was one more that she wouldn't spend fighting alone.

Given the brief frown that crossed the taller girl's face, Chu Song also knew that, but she couldn't really attack without losing face given her previous words. For some, that might not matter with the lack of witnesses, but Chu Song seemed to actually care about that kind of thing to an extent. It didn't stop a weapon, a great slab of iron and inlaid jade longer than she was tall, from appearing in her hand.

"I guess we'll see then," the girl said lightly as she heaved the weapon onto her shoulder and leapt away from the treeline, putting her back to the ridge.

Ling Qi kept a wary eye on Chu Song and backed up herself, putting the distance between them at thirty or so meters as the qi signatures of both her friends and Chu Song's allies rapidly approached.

For whatever reason, the two groups arrived at nearly the same moment. A dark blur from the treeline resolved itself into the form of Meizhen, who wore a severe expression and an already churning mantle of black water around her shoulders. She seemed to slightly relax at the sight of Ling Qi standing unharmed, but her golden eyes narrowed when they fell on Chu Song.

Su Ling and Li Suyin arrived next, lingering at the treeline. Li Suyin was a bit paler than she remembered and still wore the clothing of a Medicine Hall assistant, including a thick leather apron stained with strange colors and what looked to be blood. She glanced between Ling Qi and Chu Song, looking alarmed but determined.

Su Ling, on the other hand, looked outright disheveled, her clothing out of place and her hair tangled and messy. She had dark circles under her eyes, but the most noticeable change in her friend was the second black furred tail swishing through the air behind her. Strangely, it looked pretty ragged, missing chunks of fur and matted with dried blood. Had Su Ling gotten into a fight before this?

Now that they were close enough, she could feel that Su Ling had broken through to the second realm. Li Suyin remained at the peak of the first realm in physique, but surprisingly, she had risen to the middle of the second in spirit.

Chu Song's companions arrived a moment later, blurring to her side and resolving into a girl and a boy of similar age and visage, lightly armored but armed with large weapons. The boy held a heavy war axe in his hands as he glanced to Chu Song for instruction, and the girl interposed herself between the two groups, a guandao clutched in both hands and held in a guard position. The two of them were in the late stages of the second realm in physique, but the girl was only at the middle stage in spirit.

"What is the meaning of this?" Meizhen asked, a dangerous edge to her voice, made more threatening by the metallic hiss of the rustling metal ribbons of the blade in her hand. Her gaze shifted briefly to Ling Qi, an obvious question in her eyes.

"I am fine," she reassured her friend, gladdened by the girl's concern. Even if things were rough between them right now, it seemed that Meizhen still had her back when it counted. "But," she continued, giving the group opposite them a scowl, "while she was pleasant about it, the fact remains that Miss Chu decided she was going to keep me temporarily confined here. It seems Sun is making trouble again, and she wants Lady Cai weakened."

"I see," Bai Meizhen replied icily as the grass at her feet withered and died. Her other friends gave each other a worried glance even as they circled closer. Li Suyin was grasping something tightly in her hand, an off white jade orb five or six centimeters across. "That would explain the violence occurring below," she added clinically.

"Don't make it sound worse than it is," Chu Song said, even as the girl standing in front of her visibly swallowed, sweat beading her brow under the force of Meizhen's aura and gaze. "We just had a little chat about the state of the Sect," she continued, not quailing at all under the pale girl's gaze. "I admit, I did give my word that I would do everything I reasonably could to stop her from leaving for the next two hours though."

"And do you wish to stay here that long, Ling Qi?" Bai Meizhen asked, not taking her eyes off of Chu Song's.

"No. I don't like being threatened and letting Sun Liling run around unchecked seems like a good way to get our house wrecked again, doesn't it?" Ling Qi said flippantly. She was still nervous though, and Zhengui's confusion and alarm scratching at the back of her thoughts didn't help matters. She glanced to Su Ling and Li Suyin for approval as well.

"I didn't come here expecting a tea party," Su Ling said flatly, answering the unasked question as she fell in behind and to the right of Ling Qi.

"Neither did I," Li Suyin added quietly, taking up the opposite position to the left. "I owe you too much for that."

"Song..." The dark haired boy beside Chu Song glanced at the taller girl questioningly.

Chu Song just laughed though. "Well, I guess that's that. Let's exchange some pointers then."

Chaos came next, a flurry of motion from both sides that could hardly be tracked by the mortal eye. Ling Qi was growing acclimated to such speed, and the fast pace of cultivator combat was no longer quite so overwhelming. Yet for the first time, she found herself outsped as Chu Song let out a roar of a battlecry and swung the massive greatsword on her shoulder in a wide arc, the huge slab of metal passing inches over the head of her own ally.

A wall of wind slammed into them, and Ling Qi nearly stumbled, the gale yanking violently at her clothes but the sharper gusts only slashed uselessly at the reinforced silk of her Cai-gifted robe. Meizhen stood strong and unmoved, her long white hair fanning out in a curtain behind her. Ling Qi heard Su Ling grunt in pain and Li Suyin cry out as she was pushed back, but she had no time to look to them as her watering eyes caught a silver flash in the dust kicked up by the wind. Meizhen suddenly dodged to the side as a thin, narrow blade clove through the air, only to go spinning off with an odd clang as the mantle of black water about her shoulders slapped it aside with a whitecapped lash.

Chu had a flying sword as well it seemed, Ling Qi thought as she raised her flute to her lips, options running through her head. With the cultivation disadvantage most of her group faced, she would be best suited to support others in this fight so she needed to raise her mist, quickly followed by triggering her

new defensive arts. She began to play the first haunting notes of the Forgotten Vale, and mist billowed from every hole and seam in her flute, already darkening with the claws and fangs of hungry phantoms.

Yet that did not deter their enemies. The boy's qi flared as he leaped forward, launching himself at Ling Qi, war axe shrouded in crackling lighting. She rolled to the side, avoiding him, only for her eyes to widen in alarm as a deep, bellowing roar shook the battlefield and what could only be Chu's spirit appeared, already barreling toward her.

It was a huge, third grade bear with fur the color of burnished steel, nearly twice her height at the shoulder, and it was only her quick reaction that allowed her to become as shadow and flit over its charge, forced into an awkward flip that used the beast's own back as a springboard. Her fingers came away bloody from the bear's metallic fur.

Another glance as she landed took in the battlefield. The girl with the guando had locked herself into combat with Meizhen. Sweat and shivering showing the effect of Meizhen's aura on her, and the ground around them had depressed, dead grass crushed and ground cratered inward. Through her awareness of the mist, Ling Qi could feel the unnatural sense of 'weight' in a meters wide dome around them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Su Ling's lips draw back in a sharp-toothed snarl as she drew her blade across the palm of her other hand and felt the expanding qi as Su Ling flicked her wounded hand, scattering droplets of blood in an unnaturally wide arc. Bright colors, music, and a feeling of lethargy brushed the edge of her senses like the memory of a dream while brightly burning foxfire flared to life over the girl's shoulder.

In the midst of her clash with Meizhen's whipping blades, the guandao-wielding girl stumbled, and that was all Meizhen needed. Ribbons of metal lashed out, whipping through the girl's lowered guard to rip bloody lines across her shoulder and chest, shredding her gown and leaving cruel gashes that wept blood. Even as the girl tried to recover, a much larger arc of silver flashed out, escaping the weighted dome and forcing Chu Song to dodge the arc of Meizhen's own flying sword.

Ling Qi heard a sound like breaking glass and an enraged roar erupted from Chu's spirit beast. Li Suyin had flung the sphere in her hand at the ground in front of the charging behemoth, and it had exploded violently, leaving the beast shrouded and bogged down with something Ling Qi recognized all too well, a truly massive amount of sticky spider silk made all the worse by the dozens of hand sized black furred spiders swarming out of it to harass and bite the beast, seemingly uncaring of its sharp-edged fur. The bear reared up, shaking itself violently as it swatted and snapped at the growing carpet of arachnid aggressors assaulting it.

Her focus was quickly forced to return to her own opponent though as the axe-wielding boy came back around for another attack. Ling Qi barely had time to stamp her foot and let her qi pulse outward, granting her friends the strength of her Deepwood Vitality technique. It was a good thing she did because the ground where Meizhen stood exploded violently as Chu Song's blade came down, splitting the earth in twain and buffeting Meizhen with sharp wind, the veil of emerald qi Ling Qi had thrown up over her allies flared, absorbing the force of the blow.

It proved a good choice for herself as well. When she skipped backwards out of the reach of the axe, she was buffeted by a deafening blast of sound that left her ears ringing and hit her in the chest like a giant's fist. The temporary vitality she had created for herself took the worst of it, but she could still feel a massive bruise forming.

The boy failed to follow up though as his eyes grew unfocused, and the red eyed phantoms that stalked her mist punished him, clawing and biting at his limbs. He quickly shook himself like a dog throwing off water, but it gave her time to gain distance. More importantly, it distracted him long enough for Li Suyin's exploding needles to pepper him like a chain of firecrackers, further obscuring his vision and throwing him off-balance.

A quick glance back showed that both Su Ling and Li Suyin had distanced themselves from the enraged bear. Surprisingly, Li Suyin had scrambled straight up the sheer ridge behind them, seemingly without trouble as a faint glow of qi on her hands and feet apparently let her cling easily to the rock face without handholds. She must have climbed pretty quickly too given that she was eight or nine meters up the cliff face already.

As Ling Qi regained her poise however, Su Ling let out a cry of surprise and pain as she threw herself out of the way of a new combatant, trailing blood from the claws that had scored across her back. The beast, a second grade mountain lion with fur that shimmered and shifted, blurring with the terrain around it, landed where Su Ling had just stood, already turning and preparing to lunge again.

Ling Qi found herself with a difficult choice, made worse by the fact that Chu Song's spirit beast was breaking free of the webbing and spiders that clung to it. In the end, she chose to target the beast attacking her friend, renewing the dark qi flowing in her channels as she wove through and avoided the increasingly frustrated bullets of sound and air launched by the axe-wielding boy trying desperately to keep up with her circuitous movements and not lose track of her in the mist.

Her melody took on the slower cadence of her Elegy, and the mountain lion shuddered, qi bleeding from channels and dissipating into the mist. Her technique soaked into its channels, locking the beast's limbs in place, and it froze long enough for Su Ling to scramble away.

A wail echoed from the center of the area as Meizhen broke through the unsteady guandao-wielding girl's defenses entirely to grasp her bloodied and wounded shoulder. The girl spasmed as tendrils of toxin darkened her flesh, but for all that she collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, the distraction cost Meizhen.

Chu Song's wordless roar was underscored by a thunderous boom as her massive blade shattered Meizhen's mantle into scattered droplets and sent her skidding several meters toward the cliff. A spreading bloodstain on her side indicated where the greatsword had struck her.

Chu Song was hardly unscathed either. She was marked by several smaller cuts from Meizhen's flying sword, and Chu's flying sword lay broken in the grass near the treeline.

A blast and a cry of pain distracted her from that matchup. The flicking foxfire that had been building on the axe-wielding boy had exploded violently, leaving him smoking and unsteady but still standing.

Ling Qi's attention was pulled away as the sound of a violent rockslide reached her, along with a scream that she recognized as Li Suyin's. Chu Song's spirit had finally broken free, crushing most of the spiders that had swarmed it and responded to the provocation by slamming its front paws into the side of the ridge, shattering rock and bringing the cliff face tumbling down along with Li Suyin. Ling Qi's heart thundered in her ears as she saw the girl swatted out of the air by a paw half the size of her body, smashing her to the ground to roll bonelessly to a stop several meters away. Suyin did not rise.

She felt it then, a ripple of angry qi rising from Chu Song that attempted to blast away her mist and its effects, but with an effort of will, she resisted it. She cast a vicious look toward the muscular girl and responded with her Diapason of the Lost technique. Her qi shackled Chu Song's senses, leaving the girl too disoriented to dodge as Meizhen's bladed ribbons coiled around her leg and tore, shredding the leg of her pants and leaving her thigh dripping blood.

Ling Qi paid for her split focus though. Even with a reactivation of her Crescent's Grace, she was too slow to avoid the lightning that struck her from out of the blue, throwing her to the side. Her gown, tough as it was, absorbed the worst of the electrical punishment, but she could still smell burnt hair and her own scorched flesh as she rolled to her feet. Her only consolation was that the boy was flagging, his qi guttering low. That attack had cost him, even if it had also left her muscles and nerves twitching and slow. Was this how the targets of her Falling Stars Art felt?

Despite that, she still turned away, and she did not fail to notice the way his expression twisted even further into a scowl as she did. Su Ling had the steadily weakening mountain lion in hand for the moment. The bear was the real threat. Ling Qi ignored him in favor of darting away into the mist to distract the bear throwing its head back and forth in the mist, searching for a new target. She resolutely refused to allow the sight of Li Suyin lying still in the grass, her arm twisted unnaturally, to distract her. She had to stop the monster before she could help her friend. It was as simple as that.

The next few moments passed in a blur as she dodged the weakening bursts of thunder from the boy she ignored and drew the bear away from her other friends and activated Ten Ring Defense technique, draining her qi, but strengthening her flesh with the vitality an ancient tree. She needled the bear with targeted songs and danced in and out of view to incite it to charge at her. She paid for the distraction, but once again, her new Cai-commissioned gown and Thousand Ring Fortress art proved invaluable, absorbing force from every blow that grazed her as she layered further weakness on the beast with her Forgotten Vale Melody techniques. Blinded by mist, harassed by dozens of shadowy phantoms, and with its channels flood with chilly, draining qi, the beast quickly began to struggle.

Finally, the fight came to an end. Chu Song fell to one knee, her breastplate broken, exposing the padded jacket beneath. Tendrils of toxin darkened the veins in her arms and nearly black blood leaked sluggishly from the cuts left by Meizhen's ribbon blades. The mountain lion slumped to the ground marked by cuts from Su Ling's blade as the girl clutched her right arm and gasped for breath. The boy who had chased her around glared into the mist, searching but unable to find Ling Qi again, his qi spent. Only the bear was still somewhat combat-capable, bleeding from a few minor wounds, but it was also wrapped in mist and slowly losing qi.

"Yan, stand down." Chu Song's voice rang out over the battlefield, and the bear paused, letting out a rumbled growl. "Guess I should brought a couple more people," she said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

"You surrender then?" Meizhen asked coldly. If she felt any pain from the blossoms of red that stained her white gown, she showed no sign of it.

"I do," the larger girl said grudgingly from her position on her knee. "This just proves my point though. Someone like you shouldn't be subordinate to that Cai."

Ling Qi shot Chu Song a dirty look, but she was less interested in what the girl had to say than in checking on Li Suyin. She didn't stop playin, but as she approached Li Suyin, the girl stirred weakly on the ground, opening her eye to give Ling Qi a strained but reassuring smile. Suyin was healing herself, subtly and slowly, and Ling Qi could see that she was making good progress despite the blood that stained her lips. Suyin was already breathing easily again.

"I am free to offer my assistance as I wish," Bai Meizhen said imperiously. "Cai Renxiang has been an honest and upstanding ally." Ling Qi glanced up as she crouched down next to Li Suyin and Su Ling limped over to join them. That was weird. Why was Meizhen referring to the heiress by name instead of title like everyone else?

Chu Song merely grimaced and spat blood on the ground. "Tch. As the loser, I have no right to gainsay you." It was clear she was unhappy with Bai Meizhen's words though.

Her serpentine friend turned her gaze away, although her flying sword hovered ominously at Chu's back. "Ling Qi, this was your fight. What do you wish to do?"

## **Chapter 90 - Resurgence 3**

"We each get something for our victory," Ling Qi decided, casting a glance at Meizhen and Chu Song as she and Su Ling helped Li Suyin stand. Her friend's arm was still twisted badly, and Ling Qi could see a massive bruise forming across her side through the rips in her gown. Su Ling was less badly off, being in a similar condition to Ling Qi save that she lacked the benefit of clothing that repaired itself.

Ling Qi could feel the deep ache that she had come to learn meant that she probably had at least a slight crack in her ribs, but it felt distant compared to how such a wound had felt as a mortal. "Are you alright, Li Suyin?" she asked, looking at her most wounded friend.

"I will be fine," the one-eyed girl responded with a wince as her broken arm shifted. She leaned more heavily onto Su Ling's shoulder. "C-can we finish this please?"

"Right." Ling Qi shared a look with Su Ling as she stepped away. "Why don't I grab your tokens for you? Do you have a preference?"

Chu Song let out a snort of laughter, even as the boy clenched his fists where he kneeled by the unconscious girl. Ling Qi eyed him carefully, but while she still wasn't the best at reading people, he mostly just seemed frustrated and irritated. It didn't look like any of their enemies was showing genuine resentment.

"I'll take a storage talisman if they have one," Su Ling replied, eyeing the massive bear sitting on its haunches to their right.

"Anything is fine," Li Suyin said, biting her lip as she ran her free hand over her broken limb, fingers aglow with quickly guttering qi. Ling Qi did her best to ignore the grinding noise of bones being pulled back into alignment. It looked like her friend had picked up some real pain tolerance.

She looked to Meizhen, but the pale girl simply looked back impassively before glancing at Chu Song. "I have little need for such things, but the clasp in your hair will do. That is what allowed you to resist my poison, did it not?"

Ling Qi tuned out Chu Song's response as she approached the boy and the downed girl, who breathed erratically, expression twisted with pain even in unconsciousness. The red lines crawling out from her shoulder wound were fading at least.

"I request that you take your spoils from me and not from Luli." The boy spoke up as she approached, looking her in the eyes unwaveringly.

"... Sure," Ling Qi agreed, glancing over the girl. Besides, none of the girl's talismans she could see looked to be something she would intend to keep. The guandao lying off to the girl's side was tempting, but a quick look revealed it to be an earth-aligned talisman. She was probably going to take something from Chu Song then. "Do you have a storage ring?" she asked brusquely.

"Yes," the boy replied shortly.

Ling Qi watched him carefully, ready to respond should he try something as he slowly raised his hand and tapped his finger against the dull grey ring there. A small number of spirit stones, beast cores, and other miscellaneous goods poured out. He placed the newly emptied ring in her hand with only a slight grimace.

Ling Qi's eye caught on something in the pile of goods then, a gleaming dagger with a slightly wavy blade. It was a wood talisman that would be good for Li Suyin; the girl could use a holdout weapon for when she got forced into melee, and if she didn't want the talisman, it looked like it would at least sell well in the Sect market. She crouched down and took that too, giving the boy a simple nod before walking toward Bai Meizhen and Chu Song.

"Looking to get a piece of me yourself, huh?" the muscular girl asked as she approached.

"No more than I deserve for the trouble," Ling Qi said mildly, nodding to Bai Meizhen, who was studying the jade braid clasp in her hand curiously. She gave the girl's ragged outward appearance a look over, studying the possible talismans. "I'll take the armband," she decided. The armband might be useful, and like Suyin's token, it did at least look valuable.

"If you return to this vent, Chu Song, you will not be let off so lightly," Meizhen said quietly. "Do not invade our space again."

"Gotcha." The taller girl sighed irritably, brushing her now partially loose hair out of her eyes. "Bei, help Luli up. Yan, back to me," she commanded as she stood. The spirit beasts on the field dissolved, returning to their binders, and the boy finished gathering his things then picked up Luli in his arms. Chu Song slowly stood up as well and took a step back, careful not to appear threatening. Ling Qi caught recognition in Chu Song's eyes as they flicked briefly toward Li Suyin and the spider silk on the ground, then away. "Any objections to me being on my way?"

"We're done here, yeah," Ling Qi replied bluntly. Meizhen gestured for Chu Song to go and so they did. It irked Ling Qi a little to let potential enemies just walk away with their heads mostly held high, but that was the way things were, she supposed.

"How did you know I was in trouble anyway?" Ling Qi asked Meizhen as she moved to hand over Su Ling and Li Suyin's prizes.

"I was informed by your companions that you were under attack," Bai Meizhen replied, vanishing her own prize with a flick of her wrist. Ling Qi noticed a brief pause in her friend's statement before the word 'companions' left her lips; she had a feeling that Meizhen had been about to call them 'subordinates'. Still, she followed Bai Meizhen's gaze and gave her other two friends a questioning look.

"I was... experimenting," Su Ling grunted in response, not quite meeting Ling Qi's eye as she took the dimensional ring from her. "I picked up a new trick, but it's hard to work. I can sorta get a feel for things that are happening in the near future. It's spotty and hard to control though."

"Divination is not an uncommon skill among more potent fox spirits," Meizhen mused, giving the ragged girl an assessing look. "Interesting."

Su Ling bared her sharp teeth in response, but she crossed her arms and remained silent. The motion drew Ling Qi's eyes to Su Ling's hands, which she now noticed were covered in small burns and cuts. There was a moment of awkward silence before Li Suyin coughed into her good hand, having tucked the dagger under the sash of her gown.

"Ah... I am glad this turned out well and that you are safe, Ling Qi, but perhaps we should go? I suspect I will be needed at the Medicine Hall soon, and it seems like there are many other troubles brewing."

"Right, we should get going," she agreed distractedly, drawing a pair of qi-restoring pills from her ring with a flick and popping the restoratives in her mouth.

As the pills dissolved on her tongue, an alarming thought crossed her mind. Han Jian and Han Fang were both absent from the mountain as far as she knew or at least in closed cultivation of some kind. Which meant...

"Shit," she cursed, drawing a surprised look from her friends as they approached the cliff. "I need to check on Gu Xiulan. If there's widespread trouble, there's no way the people we've beaten are going to leave her be."

Meizhen frowned. "Have you and that girl truly sown so many grudges?" she asked, pausing at the cliff edge. "If this is part of that barbaric girl's plot, I think it wiser to coordinate our efforts with Cai Renxiang to limit the damage."

Ling Qi looked away, glancing to her other friends. The two of them looked pretty drained, even with Li Suyin having reduced the worst of her wounds to a manageable level.

"Maybe. But I don't want to leave a friend at the mercy of enemies," she replied, not quite meeting Li Suyin's eye. "Gu Xiulan's own allies are absent. I can't help but think that isn't a coincidence."

Meizhen pursed her lips but nodded after a moment. "A fair point. If this is meant to damage and fragment resistance, then it is well-timed. It is likely that the barbarian has been free for at least a few days, laying low and plotting. It seems she no longer regards simple and open assaults as viable." Ling Qi saw a brief flicker of discomfort on Meizhen's expression as the girl looked away. "... Yet I would still prefer that we go to Cai Renxiang's aid."

"We can split up to cover more ground," Ling Qi proposed lightly. "I can be pretty hard to catch when I try." Ling Qi ignored the unpleasant spike of irrational temper at her friend choosing to aid someone else over her. It was a terribly selfish thing to think, and Meizhen had already helped her a lot today. She still didn't like it.

"How about we all get to the market first?" Su Ling spoke up carefully. "It's best to stay together until we get our wounds tended at least, right? Then Suyin and I can lay low, and you can both do your thing."

"We shouldn't delay too much regardless, especially if trouble is happening as we speak," Li Suyin added quietly, glancing between Ling Qi and Bai Meizhen with a worried look.

She was right, so they got underway, going as quickly as could be managed without splitting up. Between her salve and Li Suyin's help, Ling Qi felt much better by the time she split from her friends with a grateful thanks to seek out Xiulan.

However, despite Su Ling giving her a vague directive to search around the base of the mountain, her search did not go smoothly with all the chaos. More than once she passed ongoing duels and other less fair fights, often between members of Cai's enforcers and other disciples but also between white armband wearing disciples. Ling Qi couldn't quite bring herself to ignore the fights. While she refused to become embroiled in combat, there was no reason she couldn't sink an arrow into the lower back or leg of those ganging up on singular enforcers.

Despite her speed though, the base of the mountain was a large area, and it took some time before she received a hint of her friend's location on the word of a girl she had helped. Apparently, Xiulan had been challenged to a series of duels before the chaos had broken out.

Ling Qi soon found further evidence in the form of a rather damaged battlefield and a groaning boy who was likely to be spending the next few months regrowing his hair and eyebrows. He needed a few rough shakes to regain consciousness, but given his depleted qi and the fact that he had apparently already been thoroughly looted, she was rather confident that he wouldn't try anything, particularly with her knee on his chest and a knife hovering just above his eye. It would be a shame if he struggled too much and made her slip after all. That excuse had worked fine for the one who assaulted Suyin.

"Don't move," she said harshly as the boy stirred, becoming alert. Looking closer, she vaguely recognized him as one of the older disciples she and Xiulan had beaten, furthering her suspicion. "I know you were fighting Gu Xiulan," she bluffed. "So tell me what you and your friends were up to and where they are."

To his credit, the boy didn't fold immediately. "I do not need to tell you anything. You cannot do a thing to me under Sect rules," he responded scornfully, glaring at her past the knife in his face.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Ling Qi said coldly. The enforcer's recitation on what had happened with Xiulan with first one challenger, followed by another after another, wearing her down until the enforcers had been drawn away, dampened any sense of fair play she might have had. "At the very least, I can strip you down to your small clothes and make sure the rest of your year is miserable. Lady Cai supports her allies, you know? And she doesn't approve of rebels." Ling Qi didn't hesitate to make use of the girl's name as a threat, whatever she might think of her. "Of course, I can make you pretty miserable myself now. Talk, or my hand might slip. I'm just a clumsy peasant after all."

"You wouldn't dare," he hissed, seeming slightly less sure. "My family would..."

"They won't do a thing," she bluffed again. He was only just into the late second stage of his physique with his spirit lagging, and he was at least a year or two older. "Not for a crap talent like you," she said bluntly. "Are you an idiot? Gu Xiulan has a sister nearly in the Core Sect, and I'm friends with the heir to the province and a scion of the Bai. That's not even mentioning the Han family. Look me in the eye and tell me you think I wouldn't get away with it."

She was playing by ear, but it sounded good to her, and going by the sweat on the boy's brow, he was beginning to believe it himself. If she were a better person, she supposed she might feel bad, but right now, her friend was in danger.

"It was Brother Renshu's idea!" the boy exclaimed as her knife traced the skin just under his eye. "Hehe said that... that there was a plan to get back at the first years and that we could take care of the Gu girl and he would make sure no one interfered! It was only meant to be a humiliation," he responded defensively. "But after she defeated three of us in a row, Brother Renshu's associates attacked everyone, Lady Cai's subordinates, us, and her as well. I don't know any more than that! Her and that boy with her ran off to the east." He carefully pointed out one of the several trails where it looked like a fight had exited the clearing.

Ling Qi scowled at him but didn't detect any duplicity. "If I find out you lied, I will do everything I can to make your life miserable," she warned, pricking his skin with the tip of her knife. She didn't bother waiting for a reply before rushing off in a blur of shadow, vanishing into the shade cast by the trees overhead.

## **Chapter 91 - Resurgence 4**

The trail of destruction was thankfully easy enough to follow; Xiulan was hardly subtle. The still smoldering trees and torn up turf told the tale of a running battle, but she didn't have the time to decipher the details.

Ling Qi quickly became aware that danger still remained with loose groups of qi signatures hunting through the woods. She was able to avoid them with a bit of effort, but she had to wonder why they hadn't simply followed the obvious trail she was using to guide her. It stunk of a trap of some kind, but she could feel Xiulan's qi in the fires that still burned along the path, so she couldn't turn away.

The route eventually lead her to a cleft in a high cliff stained with soot and ash within which she could feel Xiulan's qi. None of the other qi sources were nearby, but something still seemed not quite right.

After a moment, she figured out what was wrong. Amid the battle damage to the trees surrounding the clearing, there were inconsistencies, and after squinting at the closest, she saw what it was. Simple, well hidden formation characters were carved roughly into tree bark.

They were the simplest of things, no more than an alarm set to alert the caster if a significant amount of qi left the encircled area. They were hastily set up, but that very sloppiness was a defense, leaving it on a hair trigger. She was unsure if she could disable them without setting it off because any damage at all would trigger them.

She was confident in her ability to slip past the ring unnoticed, but Gu Xiulan would have more trouble. And if Fan Yu was with her, the chances became near zero unless he had been secretly training his ability to sneak around.

First and foremost though, she needed to confirm if they were alright. Ling Qi quietly approached the cleft and allowed her control of her own qi to slip as she called out to her friend. "Gu Xiulan? Are you here? It's me, Ling Qi. I followed your trail."

The clearing was silent for a long moment as Ling Qi stood in the open so she could be easily seen. Eventually, she heard Gu Xiulan call out from inside the crevice. "And how am I to know if you are not some figment of the cowardly trash that has been hounding me, hmm?" Xiulan asked haughtily, despite the fatigue in her voice. Her voice was strained and tense. As Ling Qi couldn't see her, she must have been hiding behind a twist further in.

Ling Qi pondered her answer. "Gu Xiulan, just a few weeks ago, you confided in me that you were worried that our outings to the sweet shops between duels had added to your..."

"Do not just say things like that aloud!" Her friend's voice cut her off, sounding exasperated. She could now see the girl scowling at her, having poked her head out from around the corner she had been hiding behind.

"Would you rather I say something actually private?" Ling Qi said dryly. "Gu Xiulan, are you alright?"

The girl peered at her suspiciously before stepping out, looking rather ragged. Her hair was askew, and her hands were stained with soot. She also walked with a slight limp and had an ugly bruise beneath her right eye.

"Well enough, considering," Xiulan replied, crossing her arms as she peered warily into the woods. "How did you know where to look for me?"

"Su Ling gave me a place to start. She's working on a new art," Ling Qi answered easily. "From there, I just had to follow the fires."

"Hah," Xiulan said dryly to her jibe, even as her expression twisted in distaste. "I suppose that m..." She paused, glancing at Ling Qi. "I will owe her thanks then. I do not suppose you have anyone else with you?"

"No." Ling Qi shook her head. "Sun Liling is raising the hells again, so only I could come," she added, not letting bitterness reach her voice. "Is Fan Yu with you? Or one of the others? The one I interrogated mentioned you were with a boy."

"That idiot fiance of mine took one too many blows to the head throwing himself in front of attacks for me," Xiulan sneered, but her heart didn't seem to be in the insult. "As if I could not dodge myself," she grumbled. "He was knocked out for a time, but he is conscious now, if weak from some effect from one of the blows he took."

Ling Qi grimaced. Fan Yu was an ass, but she wasn't going to just leave him behind. He was still Xiulan's fiance and Han Jian's friend. "Do you know what the people attacking you are doing?"

"No. It is as if they are merely trying to cage me here," Xiulan said angrily, smoke curling from her hair. "... As if I am meant to be bait," she added darkly, glaring at the woods. "Worse, I have fought off two cowardly little probing attacks. I cannot even meditate and recover."

Ling Qi plucked nervously at the trailing edge of her mantle, glancing at the treeline herself. Had Sun Liling created a secondary distraction for her, or was this meant to divert Han Jian and Han Fang if they returned?

"We need to get out of here. If we can link up with more of Cai's people, we can get back to everyone else and face this together." Ling Qi was dubious of her own words. It would be dangerous and she didn't even know if more than a handful of Cai's minions would still be standing on their return. There were at least eight or nine people in the woods around them, none below late second realm.

"Going deeper into enemy-controlled territory may be rash," Xiulan pointed out, proving just how tired she was in her advocation for caution. "... I had intended to meet my sister in town today to discuss some things," Xiulan offered reluctantly. "If we can reach the base of the mountain, I can signal her."

"I thought Inner Disciples couldn't interfere in the affairs of Outer Disciples?" Ling Qi asked. It would mean covering less distance if they could depend on Xiulan's sister, but it would take them out of the fight between Cai Renxiang and Sun Liling's faction.

"They are not allowed on the Outer Sect mountain without permission, but if a foolish Outer Disciple attempts to accost one while they have guests..." Xiulan explained, still looking sour. It seemed like she didn't like the idea of relying on her elder sister.

"There is no need to trouble your sister," Ling Qi answered firmly after a few moment's thought. "I have a plan. Is Fan Yu able to move?" she asked. "It's only a matter of time before someone notices my presence."

"He is, but his qi is depleted," Gu Xiulan replied, eyeing her curiously. "Nor is it safe for either of us to take further restoratives," she added regretfully.

"That shouldn't matter for my plan," Ling Qi said, drawing a pair of metal cards from her ring. It was time to finally put the spoils taken back in Elder Zhou's test to use again. "I can store copies of my movement technique in these for you to use, and I can cloak our movements. Once we are out, we can join with the rest of Cai's people."

## **Chapter 92 - Resurgence 5**

"Very well. I hope you know what you are doing, Ling Qi." Gu Xiulan turned on her heel, heading back into the crevice. Ling Qi, for her part, turned to keep an eye on her surroundings, even as she pulled her new talisman from her ring into her hand, rolling up her sleeve to put the thing on. Thankfully, Chu Song's armband shrunk to fit her much thinner arm. Her ribbon soon took its place in the ring. Now that she had the time to consider it, her ribbon was no longer very useful. Between her flute and her gown, her dark-aspected arts were already mostly reduced to requiring a mere trickle of qi.

When her friend emerged once again, this time with her fiance, Ling Qi studied the shorter boy. He looked pale, and his forehead was bandaged and stained with blood, and he had a few other marks of battle on his body. Much like Xiulan, he walked with a slight limp. Had their opponents been deliberately aiming for the legs? She supposed it was a possibility.

"Fan Yu," she greeted curtly, tossing him one of the cards. "We don't have much time to waste. Can you run?"

"Of course I can," Fan Yu replied with a scowl, snatching the card out of the air. He glanced to the woods and his expression soured further. "Are you certain of this? They may be cowardly scum, but there are many of them." He stopped himself from saying more at a look from Xiulan. She didn't miss the way his face tightened when he looked at her.

Not that it surprised her. Their mutual dislike had never faded, but the boy's loathing had become more self-directed in the past months of minor interaction. Fan Yu wasn't delusional enough to continue acting as if Ling Qi was nothing.

"It's our best chance, unless you want to sit here and get worn down one attack at a time," she said simply, then tossed another of her qi cards to Xiulan. "Gu Xiulan, I need you to be my voice since I won't be able to stop playing once I start. When we come up on any of Lady Cai's people, make sure they know to join us. It'll be a little while until we have enough people to deter attack."

Xiulan flicked her partially undone hair out of her eyes. "Look at you. I never thought I would see the day when you took charge," she sniffed, eyeing the card in her hands. "But very well. I am eager for vengeance. Let us be on our way."

Ling Qi nodded and summoned her flute to hand, raising the sleek instrument to her lips as her companions tensed. One of the groups was swinging toward them, so they needed to move now. Ling Qi sent thoughts of comfort to her still confused and fearful spirit then began to play quietly, calling on her mist to surround and dampen their qi. It might allow them to be followed, but it should make more distant tracking and precise attacks more difficult.

As soon as the mist shrouded them, she felt Gu Xiulan and Fan Yu activating their qi cards, and they began to run. Ling Qi felt the 'line' formed by the alarm with her qi sense, and brushed past it nigh effortlessly, her long practice at reducing her presence and the dampening properties of her gown allowing her to practically ignore the shoddy formation. Her companions' passage was less easy. Gu

Xiulan passed by it well enough, but Fan Yu's passage, even with the assistance of the qi card's Formless Shade technique, made the alarm line thrum and strain like a rotten beam taking too much weight. To his credit, she felt him clamp down on his qi, if only for a moment, allowing him to pass without setting it off.

Then they were off with her holding back her speed just enough to not leave the two of them behind. She felt a slight ripple in her companions' qi and glanced back to see Fan Yu with medicinal vapor drifting from his palm as if he had just crushed something. Whatever it was, it smoothed out his gait and made his legs pump faster, preventing him from falling behind Xiulan.

Ling Qi ran, the landscape little more than a blur around her, swerving around the trees and leading her companions away from the disciples manning the perimeter around the crevice. For all their efforts though, it seemed that their escape would not go unnoticed for long. By the time the effects of her qi cards were guttering out on her companions, she heard a crackling burst of thunder and glanced back to see a bright light in the sky. Some kind of flare perhaps?

They didn't need any encouragement to speed up, and shortly thereafter, they ran across the first of Cai's enforcers, a boy leaning against a tree and breathing hard over an unconscious foe. His eyes widened when he saw the mist barreling down on him, but Xiulan's shouted command to follow was enough to get him moving. Ling Qi's control of the mist wavered as she tried to include the boy while the mist was up, something she hadn't done before. In the heat of the moment, a spark of inspiration struck her, and the adjustment of a few notes in the next chord was enough to successfully insulate him from the mist's effects.

The next enforcer they came upon took a bit more effort because the girl's foe was still standing. A jump and adjustment of her trajectory brought Ling Qi's boots down on the back of the rebel's head, slamming his face into the ground and ending the fight.

She left actual command of the two early second realms to Xiulan, focusing on their path ahead. Ling Qi did not forget that she had seen apparent enforcers fighting each other, but she decided to avoid those types of fights. Ling Qi had no way of determining loyalty at this point, nor the time to try.

They had just managed to free up a third enforcer when Ling Qi felt the rapid approach of a pair of pursuers behind them. Despite that, she kept moving, focusing on her own task as she kept an ear out for Xiulan's snapped commands to the others. The first person to approach her mist was met with fire and cutting wind, and the twin arrow shots that came back in reply failed to strike anything in her obscuring mist.

The enemies were deflected, and they ran on. Ling Qi knew they didn't have long to gather others, but they were heading toward the main road leading to the central plaza. She would have to hope there would be sufficient numbers there, but at the same time, she would have to exercise her discretion about who to include in her mist. It cost qi to include new allies, and Ling Qi still needed to keep up a decent qi reserve for when they were forced to fight.

They clashed twice more with their pursuers, even as they gathered another pair of allies. One enemy fell, an ugly burn seared across his torso by Xiulan, while one of theirs fell to an arrow and had to be carried. Each time, the pursuers came with greater numbers but the clashes seemed more like an effort

to harry and divert them rather than an actual attempt to engage them. But the senior Outer Disciples chasing them were coordinated and with nothing but winded and worn down allies, Ling Qi herself did not want a standing battle.

This was why Ling Qimade the decision to bull through rather than pause when they approached the plaza. Even as she kept the mist going, she channeled qi outward, reinforcing her allies with Deepwood Vitality and brought them crashing through the four enemies in their path. Ling Qi filled her mist with clawing, hungry constructs and lead her ragged band through, focusing on passing the enemies by and confusing their senses.

Thankfully, Xiulan seemed to know her mind well enough to give the actual instruction, and they made it through, closing in on the plaza. Ling Qi had intended to join up with Cai's main forces, but with their steps being dogged as they were by their pursuers and how worn out her allies were, she wasn't sure that they would be able to reach Cai's forces.

It was only reinforced when Xiulan spoke up in a wary voice from beside her. "They will not be able to keep this up." The girl's voice was harsh, tinged with weariness. Xiulan was obviously using some strange technique; her hair was aflame, and smaller embers licked along her limbs. Her face was pale too, and Ling Qi noticed a slight gauntness to her cheeks that had not been there when they began this run.

Worse, she could feel that their enemies had finally grouped back up, minus the one Xiulan had injured earlier. They would either need to try for the safety of the lecture hall, as it was Sect property where violence was forbidden, or take their chances with a fight. Ling Qi kept running even as she deliberated, all too aware of the enemies rapidly catching up with them.

An odd whistling combined with a wordless roar came from above. Her gaze snapped skyward as powerful qi entered the range of her senses. Then a terrible impact hit the ground behind them, knocking aside trees and shaking the earth under their feet.

From the cloud of dust kicked up by the impact, a single massive hand lashed out. The hand was large enough to close entirely around the head of the closest of their enemies, a whip thin boy with a sword. The boy barely had time to let out a muffled cry of alarm before the hand gripping his head tore him from the ground and slammed him bodily into a still standing tree with a splintering crack.

Overhead, a star blazed in the afternoon sky, casting a shadow over the steel-clad giant emerging from the dust. Cai Renxiang, clad in a scandalously short gown, floated above on wings of light. To Ling Qi's eye, the heiress was not as immaculate as she first appeared. Small cuts and scrapes marked her bare arms.

"To think so many would defy my lady's order," Gan Guangli rumbled, his voice echoing oddly through the grill in the horned, full face helm he now wore. "I have crushed so many rebels today, and yet more of you still stand! Fools and scum! I will break each and every one of you!" His voice rose to its normal high volume, amplified by his three meter height as he stood and faced the seven enemies that had been chasing them.

"There is no need for rashness, Guangli. Fools they may be, but it is our duty to see them civilized," Cai Renxiang called down, floating lower, her dark saber standing out amidst her glow. "You have harassed my allies, and wounded my soldiers, and brought chaos to the Sect! Yet your rebellion is crushed. The Sun Princess was driven away, and still we stand!" she barked as Ling Qi continued to put distance between her own group of exhausted allies and the increasingly cohesive group of foes.

The run had been a blur, but she knew the enemies had at least one person like her; she had felt her effects dispelled once or twice and their enemies bolstered.

"I am not unmerciful. Sheath your blades and leave this place now, and this foolishness will be forgiven," Cai Renxiang announced. Ling Qi shot the heiress a wary look. Was she bluffing or genuinely being merciful? "Stay and continue to defy me, and not only will you be crushed, but you will be given no courtesy in defeat."

"How scary." A voice rang out from amidst the trees. "I came down to see why my boys were having trouble with a few little birds, and it turns out we've caught a hawk in the net."

Ling Qi blinked as she felt a change in her qi senses, a new oily and unclean signature among the seven enemies that still stood. She eyed the trees, but no one emerged. Glancing back at her own group, she nodded to Xiulan, and the girl hurriedly sent their more exhausted allies on, running out of the mist with their wounded. It left just her, Xiulan, Fan Yu, and one other boy, who held a thin metal staff in his hands. He had shown himself to be pretty proficient in deflecting enemy attacks in their run.

"Yan Renshu," Cai said cooly, her hair fluttering on the phantom wind that surrounded her. "Do you expect me to believe you truly crawled out of your hole for this? Do not be foolish. Stand your men down. This is over."

"Hmph. Cocky, as expected," the voice grumbled. "I wonder if you and that lummox could really stand up to us though. Do you expect me to believe you came out of your other fights unscathed?"

"I alone am a match for a creeping worm like you!" Gan Guangli shouted, the sound of his gauntletclad fist clashing on his breastplate echoing through the woods.

"And even then, do you expect that we are alone? The remainder of my allies will return shortly," Cai Renxiang called back. "Do not think so highly of your rabble." Ling Qi caught her glancing down at the mist and did not miss the way the heiress subtly gestured for her to continue their retreat.

"That's a bluff," the voice scoffed. "I know your type. You'll have the rest putting out the other fires while you come and deal with this one. Noble of you, maybe, but pretty foolish all the same."

Ling Qi scowled at the woods; she hadn't gotten a good read on their opponents in the rush. There were at least two archers and the supporter she had sensed, as well as a couple of melee types, but they all seemed speed focused. Sensible for raiders. She also knew next to nothing about this Renshu fellow, except that he was certainly getting put on her list.

She genuinely didn't know if Cai Renxiang and Gan Guangli could handle all of them; the heiress showed signs of being wounded already, and she had a feeling Gan Guangli would loudly bluster even an inch from death.

She did not have much attachment to the girl's government really, but she couldn't help but remember Bai Meizhen's words earlier and the familiar way she spoke of the other girl. Ling Qi was growing aware that her support could be a powerful way to tilt fights, but her friend was badly worn out, and there was no way Gu Xiulan would retreat if she didn't...

## **Chapter 93 - Resurgence 6**

Ling Qi cast a glance up at Cai Renxiang, who despite her minor injuries showed not the slightest hint of lacking confidence. No, in this case, the heiress had indicated that she should continue retreating, and that meant Cai Renxiang had something in mind. She did not want to interfere with it out of some misplaced and pointless courage.

She caught Gu Xiulan's eye and jerked her head in the direction of the plaza and the lecture hall, playing all the while. They needed to get moving. Her friend hesitated only a moment before nodding.

"Keep moving!" she said harshly, causing the two remaining boys to jerk slightly as she caught their attention, drawing it away from the confrontation. "There is no reason to intercede here. It will only trouble the Lady." Ling Qi didn't miss the way Xiulan's gloved fist clenched when she said that, but it was an issue they could discuss when they were safe.

Ling Qi cast one more glance at the floating heiress before turning on her heel and dashing away, heading for the hall. In that last glance, she had glimpsed a tiny blade held discreetly in Cai Renxiang's left hand. Despite the oddity, she did not look back again. It didn't concern her.

They ran across the flagstones of the plaza, now scorched and broken in several places but mostly clear of disciples. None of the remaining disciples tried to stop the speeding cloud of roiling mist. Ahead, Ling Qi could see four battered looking disciples wearing Cai's mark standing guard over the main path, and the last of the wounded she had brought in were being helped into the lecture hall.

Then the sky bloomed with radiance behind them. She would have called it a second sun, but even on the hottest day she could remember, the sun's light had never been so harsh. It was no color and every color all at once, somehow utterly heatless even as it washed out all color from her sight and screaming winds ripped across the plaza, tearing at her mist and bowling over more than one surprised disciple too close to the far side where they had come from. Leaves and peach blossoms rained down on the plaza, torn from the decorative gardens.

Glancing back, she saw that every tree in the copse of trees they had emerged from was stripped of its leaves and half of its branches, the bark bleached a stark white. Gan Guangli was still standing in the epicenter of the blast, seemingly unharmed. Though his armor itself gleamed with colorless light, Cai still outshone him, a blazing spotlight overseeing the broken trees where their pursuers had stood.

Yet their enemies were not beaten. A noxious looking purple mist exploded violently from the broken and bleached trees, writhing like a thing alive as it consumed Gan Guangli, and at least three shadows blurred out to assault him.

They were nearly to the lecture hall, Ling Qi found herself noting. No further foes lay ahead, and allies were close by. She was not entirely without tricks even at this distance. Her music cut out as her flute dematerialized, replaced with a sleek horn bow. As her friend and remaining allies sped out of her now stationary mist, she drew back the string, time seeming to slow as heaven qi surged through her channels, sparks crackling along her hands and arms.

Her new armband burned hot as her qi reached it, flooding her tired limbs with energy, and Ling Qi fired. The first shot struck one of the darting shadows around Gan Guangli dead on in a blinding flash, but the second sailed through out of her sight in the mist, dodged by the target. The third and the fourth exploded in displays of brilliance, and she thought she caught the distant sound of a cry of pain. Ling Qi didn't stick around and dashed through the gates of the lecture hall.

Gu Xiulan stood just inside, flanked by Fan Yu and the other boy. "You just couldn't help yourself," she drawled, casting a wary eye at the battle in the distance.

"I did have a clear shot," Ling Qi pointed out. "It would have been a waste not to."

Gu Xiulan let out an irritable sound but didn't question her further. "Well, is there a plan as to what we do now?" she asked, turning to question the heavy-set boy who stood at the doorway wearing one of Cai's bands.

"Lady Cai has rented the use of a lecture room as a place of recovery," the boy said with a slightly stiff bow. Ling Qi could see that he was injured himself. "The others you sent have already gone ahead."

Ling Qi frowned. She didn't like the idea of just sitting out the rest of the fights, but she was on the verge of qi depletion and she really needed to let Zhengui out and comfort him. His alarm was sharp in her mind.

"Ah, Miss Ling?" She blinked and glanced at their fourth, the early second realm who had stayed behind with them while the injured had been sent ahead. She felt like she had seen him before. Maybe he had been in Elder Zhou's lessons? "Thank you for your efforts," he continued at her questioning look, hastily bowing his head and clasping his hands together in front of him. "But may I go ahead? My... There is someone among the wounded I would like to check on."

Ling Qi blinked again. Why was he even asking ... She scratched her cheek. She supposed she had kind of taken charge. "That's fine. You can go ahead ..." She didn't know his name.

"Wei Hai," he said easily, seemingly unperturbed. "If you require anything in the future, please feel free to ask." He bowed again and then turned away, hurrying down the hall.

Ling Qi shook her head and turned back to Xiulan, who was annoyedly having a murmured conversation with a browbeaten Fan Yu. She left them to it. Instead, she turned to ask the boy guarding the door. "Do you know where Bai Meizhen is? How she is doing?"

The boy shifted nervously under her stare. "... Miss Bai was overseeing the organization of the forces in the residential areas alongside Sir Xuan," he explained. "She was in good health."

Ling Qi let out a breath at that. She nodded her thanks to the boy and turned to head inside. Gu Xiulan caught her eye and fell in beside her with Fan Yu trailing behind, his head down.

They rested for a time after that and soon, it seemed that the battle had come to an end.

"Victory is ours!" Gan Guangli's booming voice echoed through the classroom as the young man entered, his shoulders stooped to avoid having his head scrape the ceiling. He was still shrinking down toward his normal height.

"It was hard fought and well earned." Cai Renxiang's voice was certainly lower in volume yet still managed to carry just as well. The girl stepped in after Gan Guangli. Her gown had returned to its normal decent state, and the marks where Ling Qi had seen blood staining the white fabric were nowhere to be seen. Only the rippling shimmer of the crimson fabric splayed across her chest belied the gown's true nature.

Ling Qi reluctantly joined the ragged cheer that came from the gathered crowd. She was still concerned for Meizhen and her other friends, but she wasn't going to interrupt Cai in the middle of her victory speech.

"Between your own efforts, our battles, and the support of our allies, Miss Bai, Sir Xuan, Sir Han, and Sir Huang, the malcontents have been driven back into their holes. The peace of White Cloud Mountain and the order of the Outer Sect which you all have fought hard to support will not fall this day," the heiress continued with a touch of pride in her voice. It was hard not to be infected by it. Still, the girl had been wounded; it bothered her that Cai Renxiang showed no sign of it.

"In addition," Cai Renxiang continued, and Ling Qi was surprised to find herself the direct recipient of her gaze. "Allow me to finally dispel the rumors regarding Miss Ling in relation to the attacks on female disciples. I had hesitated to make accusations without more solid proof, but today has made it clear that the matter was an early plot by the villain Yan Renshu to undermine us and sow distrust. I will be most displeased if such rumors continue to be spread about an upstanding member of my council."

Ling Qi boggled. She hadn't even really known rumors were still flying around. She really needed to pay more attention to her peers, didn't she? Awkwardly, she bowed, hoping she was getting the posture correct. "Thank you very much, Lady Cai," she hurried out.

The girl gave her a sharp nod then turned her attention back to the group as a whole. "The spoils of our victory, taken from the defeated, are still being counted. I ask that you be patient, and by the morrow, you will have your rewards for this your battle. For now, return to your homes and rest."

Ling Qi had to wonder just how complete their victory really was, whatever Cai Renxiang might say. The mountain was huge, and there were many disciples. Cai's forces might control the main areas, but...

The others began to file out after another ragged cheer, but Ling Qi hung back, drifting through the crowd over to where Gan Guangli stood. "Thank you for your help back there," Ling Qi said.

He let out a booming laugh, drawing a few glances but little more. It was funny how much being loud and boisterous could lead to people ignoring him. "Think nothing of it, Miss Ling. Your own efforts were very valiant as well!"

"I would hardly say that," Ling Qi demurred. "I did want to ask though, is there anything I should watch out for on my way home? And do you know where Bai Meizhen is?"

"Miss Bai is very well to my knowledge," he replied more quietly. "Your home is safe, but I believe Miss Bai may have a few matters to speak with you about." She got his meaning, as he had gotten hers. Cultivators had sharp ears; it was best to discuss such things in privacy.

The residential area was a mess, if one that was being rapidly cleaned up. The mansion Sun Liling had claimed during the first half of the year seemed to have borne the worst damage, being little more than a smoldering, broken wreck. The rest of the damage was more superficial. Her home had a few broken windows and some holes in the roof and outer wall, but it wasn't anything that couldn't be repaired.

Once she had a chance to finally speak with Meizhen that night, events became more clear. Sun Ling had been driven out of the main part of the Outer Sect, but it might be better to say that she had simply retreated. Xuan Shi, who had been overseeing Kang Zihao's confinement, had been overwhelmed by the combination of Sun Liling and Ji Rong, and Kang Zihao was broken out. Things had spiralled from there.

Sun's subordinate, Lu Feng, had apparently been slinking about gathering dissenters, and they had all risen at once, some from within Cai's ranks. It had been Cai's intention to use Fu Xiang to ferret out such turncoats, but there had simply not been enough time to get everything done before this second uprising. The attack had been made worse by the fact that Sun Liling had convinced a healthy fraction of the older disciples to time their own bids at vengeance to coincide with hers.

Ultimately, Cai still controlled the first year residences and several other key areas, but the balance was tenuous. Sun Liling and her allies were holed up on the mountain somewhere, plotting away, and the confidence of the older disciples had been bolstered by the minor victories they had won across the mountain.

The battle lines had been drawn.

## **Interlude - Cai Renxiang**

In and out. The needle plunged into the meat of her forearm, drawing the weeping edge of the wound closed with a glittering thread of colorless qi. Blood that flickered with phosphorescent light glittered like jewels on the table below.

Cai Renxiang was silent and still, save for the near mechanical motion of her other hand as she repaired her self-inflicted wound. Mother had carved the lesson into her bones. Perfection was, as always, a prerequisite. Scars and blemishes were unacceptable, and she had not the skill to spin new flesh wholesale as Mother did.

So she stitched, drawing the torn flesh of the cursed wound together a little more with each precise motion. This was her penance for allowing matters to grow so far out of control. For failing to anticipate the red princess's plot. For needing a desperation technique at all.

No that was not right, she supposed. This was the punishment for being insufficiently prepared. That Sun Liling would return and raise chaos had been a foregone conclusion. Her subordinates declared her victory outside now, but she knew better. She had not been defeated, truly, but Sun Liling had bloodied her nose. Although the princess was not fool enough to face her forces again yet directly, this had been a draw at best. Her throne was maintained, yet bandits wandered at the very border. What would Mother think?

Mother had tasked her at the beginning of the year with uniting the normally chaotic, fractional Outer Sect into a functional psuedo-government with limited resources and connections. It was playacting; something similar to what Mother had been forced to accomplish in her rise to the ducal seat, albeit on a much smaller, inconsequential scale. Failure was...

Cold fingers, harder than diamond, dug into her small shoulders, nearly drawing blood, and she trembled. The terrible, inhuman radiance of Mother's eyes made her heart seize in her chest. Babbled apologies fell from her lips, but there was no mercy, only the consequences of failure.

#### ... unacceptable.

Cai Renxiang let out a soft breath as she finished her work, laying aside the needle for a delicate pair of scissors as she finished the seam. With Mother's thread, the wound would be gone by morning, and no mark would remain. The worst was prevented.

It was immensely frustrating, she mused, as she began to clean and put away her tools. Intrigue was not her strong suit, she knew that. There was very little plotting at Mother's court because Mother knew. She always knew, and the men and women who installed themselves in her court and bowed and scraped and danced for Mother's amusement knew that she did. They were mere hand puppets for the county lords, mouthpieces and sycophants who knew little of value.

The lords had taken the lessons of Mother's rise well. The Chu had been her first example, their refusal to accept the new order and the curbing of their rights ending in the erasure of all save their youngest generation, whose dantians had been crippled instead.

This brought her problems now, if Bai Meizhen's words were true. She had thought the name familiar when Fu Xiang had mentioned her, but only later had she matched it to those Chu, those ragged remnants reduced to common soldiery, left alive as an example to Mother's other vassals.

It seemed that would be changing though with this Chu Song; having reached third realm under seventeen years of age, the Chu would be rising to the barony level. Yet another small issue, which, with the others, was quickly becoming a mountain.

Her base of power, at least, was secure. The son of Xuan was a solid ally, asking little in return for his service. That was a simple matter of trade politics, unlikely to change, although she had caught his eyes lingering on her from time to time. If he bore an attraction, that only tied him all the tighter to her mission.

The Huang boy was a simple creature, easy to predict and guide. His hated foe lay on the other side of the divide, and that would be enough. She found him distasteful, but she was not in a position to make that known. Yet. If need be, she could promise some small aid to his ailing house. Mother had granted her a limited set of resources to secure such alliances after all.

Similarly, Bai Meizhen's familial enmity with Sun Liling would inspire her to take action against the Sun faction.

The eastern bloc was trickier. The Han boy was more intelligent than his indolent reputation would have indicated, and he had a strong group of supporters.

Cai Renxiang rose from her seat without swaying, despite the lightheadedness that came from feeding too much blood to her gown spirit, Liming. The rolled-up sleeve of her gown fell down, concealing any sign of her wound.

Liming stirred, silk brushing across her skin as the eyes on her chest shifted and a susurrus of hungry voices whispered in her thoughts. She crushed the intrusion with the ease of long practice, and her gown stilled.

She crossed her dimly lit room and placed the teakwood container back on the shelf, taking a moment to ensure its exact placement. Turning on her heel, she extended a hand and her saber rattled briefly before flying to her hand.

She could not simply sit and think. There was a schedule to keep. She had a meeting with Fu Xiang to review intelligence and plan future operations, she would need to speak words of encouragement to her many lesser supporters as Guangli began training them, and then she would need to focus upon her own cultivation. Her lagging physique galled her.

She reached the door and cast it open, striding across the symmetrically perfect hall that lead from her chambers to her home's sitting room. She would have to begin refitting the mansion Sun Liling had abandoned, if she could find a moment and resources for it. She had previously left it alone in the vain hope that the barbarian would settle down after her punishment.

Bai Meizhen had been right in that. It had been a futile thought to pursue reconciliation, and she resolved to listen more closely to the girl's advice on the matter in the future.

Acquiring the goodwill of the Bai daughter was a windfall. She did not know the details of what had occurred to leave the girl so distraught, but she was thankful for it in a way. The distant, distrusting Bai were notoriously difficult to wrangle into alliance. That she could acquire a tentative closeness with one merely with a sympathetic ear and her mid-afternoon tea time was nothing short of heaven-sent providence.

... It had nothing to do with Bai Meizhen being a not unpleasant conversation partner to spend her tea time with. The girl was well-educated and politically savvy, even if she lacked the initiative to make use of it. The alliance with Bai Meizhen was useful and would be into the future if maintained. Mother understood that, and so did she.

A house like the Bai would not stay down for long. Even at their lowest, no one save the Imperial house had dared make any direct moves. Reviled as they might be, power was power, and whatever rumor might say of the Bai's treatment of their 'allies', her measure of the pale girl said that she would remember her friends well indeed.

The Bai's friend, Ling Qi, was also swiftly shaping up to be very valuable. A swiftly rising commoner talent was exactly the sort of thing that Cai Renxiang was looking for, and she had been specially granted permission and authority by her Mother to recruit at the Sect.

She had Guangli and he was a pillar of her faction, but more support was invaluable. Mother's limitations on her available resources and connections were likely to continue after her time in the Outer Sect, and Cai, as a relatively newly established house, had no longstanding allies or personal retainer clans to call upon. Mother had raised the Wang and Jia clans to the status of counts through similar sponsorship.

If the girl's progress continued, she would consider extending an offer. It would have the benefit of being a minor favor to Bai Meizhen as well, given some of the concerns the Bai had confided with regard to offering vassalship under her own ducal family.

As Cai Renxiang left her home, plans and schedules and numbers and names all swiftly flowed through her thoughts, assembling the order of her future.

## **Chapter 94 - Peace 1**

Ling Qi sat atop the roof of her home. Her eyes were closed, but her awareness spread far from her body. She felt the trickling streamers of starlight, dyed silver by the power of the moon, streaming down from the vault of the sky, and as she breathed, she drew them in and wove them carefully into her own qi, circulating and compressing until the stellar energies were indistinguishable from her own. Her dantian pulsed like a heart, growing infinitesimally denser with each cycle.

All concerns of the previous day faded from her mind as she drank in starlight and continued to work toward mastery of the third phase of her cultivation art, Eight Phase Ceremony. The chaos of the afternoon had the benefit of leaving the night peaceful by necessity, and Ling Qi took advantage.

As she fell into meditation up on the roof of the home she shared with Meizhen, Ling Qi allowed her concerns to drift away. The little aches of the day of combat and exertion faded next, and soon, there was only the peace of her even, rhythmic breathing and the slow cycling of her depleted qi through her dantian and channels. She exhaled and opened her meridians further, drinking in the faint threads of stellar and lunar qi drifting down from the night sky like a slow and lazy rain.

Her qi recovered first, and soon, the cool energies flowed outward from her channels, soaking into flesh and bone. Slowly, Ling Qi began to work on the next step, changing the pattern of her breathing as she began to cycle her qi in the complex pattern demanded by the next step, a looping eightfold lattice of energy that flowed from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes.

This time, the pattern did not break or waver. She cycled her qi again and again, drinking in new energy from the night sky all the while. Eight times eight cycles passed, and when next she breathed, the world was gone.

Ling Qi found herself sitting atop the water in the center of a shimmering black pool shrouded by mist. The only thing visible to her eyes were seven shining reflections in the water and a single circular void of unlight which somehow stood out even in the darkness. Her thoughts drifted slowly, hazy from deep meditation, but she could recognize this for what it was. It felt similar to peering into the jade slip. This was a construct of her own mind, a translation of concept into image for her to understand.

Curiously, Ling Qi reached out, fingers brushing the water over the waning crescent that represented the Grinning Moon. Water rippled, and a soft laugh echoed in her thoughts. Motion and cunning, trickery and light-hearted deceit. These were the hallmarks of the Grinning Moon. Images flashed across the water: a boy shadowed by deep purple mist, a room lit by eerie green lanterns, and a book and a slip of jade. Ling Qi withdrew her hand as she felt a tug on her qi. Somehow, she knew that if she held too long, her path would be set.

She prodded the other images one by one. From the void of the Hidden Moon, the keeper and seeker of secrets, rose the image of a cavern lit by bioluminescent fungus growing over the remains of a strange basalt gate. From the waxing crescent of the Bloody Moon, patron of retribution and blood spilled in the night, came the image of a puppet wearing her face and and the flash of a knife cutting down the dark shadow pulling its strings. The other phases rebuffed her touch, save for the Guiding Moon. The bright full moon representing the guide and protector accepted her touch, giving her an image of a hand

carefully drawing out the complex lines of formation characters. The image shifted, and she found herself looking at the staid expression of Xuan Shi.

It seemed that the time had come to make a choice. She could feel that she would not be able to master the Ceremony further until she chose one of the moon phases and performed the offered task. Yet it did not feel final; she would not be locked to a single path. The moon was change, and she would see herself cultivating under more than one sister's gaze by the end of the Ceremony.

Really though, was there any other choice? Ling Qi plunged her hands through the reflection of the waning crescent, and images flooded her mind. Soon, she awoke, staring up at the faint colors of dawn, rising into the sky.

Much of the next day was spent on Zhengui, hunting down minor cores for him to eat to make up for yesterday's chaos and soothing his nerves. Her spirit was jumpy and nervous, alarm ringing from his thoughts at every loud noise or sudden motion in the world around them. He clung stubbornly to her shoulder rather than wandering around while she cleaned her kills. He had also taken to breathing out superheated ash at things which surprised him, which was a little dangerous but also amusing when it left him chirping triumphantly over a slain field mouse, only to have his kill stolen by his other head.

Ling Qi kept a wary eye on her fellow disciples when she saw them. There was a tense atmosphere on the mountain, like a levee on the verge of bursting. It was only a matter of time until skirmishes between the two factions began again.

However, Cai Renxiang was not idle. Cai had narrowed the scope of her enforcement, and those wearing her armband now traveled in groups of four rather than two. Ling Qi also saw many harsh group training and drilling sessions occurring throughout the areas Cai controlled. Cai Renxiang was pushing her recruits to grow stronger quickly and bolster the enforcer numbers through offers of medicines and training.

It wasn't her concern. Ling Qi's focus lay on preparing to host Xiulan for the night since she had invited the girl over for a little relaxation to unwind from a stressful week. She felt the need even more keenly given how worn out the other girl had appeared the previous day. Ling Qi had never really hosted guests before so her efforts were mostly guesswork, aside from the obvious necessity of gathering a veritable mountain of sweets and other light foods for them to snack on throughout the night. She enjoyed little luxuries like that, and Xiulan had more than a bit of a sweet tooth herself.

Evening came quickly enough, and Ling Qi busied herself preparing tea as she waited for Xiulan to arrive. She was not left waiting overly long as her friend arrived promptly on time. They traded a bit of small talk as Ling Qi lead her through her home and out to the porch overlooking the internal garden where she had set things up for them. Ling Qi had left Zhengui to his own devices in the sandy portion of the garden with a hefty amount of snacks of his own, and Xiulan released her own spirit to join him in the little enclosure to avoid the flighty spirit growing bored and becoming a distraction. With their spirits' needs taken care of, the two of them were able to sit down on the thick blanket Ling Qi had laid out and relax under the cool evening sky.

"So, what have you been working on lately?" Ling Qi asked as she leaned back against the wall, a plate of sliced rice cake resting in her hand.

Gu Xiulan hummed to herself as she popped a spoonful of flavored ice into her mouth. Ling Qi was glad to see the gauntness in the girl's cheeks hadn't gotten any worse. She hadn't missed the eagerness with which her friend had dug into the presented food. "Exercising and improving my body, of course. It does not do to let oneself fall behind," Xiulan declared.

"That can't be all," Ling Qi said, savoring a bit of the sweet rice cake before speaking again. "I have been working on further mastering a few of my arts."

"Of course not," Xiulan replied testily, shooting her an annoyed look. "I continue to master my family's cultivation art, and I have begun to practice our longer range combat art as well."

Ling Qi held back a grimace; she hadn't meant to be insulting. "That sounds interesting," Ling Qi said instead. "What sort of art is that?"

Xiulan eyed her for a moment and let out a huff, taking another bite of sweet ice powder. "The Radiant Lance art is one of the Gu's foundational arts. It is used to strike down distant foes with bolts from the heavens," she said pridefully. "The full art is unmatched in the east."

"Huh. I never would have guessed that you would use a heaven art," Ling Qi mused as she finished chewing another bite of her rice cake. She stretched out her legs, letting her bare feet dangle over the edge of the porch. "I thought all of your family's arts were fire."

The other girl huffed, pointing her spoon at Ling Qi as she spoke. "My family is not so simple as that," she said irritably. Then she glanced away. "It is a hybrid art of heaven and fire," she muttered. "Father sent the novice's slip along when I informed him of the spirit I had bound."

Ling Qi made a sound of understanding and glanced toward the sandy enclosure. Zhengui was trundling along, kicking up grit as he chased after the fluttering fire fairy, which dangled a smoking stick of fragrant wood just out of his reach. Should she... No, she could feel an echo of agitation through their link, but it wasn't serious; there was a certain playfulness to the scene.

"I hope that is all he sent along," Ling Qi grumbled. "Don't think I've forgotten that nonsense about trying to hook me up with some cousin."

Xiulan gave a theatrical sigh. "Is the idea really that repulsive?" she asked, putting down the finished bowl and snatching up a plate of sachima before popping one of the little squares of fried batter and sugary syrup into her mouth. "Your closeness to Bai Meizhen will not ward off such things forever."

"I don't need to think about that kind of thing," Ling Qi said stubbornly, only to wince as she saw her friend's expression darken. "Well, more like I don't want to. I just got that creep Huang Da to give up."

Xiulan tsked under her breath. "I understand you don't like the boy, but from what you have said of the encounter, it is probable that you have drawn the attention of a potential suitor of higher rank."

Ling Qi paled a bit, shooting Xiulan a panicked look. The Huang were an old but declining count level house from what Meizhen had said. "What?!"

"Well, why else do you imagine the boy's father would interfere in something so petty?" Xiulan asked, gesturing with one of the little wooden skewers that had been stuck into the squares of sachima. "I can't say who it would be though. There are no children from the Zheng clan among the Sect as far as I

am aware - nor would there be given their thoughts on the sects. Have you been approached by anyone of late?"

"No," Ling Qi replied, trying to think of anyone she had met recently who might have shown such an interest. Nothing came to mind. "Let's leave that aside for the moment."

"As you wish," Xiulan said. "You cannot avoid the subject forever though. Father will order me to introduce you at some point. I can promise that none of my cousins are so crude as that Huang."

"Maybe I should ask Meizhen to fake something up," Ling Qi grumbled. It wasn't really a serious idea, particularly as things were, but it would be nice to keep such ideas far from everyone's mind. "Anyway, what about you? How are things going with Han Jian? What was he up to last week?" In her haste to change the subject, Ling Qi jumped to the first thought that came to mind.

Her friend's expression soured. "He has been quite busy," she said irritably. "Too busy for either myself or Fan Yu. He discovered a trial site. I imagine he is receiving training of some kind from it."

Ling Qi set aside her plate to take a sip of her still warm tea. "I am sure he didn't mean anything by it. It makes sense to take family with you, right?" She didn't really get it, but from watching Han Jian, she knew Han Fang was the only one Han Jian really seemed to properly confide in.

"Of course. I am nothing special to him after all, merely a vassal to be directed and occasionally humored," Xiulan said bitterly.

"... I don't think he feels like that, even if he doesn't... feel quite the same as you," Ling Qi said awkwardly. "I've seen you two together. You are friends, are you not?"

"I do not want to be friends," Xiulan snapped. "I want him. I deserve that much, do I not? I work hard, harder than anyone else, save perhaps my sister, and what do I get for it? Chained to a fool and an oaf."

"Fan Yu isn't..." Ling Qi sighed. She couldn't even finish that defense. She had thought the two of them had been getting along better, but Xiulan's disdain was apparently still strong. "I am sure you can change that. You've been getting stronger quickly as of late, right?"

"And what good will it do me?" The other girl's mood changed as quickly as it ever did as her shoulders slumped. "Jian promised me that I would always be at his side. It was a childish promise, but I believed it. Is it so wrong that I want him to look only to me? I tried so hard to scare away the tittering, empty-headed trash that his family tried to foist on him, and he always thanked me for it."

Ling Qi shrugged uncomfortably. "I... don't really know." What did one say in this kind of situation? Ling Qi had no idea. "I do think you should talk to him though. You shouldn't throw away a friendship so easily."

Xiulan wrapped her arms around her knees. "It was him who threw it away. He said he had never loved me like that. As if he had never looked at me in that light. The liar." She shook her head. "I want no more of it."

Looking down, Ling Qi picked at her food. The mood had gone down fast. "I won't tell you what to do," she finally said. "There are plenty of handsome boys out there, right? You keep telling me so. Sulking doesn't become a lady," she added with false cheer.

Xiulan shot her an unamused look but straightened up. "You are right in that at least. Shall we both drop such conversation then? You have so many delicious dishes here. It would be a shame to leave them to waste."

Ling Qi sighed in relief; Xiulan's mercurial moods had swung in her favor for once. Still, she worried about her friend. In the end though, the girl's problems were not something she could change. They could only be resolved by the people actually involved. All she could do was support Xiulan as she made her choices.

They stayed up late into the night speaking of lighter things and parted ways in the morning. It was time to plan her next week's training.

## **Chapter 95 - Peace 2**

Zhengui had grown, and not just physically.

When she had lain down for her weekly sleep, he had still been big enough to fit in her hands. When she awoke and went to fetch him from his kiln, she had found the entrance cracked open and two, much larger sets of eyes staring up at her. She could still pick him up comfortably, and even hold him in her arms, but he was nearly a half meter long, ignoring his serpentine half.

*'Fix? Sorry.'* His thoughts were growing more ordered, allowing her to more easily translate the meanings into words. She could feel his sheepishness as he pawed at the ground with his stubby claws and the serpent half studiously avoided her eyes.

"I guess it was only a matter of time before I needed to build you a new bed." Ling Qi sighed, shaking her head. He had shot up to the middle of the first realm too, as far as her senses could tell, and he was racing on toward the end of it. It seemed her little spirit was reaching the end of his infancy.

*'Breakfast?'* She glanced back down at him to meet his bright green eyes, hopefulness shining from his blunt, beaked face. *'Hunt?'* She was faced with a second set of eyes, this time of fiery red.

"... Breakfast first." Ling Qi crouched down, slipping her arms under his shell as she picked him up. He was warm to the touch, and his shell had grown rougher, like knobby, petrified tree bark. "C'mon, then. You're going to have to start helping though, you know? You're growing up quick."

'Help Mother. Eat good,' two voices chorused together. Gui nestled against her chest while Zhen peered cautiously over her shoulder, forked tongue trailing ash as it flicked in and out. Ling Qi almost missed a step.

"Big Sister," she said quickly, reaching down to rub his blunt beak with her finger. She did her best to convey feeling as well as words. "I'm not that old yet," she added lightly.

Bright green eyes blinked up at her in confusion. 'Big Sister! Hunt now!' The moment was interrupted by his other head, who looked to her plaintively.

"Yeah, yeah, no need to be impatient," she chided, even as she fished a stick of wood from her pocket to calm Zhengui's rumbling belly. She would have to start cutting these sticks larger with how much he was growing. She would miss being able to have him ride on her shoulder. Maybe Cui could teach Zhengui her size adjustment trick?

For now, it was time to gather a healthy meal for her little glutton of a spirit. Once that was done and he was settled in, she would have to arrange something else for his bedding. Then, she would head up to the vent to begin working on refining the Thousand Ring Fortress. Even in its early stages, it had proved very useful in bolstering her friends and allies, letting the group break through the enemy line with minimal injury.

She still had a long way to go before that art could be considered mastered. She remembered Li Suyin tumbling to the ground in a heap, and blood blossoming on Meizhen's white gown. Next time, she would do better.

Ling Qi descended the mountain to hunt and forage, keeping the cores and various fruits and plants that he seemed to enjoy and selling the rest for various spiritually infused woods and even more cores.

Once she had a large stockpile built, the main challenge was keeping the hungry little snake-tortoise out of it and resisting the twinned powers of wide and plaintive eyes combined with increasingly articulate childish pleas for treats. She held firm though. She would only give him so much each day. If he wanted more, he had to do some foraging himself.

... Well, she mostly held firm. A few treats while he sat in her lap chirping happily couldn't hurt, right? The day blurred by, and she did not get very much cultivation done until late evening when it was time to meet Meizhen for some further training time.

Ling Qi hadn't seen the girl since the day of Sun Liling's return, and their conversation that evening had been quick and utilitarian. She was happy to see her friend looking as hale and graceful as ever as she flowed through the motions of what Ling Qi recognized as one of her family's unarmed combat exercises.

"Meizhen, good evening," she greeted as she stepped off the porch and onto the garden path. Zhengui trundled along at her side, his blunt clawed feet scrabbling a bit at the polished wood. "I'm glad to see you're doing well. Have you been keeping busy with shoring things up around here?" Ling Qi was a little unsure as to how deeply involved Meizhen was with the Cai heiress at this point.

Meizhen turned to face her as she approached, lowering her hands from their combative position. "Good evening," she greeted, acknowledging Ling Qi with a slight nod. "I have been refining certain underdeveloped portions of my repertoire. Cui has needed some aid in acclimating to her new status as well," the pale girl continued evenly, her golden eyes flicking over to the garden pond.

The pond rippled, and after a moment, emerald green scales broke the surface and Ling Qi found herself under the regard of another set of golden eyes. Cui had grown as well. The serpent was as thick as a young tree now and looked as if she could swallow a large dog whole.

'Such trouble, Sister Meizhen. No more training today, yes?' Ling Qi's eyes caught motion out of the corner of her eye, and on the other side of the garden, she saw Cui's tail slip under the surface of the area's second and entirely unconnected pond. That was a... powerful ability.

"Everyone is growing so fast these days," Ling Qi mused. "That reminds me though. Is that shrinking trick of yours something any spirit can do? Zhengui had a little growth spurt himself." Ling Qi wondered when talking to a snake big enough to fit her head in its mouth had become normal.

Cui flicked her tongue twice silently, and briefly, Ling Qi wondered if the serpent would ignore her. Then Meizhen tilted her head slightly, giving her cousin a pointed look and the snake let out a soft hiss.

'The little thief is too young. He will not have the focus,' Cui responded haughtily, giving Zhengui a look of reptilian disdain. He responded by hiding behind her legs, but Ling Qi saw his serpentine half peeking out, giving off a feeling of awe as he stared up at the bigger snake.

"It is not impossible, no," Bai Meizhen said frankly. "Many spirit beasts are able to vary their size somewhat, although there is a limit." A slight smile touched her lips as she glanced at Cui. "She will no longer be able to play choker, for example."

'It is not fair,' Cui sulked, even as she shrank and slithered from the pool, vibrant scales glimmering with moisture. By the time she stopped shrinking, Cui was still over two meters long. 'Sister Meizhen is cruel,' she grumbled.

"Well, that is good to know," she decided. "How are things outside though? I've been down in the forest today."

"They are holding," Meizhen replied simply, and it was a relief to see her speaking normally and without hesitation, meeting Ling Qi's eyes with only a slight pause as she folded her arms. "That barbarian is licking her wounds, and if I know her kind, she is likely rearming and training her subordinates. Several older disciples from the western territories have openly joined her, as has Ji Rong."

Ling Qi frowned. That was trouble in the making there. She doubted that Sun Liling would be satisfied with merely having her own faction, even if its existence in and of itself was a snub to Cai Renxiang as she understood things. "Are we doing anything about that?" she asked, toying with the end of her braid.

"We are regrouping ourselves," Bai Meizhen answered, shifting her stance slightly to a more combative one as her flying sword manifested in a flash above her shoulder. "For now, we push our own strength. I should like to begin, if it is all the same to you. We do not have the luxury of dawdling."

"I can get behind that," Ling Qi agreed, slipping into her own stance. "I need to get faster myself." She glanced down at Zhengui, who looked up at her with worry emanating from his thoughts. "It's okay, Zhengui. My friend and I are just going to play a little, alright? Why don't you go get a treat from the wood shed?"

He looked to Meizhen uncertainly but backed away, toddling off toward the flowerbed Cui had disappeared into.

"You do not need to speak aloud to communicate with him," Meizhen said as she examined Ling Qi's stance.

"I know, but I'm not very good at trying to project thoughts yet. Speaking is easier. I'm working on it," Ling Qi said. After a moment's thought, she summoned up the practice weapon she had been working with, the heavy glaive materializing in her hands from within her storage ring. "Do you mind if I work with this? I want to try out Sable Crescent Step with a different motion set."

"Do not blame me for the blows you suffer in doing so," Meizhen allowed. "And do not forget to practice. Instant communication with one's partner is invaluable in battle."

Ling Qi nodded, and they began to circle one another. Then, Bai Meizhen blurred, a fine spray of mist kicked up in her wake, and Ling Qi's limbs dissolved into shadow as she strained to match the other girl's speed.

It was nice, aside from the stinging pain of the minor toxin Meizhen used for the spar. Sparring and cultivating together was something they could still do without awkwardness, and Ling Qi was glad for it.

All good things come to an end though, and they parted ways well after midnight to get back to their own tasks. Zhengui had fallen asleep in his adjusted kiln while they sparred, so Ling Qi ghosted away without any trouble, returning to the higher cliffs she had taken to using for absorbing starlight. She needed to meditate further to decipher the cloud of images, sounds, and memory that had flashed through her thoughts when she was considering the tasks from various phases of the moon.

The odd post-combat vision and her actions in the immediate aftermath made her a little wary, but she was more aware now of the foibles of the lunar qi she used. She wouldn't let herself grow so erratic again.

It did not take long to return to that place within her thoughts, the dark pool that reflected the phases of the moon. This time, when she reached for the reflection of the Grinning Moon, she kept her focus, and the torrent of sensation did not overwhelm her.

Soft, amused laughter rang in her ears as her surroundings spun away in a whirl of silvery luminescence, and for a moment, she felt the sensation of cool, delicate hands upon her shoulders as visions flashed in front of her eyes, imparting the quest of the Grinning Moon. The jade slip and the book, a thick tome with a dark red cover and no title, were a piece of power and a piece of knowledge, the first for her, and the second to share.

The figure in the mist grew clearer, revealing a tall, whip-thin boy with dark catlike green eyes that glowed faintly and who cast a hunched, misshapen shadow. She did not recognize him, but her memory spun, and the words spoken by the boy she had threatened rose to the surface. Yan Renshu. Her target was the older Outer Sect disciple, the one who Cai had said was the maker of that puppet that attempted to frame her.

The visions of ghostlike green lanterns and an underground room came next. The location perhaps? It remained unclear.

What did not remain unclear was her objective. She was to steal a technique slip and acquire the book from him, or at least the knowledge inside of it. She was to... reveal something from the book, which would cost him much face. What exactly would be revealed, however, remained shrouded in her mind's eye.

It seemed that was all she was going to get. The visions faded, replaced by the twinkling of stars overhead. Ling Qi remained seated for a time, considering the scant details of the task she had been given. It was barely an outline of a task; she had the absolute essentials, but nothing else.

She could feel something had subtly changed in the practiced flows of her internal energies. As she slipped down from the high cliff, blending in with the shadows, she felt a tiny trickle of qi continuing to flow into her dantian, only to cease as she stepped out into the street outside of her house. Slipping back into the shadows on a whim, she followed another girl unseen for a time and with each soft and unheard step, her qi cycled, just a little more.

It seemed the Grinning Moon had given her a taste of her blessing already.

## **Chapter 96 - Peace 3**

As the sky began to take on the colors of dawn, Ling Qi slipped away, heading further up the mountain. Li Suyin and Su Ling had been very busy lately, but the two girls had not yet broken away from mortal habits and sleep schedules. If she stopped by this early, she should be able to catch them for a chat before they departed for the day.

She was right of course, which lead to a sleepily blinking Li Suyin staring at her owlishly from the entrance to their cavern home when she came knocking. Shortly after, she was seated inside at a makeshift table laid out in one of the interior chambers, sipping from a warm cup of tea.

Li Suyin sat across from her, fretting over the teapot. She was still dressed in her rumpled white bedclothes. Su Ling, on the other hand, was dressed normally, save that her boots were off in the corner of the room.

"So gonna guess there isn't any immediate trouble since we're sitting here drinking tea," Su Ling said dryly. "Want to fill us in on why you felt like stopping by at the crack of dawn?"

"Well, it's been a little while since I've been able to talk to either of you." Ling Qi pointed out, cup half raised to her lips. "I wasn't sure of your schedules, and I wanted to thank you again for helping me the other day."

"It was nothing," the rougher of the pair grunted, looking away.

"You are welcome, Ling Qi," Li Suyin said a bit more graciously, even as she covered her mouth to stifle a yawn, crinkling the soft grey patch that covered a third of her face. "I am glad I could help you out for once."

"You really did," Ling Qi agreed. "Where did you get that spider ball thing anyway? Are those for sale somewhere?"

Her friend's cheeks flushed a bit, and she looked pleased. "Um... They aren't for sale unfortunately. It was something I had been helping Senior Sister Bao with. When Su Ling came to get me, she said that I may as well take it for testing."

"That workshop is a damn creepshow," Su Ling muttered, hunching her shoulders and shivering.

Ling Qi glanced at her with raised eyebrows. She hadn't thought Su Ling squeamish. "Did Bao teach you that movement art too?" Ling Qi asked curiously.

Li Suyin shifted uncomfortably under Ling Qi's scrutiny. "Well, yes. She said that the one I was using before was t-trash," she said, looking slightly ashamed. "And that I would need to master something better to be her assistant. Parts of her workshop are very vertical," she hurriedly explained.

Su Ling just huffed under her breath and took a long drink from her cup. "She's kind of a bi..." the fox girl began, only to fall silent at Li Suyin's look. "Don't think I didn't notice the way you came back in tears at first."

Ling Qi frowned, but Li Suyin spoke up before she could. "And I remember telling you it was fine, Su Ling," she said warningly before looking back to Ling Qi. "Senior Sister Bao is very harsh, but no more than she needs to be. Please do not trouble yourself over this."

Ling Qi toyed with the end of her braid but nodded. It was Suyin's business. "That's fine. Just remember me if you need help, alright? I wanted to talk to you two about something else anyway," she said, changing the subject.

Li Suyin seemed relieved, and Ling Qi had a feeling the two of them had argued over this before. Su Ling just had her normal disgruntled expression as she waved Ling Qi on. "I want you two to come back to the residential area," Ling Qi stated firmly, after a beat of silence. "With Sun Liling running around again, on top of everything else, it isn't safe out here."

"And it's is safe in there?" Su Ling incredulously, scowling as she sat up straighter. "We're doing just fine."

"It is safe. Safer than it is out here," Ling Qi replied, meeting her gaze and refusing to back down. "Like it or not... people associate you with me, you know? The residences are under Lady Cai's control. No one still living there would try anything."

"You're getting a pretty big head," Su Ling retorted. "I'd say that mess recently shows that plenty of people will pick a fight with her."

"They will," Ling Qi admitted, her tea cup coming down on the table with a clunk. "So what do you think will happen if they find you two isolated out here?"

"We can handle it," Su Ling snapped, her lips curling to reveal sharpened teeth. "We don't need-"

"I think it might be for the best," Li Suyin interjected said quietly, fiddling absentmindedly with the hems of her sleeves. "I've had the same thought. I didn't want to bring it up. But we can't go back to a little hovel like we had. Both of us need space for our projects now."

"There are plenty of empty houses now," Ling Qi pointed out. "I can find you two something. It's just - I don't want the two of you to get hurt because of me, and I think I picked up some enemies recently, you know?"

Su Ling still looked unhappy, but after sharing a lingering look with Li Suyin, she gave a grunt of acknowledgment. "... I'll think about it."

Ling Qi gave a sigh of relief at that; it was less difficult than she had feared. She stayed to chat with her friends a bit longer, discussing their schedules and other minor things. She got their agreement to come looking through empty houses the next day, as well as aligning their schedules to allow them to train together at the vent again as they once had, although the sessions would have to take place in the afternoon now rather than the morning.

She left alongside them as they went to take care of their own tasks and headed to the market to restock on healing supplies. It would eat up her council income for the week, but she was doing well enough on rewards not to worry too much about it.

Ling Qi wasn't able to turn her attention fully to cultivation just yet; she still had one more obligation to take care of. Namely, she had a pending meeting with Cai Renxiang, who had sent a messenger indicating that she had something to speak with her about. Ling Qi was a little wary of the meeting, given her feelings toward the girl's government.

It certainly had nothing to do with Meizhen's apparent closeness with the other girl and the incredibly convenient timing of that development. That wasn't her business, even if it pained her to think that. Between Han Jian and Meizhen, it seemed as though many of her friends were growing away from her these days.

Ling Qi quashed the ugly feeling that thought gave rise to as she headed down to the entrance plaza to meet the heiress. They were going to walk and talk, apparently. When she arrived, she found Cai waiting by the great archway that marked the start of the road, empty-handed but impeccable as ever. There was no sign of the damage she had taken in the battles a few days prior.

Gan Guangli stood at her side, clad in the same armor he had worn the last time she had seen him, although his helmet had been left off. The muscular boy gave her an acknowledging nod as she approached, and Ling Qi bowed her head in turn, clasping her hands in front of her respectfully as she did so.

"Lady Cai, thank you for your invitation," she said formally. "Might I ask the purpose of this meeting?" Cai Renxiang regarded her thoughtfully before gesturing for her to raise her head.

"Thank you for attending me on such short notice. I will explain the situation on the way. Walk with me." The tone carried the ring of command, but Ling Qi found her demeanor slightly less aloof than their last private meeting.

As she fell in a step or two behind the girl, even with the trailing Guangli, she wondered if that was genuine, or something meant to set her at ease. The girl was hard to read. "Of course, Lady Cai," she said respectfully. "Will we be going to town?"

She was surprised to see the heiress gesture for her to step up and fall in beside her, but she supposed it made a degree of sense if they were to continue talking. "That is my destination. I have certain matters to attend to. Using the travel time for our meeting was merely efficient."

Ling Qi glanced at the girl's stoic features measuringly. That didn't seem right. If Cai was worried about time, they wouldn't be moving at this sedate pace; the girl could probably reach the town in a minute or two, less if she decided to fly. A thought struck her then as she glanced around, noting the other disciples on the path. "And if it shows you to be unconcerned and unharmed, all the better, right?"

"Quite," the other girl responded succinctly. "I am sure you are aware of the power that lies behind reputation."

Ling Qi nodded easily enough. She liked to think that her actual strength was what had forced the change in her peers' behavior, but she was aware that it was not all of it. "It is not everything, but I understand," she agreed. "How long do you think we have before things come to a head again?"

Cai Renxiang was silent for a time as the two of them strode down the mountain path, Gan Guangli's heavy footfalls pounding the ground behind them. "That is the matter that I wished to speak with you about. I have been remiss in some of my duties," she admitted, inclining her head very slightly. "Despite bringing on Fu Xiang, I have underestimated the power of intelligence and focused too much on the obvious."

"Nay! Lady Cai, the fault remains mine," Gan Guangli said, sounding pained. "As your shield, it is my duty to guard you against such cowards!"

Cai Renxiang glanced back at him and gave a thoughtful hum. She was definitely behaving more casually; it was strange. "You are a fine shield, Gan Guangli, but no bulwark is without its weaknesses," she said simply, her gaze returning to Ling Qi as they began to stroll down the first of many switchbacks. Ling Qi felt a pang of sympathy as she saw the tall boy lower his head and clench his fists.

"Fu Xiang is a skilled set of ears and eyes, but some things are beyond his notice," Cai Renxiang's expression clouded, her tone briefly voicing her displeasure. "For one reason or another." She paused for a moment, considering. "I would like you to aid me in ensuring that our enemies cannot collaborate beyond our sight again."

That was along the lines of what Ling Qi expected when she came here. She mulled it over, taking her turn to walk in silence. "I'm not necessarily against the idea," Ling Qi replied eventually. "But I would like to know more about what you intend for me to do."

Cai Renxiang folded her arms across her chest, her hands vanishing into the confines of her wide sleeves. Her gaze remained straight ahead. "I would have you gather intelligence on the movements and composition of Sun Liling's forces, as well as those of Outer Disciple Yan Renshu," she said evenly.

"I'm guessing they're operating in some kind of blindspot for Fu Xiang's arts?" Ling Qi asked rhetorically, receiving a confirming nod in turn. "So you need me to do more hands-on scouting," she thought aloud. It wasn't a bad idea; she had to poke around in Yan Renshu's business anyway due to her patron's quest, and she hadn't forgotten the disciple's attempt to frame her either.

"I suspect that they remain in collusion, given the similarity in their camouflage," Cai Renxiang explained, light flickering in the air behind her shoulders. "Clairvoyance and divination have failed, and so more mundane means need be utilized. Will you perform this task?"

"It's not an easy thing," Ling Qi cautioned. "I won't have results immediately, especially if I am starting with nothing."

"That is acceptable," Cai Renxiang acknowledged. "We have time, I believe. I struck Yan Renshu a blow, despite the fact that he was not truly present. Sun Liling was similarly damaged. They will be licking their wounds for a time and regrouping."

"I will do what I can," Ling Qi agreed. It was dangerous, but ultimately, keeping an eye on her enemies was just good sense. There was no point in refusing what she was likely to do on her own anyway. It just meant also investigating Meizhen's enemy as well, which was fine with her.

# **Bonus Chapter - Humiliation**

This was unacceptable, thought Kang Zihao for the thousandth time. He paced restlessly through the sitting room, his handsome features set in a scowl, and his arms behind his back. All of this was unacceptable. Confining him to his house like this, as if he were some wastrel or miscreant who had shamed his family in public. How could Lady Cai countenance such overreach among her servants?

Stopping in front of his window, he rubbed his jaw irritably, remembering the phantom pain from the blow that had knocked him out. That brutish commoner Gan, taking advantage of his distraction in fighting off phantasms and echoes. He would have recompense for that insult. Kang Zihao clenched his fists at his side as he looked at the street outside of his window. Nothing had gone as he had planned since the end of the truce. The Sect should have been his opportunity to shine, to bring the light of the capital in this backwater of a province.

It had all started with his plan to subjugate that serpent. He knew he had not been the only scion of the Imperial City given quiet instruction to make the lives of the Bai youths scattered among the Sects unpleasant, to make them understand, that for all their pride, they were beneath the Celestial Peaks. Some of his earliest followers in this place had arisen from such. With the heir of the Cai, a new ducal family deeply in debt to the Imperial Throne, and known modernizers and centralists at hand, he had assumed that things would proceed smoothly.

Yet Lady Cai had interrupted him then, ruined his plan. It should have been his warning that something was amiss. Instead, he had assumed it was an error on his part. He *had* lost his temper somewhat, striking at the Bai's pet commoner like that had been a tiny bit unseemly. Lady Cai was simply the type to take certain proscriptions on noble behavior too far, misunderstanding their real purpose. That was fine, a little difficult to work around, but perfectly reasonable.

But then, there was the Council she had started. The idea was not a bad one in theory, it would be good to establish a system by which they could take the authority that was theirs by right of strength. However, the ones she had invited were... He glanced down at the windowsill, where characters burned with sea green qi, a dense array that he knew extended around the perimeter of his home, making the only exit the front door, where he knew the Xuan boy slouched with his nose in a book.

He turned away from the window, pacing back across the room, his lips twisting in a sneer. The Xuan, more spirit blooded mongrels, without even the claim that they had been among the first to join the Sage Emperor to grant them legitimacy. They crouched on their little wet rocks in the sea, barely deserving to be called a province. At least the remnants of the Golden Fields had some historical claim to glory. It was worse still that Lady Cai had invited the Bai as well. Did she truly not understand that the key to imperial unity, the dream of the throne since time immemorial, lay in breaking the pride and autonomy of those clans...?

So his objections had not been terribly strenuous when Princess Sun had approached him. She was more than a bit rough around the edges, though he suspected it was at least partially an act, to fit her new provinces martial reputation. However, mannerisms aside, she did understand what was at stake,

who the true enemy was. King Sun understood the Thrones position well, and had received many honors for his part in advancing it.

Kang Zihao let out a frustrated growl and turned on his heel, stalking toward the small kitchen. And now with their challenge failed the council was overreaching itself more and more, trampling on the rules and the purpose of the Outer Sect as a proving ground. Pushing violence away from the residential areas was one thing, but the growing list of rules they had begun to enforce was growing absurd. Then there was what had been done to him! He was a superb duelist, more than a match for any of those cowards who had attacked him, rabble that they were, the Han rat aside. Yet it meant nothing when there were so many of them and he had not yet secured more followers, even his spirit beast had been away, remaining with the wolf pack he had been seeking to recruit among to give incentive for new second realms to follow him.

Taking a cup down from the shelf, Kang Zihao paused as he felt a faint tremor through the floor. He looked around, frowning as he felt a second. There was a faint rumble, and window pane rattled. He knew that the formations around his home dulled sound, so as to prevent him from passing or receiving messages easily, so what in the world was making all that racket? The doorframe rattled, and he turned fully to face it, instinctively drawing upon the steel and stone that ran through his spine to bolster his flesh.

Despite the sound dampening, he heard a shout then. Then the door detonated violently. Kang Zihao did not flinch as sharpened wooden shrapnel clattered against his clothes and skin, skittering off qi enhanced flesh.

"I was going to pick the lock," an irritable voice sounded through the smoking, sparking doorway, and it took Kang Zihao only a moment to place it. Lu Feng, Sun Liling's second.

"Or I could just break it and save us yer fiddling," came a second voice, sounding mildly out of breath. No, it couldn't be. The Princess had only broken him out as a tool, a weapon, drugged up with some foul elixir rendered from the red jungle.

"You're lucky to still have what is left of your face, you hooligan," Lu Feng grumbled. "Did you even look at the formations array on the door?"

"Nope," the thug Ji Rong said from the ruins of his doorway, smoke still rising from his crackling fists. "Hey, pretty boy, you just gonna stand there? We don't have all day here!"

"What is..." he began.

"We really do not have time Sir Kang," Lu Feng interrupted him. The boy's refined features were twisted with strain. "The Princess is back, she thought it'd be polite to free you."

"Dunno why, all he did was stand there and get wrecked by the snake chick," Ji Rong snorted. "Those two he brought with him were fuckin useless too. 'Least I fought turtle boy to draw."

"You dare," Kang Zihao said, still off balance from the surreality of the situation, but the thug had the temerity to *turn his back*. It was only his long meditation on the element of metal in his confinement that allowed Kang Zihao to not attack him then and there. "I will not be spoken to like that," he spat.

"Then stay in your cage," the scarred boy called back over his shoulder, already jogging away. "C'mon Lu Feng, gotta get outta here before that guy busts outta your vines and the rest of the goons get back."

Lu Feng shot him an apologetic look. "...Crude as he is, he has a point. You can duel him later if you like Sir Kang." Then he was gone too.

Kang Zihao hesitated only a moment, spitting out a curse. Why had everything gone so wrong?

#### Chapter 97 - Peace 4

Breathing out, Ling Qi focused her attention on the verdant green qi which encased her body like a layer of bark. The vibrant energies seemed to hum under her control, ready to burst out, to bloom and grow. However, Ling Qi maintained her concentration, and the wavering shell of green slowly grew thicker and darker, gaining depth and texture. At her feet, Zhengui chirped in delight, toddling around as streamers of vital qi spread across his shell as well.

To advance her understanding of the Thousand Ring Fortress Art, she needed to master its next technique, the Hundred Ring Armament, which meant improving her control of the Ten Ring Defense technique. The Hundred Ring Armament was a physical technique which would infuse her flesh with vitality and resilience rather than simply calling up a barrier as Ten Ring Defense did. Naturally, she wanted to perfect her control of the wood qi before she attempted something like that.

She could not afford to just sit here all day and meditate though. So, with the sun peeking over the horizon, Ling Qi dismissed the technique, letting the verdant armor fade away into motes of light. She had a job to do, not just to satisfy Cai Renxiang, but for herself. This Yan Renshu was going to learn why attempting to frame her was a poor idea. Ling Qi reached down and scooped up Zhengui as she stood. It was time to gather some information.

The first step was to remain subtle. If it became known she was poking around after Yan Renshu, it would be easier to avoid her, so Ling Qi took the time to disguise herself and keep her movements and questions discreet. She had grown rusty at such things over the past few months, but she still had the skill.

Yan Renshu was a young man three years her elder from a prosperous mortal family in the Heavenly Peaks province, the seat of the capital. However, following his first year when he had an unfortunate encounter with a disciple from a powerful family, he became a secretive sort, rarely appearing in public and instead, acting through intermediaries and sticking to his boltholes. Despite that, in the last year and a half, he had built a respectable following. Although not well liked by most of his peers, the older Outer Sect disciples regarded him as useful, and those in his employ were quite loyal by all accounts. His talents apparently lay in formations and earth and wood arts.

A few of his lairs were known, but the locations Cai gave her proved empty. All that remained were the chambers themselves, dug into the earth of the mountain with some art or another. Every known lair was trapped heavily, despite being stripped bare. Once, she nearly ended up buried under a collapsing roof, saved only by her movement art.

She moved more carefully after that.

Unfortunately, actually searching for leads on his other lairs proved difficult. Those openly associated with Yan Renshu or with Sun Liling had vanished into the wilderness in the aftermath of the recent chaos, and her own skill at tracking proved insufficient to dig them out of whatever hole they have chosen to hide in. There were rumors of Sun Liling being sighted lurking around at the base of the south side of the mountain, but beyond a single mutilated and exsanguinated spirit beast, she found no further signs of the girl or her minions.

As days passed without gaining any solid lead, Ling Qi decided to back off for the moment. She could not afford to stop getting stronger, and she would probably need to get further help for this task. Perhaps Su Ling would be willing? Even without her new art, Su Ling was a far better tracker than her, and Ling Qi had at least narrowed down the potential locations with her initial searches.

With the recent improvement of her music under Ruan Shen's instruction, Ling Qi thought she had a lead on an opportunity. Every child in the Empire knew stories of men and women learning great and powerful secrets at the foot of mighty spirits, and had she not received just such an offer during the Moonfill mission? It would be dangerous, but from what she had gathered, the icy spirit of the peak that she had encountered was a very powerful fourth grade spirit.

If this failed, she still had the trial Fu Xiang had revealed to her to fall back on. However, after playing detective for most of the week, she felt more inclined to take the option that meant getting away to play some music. So, at dawn, she began to climb past the temperate lower reaches of the mountain and up the snowy peak. There was no driving storm today, just the frigid chill of high altitude.

It occurred to Ling Qi that she did not actually know where to find the ice spirit, but she had a plan for that. Finding the stretch of mountain she had explored before was not difficult, and from there, she simply climbed, higher and higher, seeking the coldest cliffs with the best acoustics.

It was a bit of a gamble, but she felt it was her best bet for attracting the spirit's attention. Once she found a good, high cliff face from which sound carried well, she cleared the surface of a boulder of snow and sat down to play.

The first haunting notes of Forgotten Vale Melody rang out, the notes heavy with the weight of her qi as she let her mist flow from the flute sluggishly, spilling down from her flute into her lap and splashing across the snowy ground at her feet before slowly rising to consume everything around her. Ling Qi closed her eyes as she played, slipping into a more meditative state.

Images of the lonely vale deep in the mountains flowed through her thoughts, a panorama of stark beauty and loneliness. She wasn't sure exactly how long she played, although it was long enough for her to go through every measure of the melody several times, but eventually, something changed. It was a chill breeze at first, then a gust carrying snowflakes with it.

Ling Qi opened her eyes as she felt frigid qi at the edge of her senses, and the wind picked up further, stirring her mist and spilling it over the edge of the cliff. Her song was interrupted when darkness erupted from the stone beside her, billowing upward and expanding. Instinct took over, and a knife flew into her hands as Ling Qi dove to the side and whipped the blade at the apparition. It passed through pale and perfect features without a mark and clattered against the rock.

Hanyi's mother watched her with a raised eyebrow from where she now sat upon the rock beside her, her loose, empty sleeves resting on her lap. Ling Qi swore she saw a twinkle of amusement in those empty white eyes. Ling Qi narrowed her eyes at the powerful ice spirit. She knew that expression. It seemed Hanyi's personality had not emerged from nowhere.

"Please do not startle me like that," she said as she straightened up, dusting the snow from her mantle.

"I was expected, and this is my home," the spirit rebuked, showing no further sign of any amusement. "You are, if anything, the one in the wrong, Disciple."

"My apologies, spirit of the mountain," Ling Qi said immediately, not wishing to provoke the powerful spirit. "You recall me then? I am Ling Qi, and I have come in the hopes that I might learn from you."

"I recall," the spirit replied, tilting her head slightly to the side as the hem of her gown billowed in the breeze, revealing the emptiness beneath. "You have improved," she allowed, turning her head to observe the slowly dissipating mist. "You are fortunate that I found myself lacking burdens upon my time this night."

"Fortune is another talent," Ling Qi said lightly, bowing respectfully. "Might I know what I may call you, honored spirit?"

The ice spirit considered her, shimmering silver hair fluttering in the phantom breeze that surrounded her. "You may call me Zeqing. It is as good a name as any," she mused, eyes tracking upward to the bright full moon in the clear and starry sky.

Silence reigned between them before Ling Qi pushed on. "Lady Zeqing," she began with uncertainty. "May I have your instruction?"

"You may," the spirit replied, crimson lips quirking upward. "Sit," she said, gesturing to the stone beside her where Ling Qi had previously been seated.

Ling Qi eyed the spirit warily, but ultimately, there was no reason to hesitate. She bowed her head again and sat down as instructed. Her elbow brushed against the spirit's dark gown and burned from the cold, even through layers of cloth.

"I have made some alterations to the melody since we last met," Ling Qi ventured. "Were they pleasing to the ear?"

"Your new melody still holds to the beauty of the original," the spirit answered in a voice that echoed like a cold wind. "I suspect you hold one of that man's earlier attempts. That you came upon a number of the later improvements yourself speaks of your skill."

"You knew the melody's writer then?" Ling Qi asked curiously.

"Thrice I came for him, and thrice I was rebuffed," Zeqing explained. "I was quite cross at the time," she continued with quiet amusement. "Still, I watched some portion of the journey that produced that melody in the days before greed brought the fury of the Windriders upon this place."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows in thought. The Cloud tribes had invaded the province half a millennium ago. "Will you help me improve the melody then?"

"I may. It is a pleasant enough way to pass an evening since that daughter of mine is with her father for the night," the spirit said. As the wind picked up, there was a crackling sound, and Zeqing's sleeves billowed, revealing perfectly formed hands of pure and clear ice where once there had been nothing. The hands held a flute of similar make. "Play with me for a time. If you keep up well enough, I shall help."

It was relaxing, and more than that, fun to try and keep up with the near impossibly precise melody Zeqing played. It was a beautiful song, but it took all of Ling Qi's acquired skill to keep up and not fumble any of the notes as she echoed the ice spirit. She continued to play even as her arm and side began to grow cold and numb with proximity to the frozen beauty until she flushed the feeling with a rush of qi.

They played one song and then another together as the night rolled past until at last, Zeqing was satisfied. The spirit rose from the stone and gestured for her to follow as the last notes faded, and Ling Qi did so, relieved that she had passed the difficult test. Hanyi's mother lead her higher on the mountain through deep and winding ravines until they came upon a dead end shadowed by a high cliff overhead. It was cold here, far colder than outside, and not a single patch of stone was not covered in a layer of slick ice.

At the far rear end of the ravine lay a frozen black pool, mirror smooth and umarred. Powerful Qi radiated from it, and looking down, Ling Qi felt that she might stare into its depths forever if she were not careful. A haunting son seemed to rise from its limitless depths, and only by steeling her will could she pull her eyes away.

It was here that they began to work on her melody. Ling Qi demonstrated her first halting efforts at the next measure she sought to master while Zeqing offered correction. But the later measures of the melody were complex, and even with the potent qi of the pool bolstering her efforts and the spirit's instruction, she was far from mastery.

Yet she felt the time spent worth it. Zeqing's instruction differed from the slip in places, but Ling Qi could instinctively tell that the insights offered were improvements, corrections of the rough edges she was just beginning to perceive within the art. She knew that if she continued to take lessons from the spirit, she would receive greater results than if she continued to practice the melody on their own.

In the end though, the spirit's time was limited, as was hers. They parted ways amicably enough, and Zeqing warned that she would only be available to work with her every other week. Still, it was a boon, and Ling Qi was thankful.

## **Chapter 98 - Dark Dreams 1**

With the spirit's departure, Ling Qi now had more time than she had thought she would. It seemed that she also would be seeking out the trial this week, instead of as a backup alternative. She would need a partner though as it was a two person trial, and she knew just who to ask.

How to approach Gu Xiulan... Han Jian and his cousin were back, and they had once again taken to working with her friend and the girl's fiance. Ling Qi was hardly politically savvy, but she had a feeling that inviting Xiulan along to her trial when Han Jian hadn't invited the girl to his might be a turning point of sorts.

Ling Qi did not consider herself knowledgeable about politics. From Meizhen and time spent browsing histories in the archive, she had managed to pick up a sort of fuzzy outline of how things stood. She knew the names of the most important families and some various general information about the Empire's provinces.

She was not sure how to engage with the system in place, however. There weren't really any books on the subject, beyond etiquette texts and other such related things. She strongly suspected that it was the kind of thing one was just expected to pick up, like the pecking order among the street folk in Tonghou.

So after her initial resolve to ask Xiulan to accompany her on the trial Fu Xiang had revealed to her, she began to worry. She knew Xiulan was drifting further away from Han Jian, and she knew things in their group were getting strained. It seemed like a strange thing to worry about, but she had been spending a lot of time with Xiulan lately and it might appear to others or even Han Jian that she was trying to pull her away.

It seemed absurd, but so did a lot of things about the weird relationships among the various nobles here. She mostly avoided it herself, for one reason or another, but it seemed like something she should at least mention to Han Jian to make sure she wasn't sending any unintended signals, particularly when she was only half aware of which signals were bad in the first place!

In her effort to meet up with Han Jian, she found herself at the pavilion where the council meetings took place. Han Jian had returned from wherever he had been off to, and according to what she could gather, he was coordinating with some lesser members of Cai's faction on some kind of training effort. She made sure to arrive around the time that he would be finishing up.

Han Jian had changed, she noted idly as she waited at the exit to the pavilion area. He seemed more confident and more decisive in demeanor as he instructed the enforcers. He was wearing the Cai robe that she had previously seen him wear, this time with a white cape pinned over his shoulders. She wondered if he had practiced to get it to flutter like that.

Her eyes drifted to Han Fang as the two of them approached the exit. The larger boy was a step behind his cousin as always and had changed to a more martial set of gear, similar to Han Jian but of lesser quality and lacking the cape. The weapon on his back, a massive mace with the spherical, ridge-lined business end the size of her head, was new as well.

"Ling Qi," Han Jian said, raising his hand in greeting as he approached. "Sorry I haven't had a chance to talk with you since we got back." His qi had grown more vibrant as he had broken through to Late Yellow since she had seen him last.

"It's fine. You've been busy. It happens," she said with a shrug. "If you're done for now, do you think we could talk for a bit?"

Han Jian cast a glance over his shoulder at the other disciples slowly scattering to the other exits then nodded.

"That's fine. Before anything else though, I would like to thank you," he said, bowing his head, lower than was strictly proper. "You helped my friends out of some real trouble. I owe you one."

Ling Qi blinked then scratched her cheek sheepishly. "They're my friends too," she said uncomfortably. "Well, Gu Xiulan is."

"I know," he said, smiling. "I'm glad she has someone else to look out for her. Figures I would pick just the right time to disappear, huh?"

"That's not your fault," Ling Qi reassured him hurriedly. She felt a little silly about letting him know about her intended plan to ask Xiulan now. "I just wanted to let you know that I was planning to ask Xiulan to accompany me for a trial tomorrow. Figured you would want to plan around it."

"Oh, thanks for the warning," Han Jian said slowly, giving her a concerned look. "There's something else you're worried about though," he pointed out shrewdly.

Ling Qi glanced at Han Fang, who was facing away from them, arms crossed. There was a faint buzzing in her senses and an odd stillness in the air. What he was doing dawned on her a moment later when he met her gaze and nodded. Han Fang was ensuring that they wouldn't be overheard.

"... I'm worried that I'm going to mess up," Ling Qi replied after a moment's thought. "I know Xiulan isn't happy with you right now, and I don't know if I'm making you look bad by going out with her all the time, especially with a big prize like this."

Han Jian frowned, cupping his chin in his hand. "I suppose I can see the reasoning there. It's been… a little difficult between us lately," he admitted. "I'm trying to give her some space and time to cool down, but I may have overdone it."

"Maybe a bit," Ling Qi said dryly. "I don't really have any right to say anything though," she added awkwardly. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"No. I'm not going to try and get in the way of my friend's good fortune, even if she'd like to light my hair on fire at the moment. I'm not going to be that kind of lord," Han Jian said firmly. "As far as I'm concerned, it's not a matter for me to decide. I don't have any business getting into my vassals' personal affairs if it's not affecting their duties."

Ling Qi nodded, relieved. "Alright. I guess it was a little silly to think otherwise, but the more I learn about things..."

"The easier it is to get paranoid about every step," Han Jian finished ruefully. "I get it. Honestly, there probably will be a few people starting nasty rumors, but you can't really avoid that, no matter what you do."

They parted ways soon after that with Han Jian assuring her that he would resume their normal activities soon. That done, Ling Qi headed off to find Xiulan, who she found was on her way back up the mountain. If she had to guess, she would say that Xiulan had gone to the volcanic vent where she had trained with her sister some time ago.

Ling Qi didn't bother hiding her own energy as she approached the bonfire of qi that Xiulan represented in her senses. She ghosted openly through the canopy of the trees, using the travel as a light agility exercise as she hopped from branch to branch. It became obvious that Xiulan had noticed her as well as the other girl picked up speed to meet her.

Ling Qi dropped down onto the narrow dirt trail that constituted a path on this part of the mountain next to one of the stubby waystones marking distance. Gu Xiulan soon came up the path, wearing a new dress in her usual red shade with azure flames decorating the sleeves and hems.

"You can be kind of troublesome to find," Ling Qi said lightly, smoothing her mantle. "Are you doing well, Gu Xiulan?"

Her friend smirked and took a prideful pose. "Can you not tell?" she asked, spinning lightly on her heel, making her gown flare out around her legs. "I have refined my perfection further."

Ling Qi smiled. She wasn't the only one working hard. Her friend had reached Mid Silver. "Of course," Ling Qi replied, eyeing her preening friend with amusement. "I guess all of that cake and candy had to go somewhere."

"Such things are beneath the concern of immortals," Xiulan huffed, giving her a flat look. "As I have said many times before. Besides, I am not the one pushing the fittings of my gown."

Ling Qi glanced down despite herself. It was fine. And she was pretty sure this thing readjusted itself... She turned her gaze back to a smug looking Xiulan. "That was mean," she complained.

"You started it," her friend replied in an amused tone. She was clearly in a good mood. "I hardly meant insult," she teased. "Young ladies our age often need their clothes refitted."

Ling Qi flushed; Xiulan could be cruel at times. Ling Qi was still as lacking in feminine charm as the day she had come to the mountain. The only physical difference was that she wasn't half starved and had put on a bit of muscle. "Anyway," she said, changing the subject, "I wanted to extend you an offer."

"Oh, what kind of offer?" Xiulan asked, slipping easily into a more serious posture. "I heard you were hunting for something or another. Do you require aid?"

Ling Qi held back a grimace. It looked like she needed to practice her subtlety if people had already figured out her general action. "Not quite. I have the location of a trial. And I would like you to accompany me for it."

Gu Xiulan blinked, a look of genuine surprise on her face before she broke into a wide grin. "You truly do never lack for good fortune," her friend praised, and for once, there was no trace of bitterness or jealousy in her voice. "I would be happy to accompany you."

That was as Ling Qi expected. The next part was more difficult. "... I should let you know that you won't have to worry about scheduling conflicts. I already let Han Jian know."

Xiulan's smile slipped, and Ling Qi saw a quite literal spark of unhappiness in her eyes. "Is that so. I suppose I am glad it will not be an issue." Her tone was studiously neutral.

"I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to cause either of you problems," Ling Qi said earnestly, meeting Xiulan's gaze steadily. "You know I don't really get all of the political stuff."

Xiulan still had an air of irritation, but she nodded. "You are... not wrong," she agreed grudgingly. "In the future, allow me to speak with him on such matters."

"Sorry," Ling Qi said, dipping her head. "I hope the prize makes up for it a little?" She didn't voice her suspicion that Xiulan might have handled the situation poorly if left on her own.

"It does," Xiulan said. "... It helps that you made no attempt to conceal your actions."

"I might be a sneak, but you are one of my closest friends. I'm not going to purposely go behind your back," Ling Qi replied. "Does sunrise tomorrow sound good to you?"

"It does," Xiulan said with a sharp nod. "I shall see you there."

The rest of the evening and night passed quickly enough. Ling Qi continued her efforts to ferret out information on the groups she was investigating, but soon enough, the light of dawn began to brighten the horizon, and she went to meet Xiulan at her home. Unlike her other friends, the noble girl proved more akin to her own habits and was fully prepared by the time she got there.

Taking the mountain paths together, they climbed the mountain, heading toward the treeline where the cavern which held the trial was located according to Fu Xiang's information. The general area was easy enough to find, but even with explicit instructions, the sense-distorting maze around the cave entrance proved an irritating obstacle. Although they had started their trip before the sun had properly risen, dawn was well underway by the time they made it to the cave and the white stone door buried in its rear wall.

The two of them took a moment to examine the cave, but they found no further traps or surprises. The door was similar enough to the one she had seen with Meizhen, aside from its coloring, so they both placed a hand upon it and channeled their qi.

Unlike the last trial she had been to, they were not immediately whisked away. Instead, the doors ground open, revealing a chamber dimly lit by a single hanging lantern filled with a ghostly blue-green flame. It hung from the center of the ceiling over a pool of clear water and cast the rest of the room in shadow.

While that wasn't a problem for Ling Qi, she was not so certain of her friend. "Do you need a light?" she asked quietly as she stepped inside to peer around.

"Hardly," Xiulan sniffed, stepping gingerly inside as well as flames gathered in the palm of her hand, brightening the interior. "I am the light."

Ling Qi made a sound of acknowledgment and examined the circular chamber. She could easily see the bottom of the pool, which was tiled with jade in varying colors. Two tiles were missing.

"Ling Qi, this way." She looked up at the sound of Xiulan's voice. The other girl stood near a flat section of rock on the far side of the room, examining the wall. "Written instructions. How straightforward for an Elder," the girl mused.

Ling Qi hurried over. Sure enough, when she got within a meter of Xiulan, silvery characters blurred into existence on the previously bare patch of wall.

"Resolve in the face of hardship is the truest virtue," Gu Xiulan read aloud. "Within dreams of tribulation lie the keys to success."

"All dreams contain keys, yet not all trials are equal. Choose wisely," Ling Qi finished. "That... sounds obvious enough. So... this will be like Elder Zhou's test, you think?"

"Perhaps," Xiulan mused. "Let us search the other walls. There may yet be more."

They moved around the perimeter of the room, and as they did, more hidden markings were revealed. This time, there were no words, only symbols. The first was a rearing dragon horse, shrouded by cloud and lightning. The qilin was the symbol of the cloud tribe warlord Ogodei, who had invaded the Empire centuries ago. She remembered that much from her occasional studying.

The second was hideous, a man half twisted into some kind of great cat, his leering, fanged mouth dripping blood. Xiulan thought it resembled tales of the skin-changing warriors of the western barbarians.

The third was a tiny ship on a storm-wracked sea, ghost lights shining from the waters below. Something to do with the northern provinces then, they both agreed.

The last was a stylized white owl with wings outstretched over a black sky, and they both knew what that symbol meant. It was the mark of the Ministry of Integrity. What that meant for a trial, neither could say.

Xiulan recounted Elder Zhou's third test that Ling Qi had skipped, where the remaining disciples had been pitted against the phantoms of various enemies. It seemed likely that this trial's dreams would be something similar. Unfortunately, there was no further information to be found nor any means of egress, aside from the door they had entered by.

They would need to make a choice.

"I think that one might be a good place to start," Ling Qi said, pointing toward the image of the scaled spirit beast. "We still don't know what these tests will entail, but this one should at least take place on familiar ground, right?"

Gu Xiulan hummed thoughtfully, eyes flicking from one symbol to the next. "I suppose so. It is somewhat irritating that my home is the only region of the Empire unrepresented," she added, frowning.

"That is a little strange," Ling Qi said consideringly. She didn't particularly understand why. "Maybe the Elder who crafted this trial isn't familiar with the east?"

"Perhaps," Xiulan replied, shaking her head as she turned toward the image of the dragon horse. "In any case, some practice against the foes we will be expected to face cannot go amiss."

Ling Qi nodded, glad they could agree on the first step without trouble. "Now, we just need to activate it. Do you think we should just touch it?" She stepped closer to the faintly luminescent symbol. Ling Qi hadn't found any visible formations markings in the chamber despite her best efforts.

"As simple as that is, it seems so," her friend said as she stepped up beside her. "There is nothing else to..." The image rippled as Xiulan's fingers brushed across it and dissolved into mist, revealing two circles of characters so dense that they at first appeared as simple black rings. Even squinting, Ling Qi could barely make out the individual characters.

"I suppose that answers that question," Ling Qi said dryly, for above the hand-sized circle was a single glowing line of silver script. It read simply: 'Here begins the dream of storms.'

She shared a look with Xiulan, and then the two of them placed their hands within the offered circles. Everything went black.

## **Chapter 99 - Dark Dreams 2**

After a timeless instant, Ling Qi's eyes fluttered open once more, and she found herself staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling of natural stone. She quickly scrambled to her feet, looking around. She was relieved to find Xiulan a scant couple of meters away, unsteadily climbing to her feet herself. They were in a shallow cave, featureless and non-descript.

Thunder rumbled outside, and Ling Qi felt herself tensing instinctively as her qi senses came back into focus. There was a heavy and oppressive weight in the air, like nothing she had felt before. It made her uneasy.

"Not the most auspicious starting line," Gu Xiulan said quietly as she peered around, seemingly unaffected by the atmosphere. "There is a battle occurring nearby," she added. "What is our objective though?"

"Maybe we're to support Imperial forces in the area?" Ling Qi guessed. A battle. Was that what this feeling was?

"Perhaps," Xiulan said warily. "Let us see what lies outside."

That seemed reasonable enough to Ling Qi so she nodded, joining her friend in carefully moving toward the entrance of the cave. What she saw when she neared the entrance stole her breath away. The cave they had appeared in was located on a steep cliff overlooking a shallow depression, its high elevation giving her clear sight for kilometers under the storm-darkened sky. Before her lay a city, perhaps a bit larger than her Tonghou, laid out in the same sort of layered set of rings, walls separating one section of the city from the next.

The difference, of course, lay in the fact that it was on fire. Thick, cloying black smoke rose from smoldering buildings, and entire fields were burning, framing the city wall in lurid light and soot. That was not what drew her eye though. A rippling dome of translucent cyan qi rose from the city walls, the stonework below burning with the light of thousands of complex characters.

Then there was the noise. A terrible, reverberating scream arose as a black hail fell upon the city. The dome over the city flared violently where the arrows struck, visibly straining under the assault before the arrows shattered.

Her eyes tracked upward, following the path the projectiles had taken, and for a moment, she thought she was looking at a river of thunderclouds, moving as if it were alive. Her mistake became clear a moment later as her enhanced vision allowed her to make out the individual figures among the churning clouds that roiled beneath the hooves of the blue and grey furred horses the barbarians rode. Thick, form-concealing furs and occasional armor glittered in the light of the lightning, and shadows of smaller, slighter figures darted at the edge of the horde, hanging from odd constructions like the wings of a bat strapped to their backs.

They were circling away from the city even as it answered in kind, massive bolts and glimmering nets that unraveled into the sky catching horsemen that had not wheeled quickly enough. The titanic river of

clouds split in the wake of the counterattack, columns of riders making to encircle the city. Arrows continued to fall like a screaming rain, drowning out the sounds of the fires.

"They are going to lose," Gu Xiulan assessed, drawing Ling Qi's attention away from the spectacle. "If they merely cower behind the walls, it is only a matter of time. Were the rest of the Imperial forces routed?"

Ling Qi turned her attention back to the city, her face pale. How was her friend so calm? Even knowing it wasn't real, she felt like she could hear the screams of the dying from here. As if to punctuate her point, the sound of shrieking wind that accompanied the cloud tribe's volleys roared to a crescendo, and thunder rumbled as the sky lit up, blazing lines of lightning stretching toward a figure at the head of one of the columns of riders.

A bolt fell, and one of the ballistae towers crumbled, stone and men falling as the barrier above the city gave a tortured shriek. The hole blown in the shield began to seal shut, ever so slowly.

"What are we supposed to do about something like that?" Ling Qi asked in a furious whisper, gesturing at the scene before them. She was confident in her abilities, but this was something else.

Xiulan began to speak, only to cut herself off, as fire bloomed in the air before them. Instead of an attack, the fire formed into flickering characters.

Behold the price of sloth and unreadiness.

Only death awaits those who shirk their duty.

*Yet all lives must not be forfeit. The Empire protects its own.* 

Seek those hidden, and lead them from death.

Authority has been granted. Squander it not.

"I suppose that answers your question." Xiulan huffed.

Ling Qi frowned at the fading words. "So, we're supposed to find people in the countryside who haven't been killed and lead them away?"

Her friend snorted. "A few panicked farmers are not worth our time. No, I know the markings for shelters and escape routes. In a situation like this, some of the noble families should have gotten their non-combatants away from the walls and hidden. It will be troublesome to move with such a group though. If we move quickly in the shadow of the forest, we may have a chance."

Ling Qi shot the girl a sour look at her easy dismissal of the common folk... but was her friend really wrong? If there were already shelters where people were gathered in hiding, wouldn't they save more by focusing on them? Were they really supposed to abandon the city to its fate?

"The question, I think, is whether we should split up to gather as many as we can or stay together," Gu Xiulan mused. "I could show you the signs easily enough. We will need to move soon though. I imagine that once the walls fall, the barbarians will scatter to pillage the surroundings."

No, the text was right. The city was lost; there was nothing she could do about that. The only thing to be done was to try and get as many people out as possible. She did wonder what the test's measure of 'escaped' was.

"How will we get them to listen to us though?" Ling Qi asked.

"I assume we will be seen as officials of some rank," Xiulan replied, the fires below reflecting in her considering gaze. "The last line seemed to indicate so, and this is but a dream."

"Show me the symbols on the way down," Ling Qi decided as she looked up, tracking the curving path of the army overhead. Even as she watched, one of the halves swerved back in, raining further projectiles down on the city below. "We'll need to figure out where we're going to meet up though."

"The bold approach then?" Xiulan asked lightly, a sharp grin forming on her lips. "Well, I will not object. We will need to find a landmark... Something northward, I think."

Ling Qi nodded. Given the terrain, this was a city on the border, like the town at the base of the Sect's mountain. North was the only direction that really made sense for a withdrawal since they didn't know if cities to the east and west were also being attacked. She scanned the horizon while keeping a wary eye on the sky overhead.

"Perhaps that outpost?" Xiulan asked, pointing out a plume of smoke rising from a rectangle of damaged stone that stood in a cleared section of the trees, some distance away from the road that curved north, following the flow of a small waterway. "It looks to have fallen already, and I see no enemies about."

"They would have to be pretty foolish to not leave something at a hardpoint like that," Ling Qi said dubiously. She had only the simplest understanding of tactics and war, mostly picked up by osmosis from being near Han Jian when he was thinking aloud, but that seemed obvious.

"Only if they had any intention of holding territory or any need for mundane lines of supply," Xiulan shot back, giving her a long-suffering look. "Are you so unaware of your histories? It is one of the many reasons why the cloud tribes are so troublesome to deal with."

Ling Qi huffed and crossed her arms. "I haven't had time to study that kind of thing. Tonghou hasn't been raided in more than a hundred years," she replied, the factoid rising from some forgotten corner of her memory.

"Is that where you are from? I would have expected a town closer to the border given your complexion," Xiulan mused, eyeing her speculatively. Ling Qi scowled at her, but the other girl shook her head. "Well, no matter. Let us get moving. Every moment spent here is one lost."

"Fair enough," Ling Qi said grudgingly, still a little irked at the other girl's casual mention of her deficiency. "So, what are the signs I should be looking out for?"

They set off, running down from the mouth of the cave they had begun the trial in, leaping easily from one crumbling ledge to the next until they had gained the cover of the scrub trees in the hills below. All the while, Ling Qi listened intently as Xiulan described the various waystones and subtle signs that marked places of escape for Imperial citizens in times of trouble.

It was irritating that she had never known of such a thing, but apparently, people like her weren't worth such precautions. If a spirit got loose in the city, it was best to just find a shrine. But apparently, part of guard duty included the checking of spirit shelters around cities that served as fallback points for young cultivators and their servants who found themselves in trouble. These shelters also allowed them safe passage back into the city, or out in this case. She pushed the thought aside for the moment; it wasn't as if it was really surprising that nobles and cultivators had their own routes.

She had a job to do here, and she would do it, even if she found herself glancing with worry at the struggling city. There would be thousands of people just like she had been there, and they were just going to leave them to suffer at the hands of barbarians. Intellectually, she knew that this was simply an illusion, but it still sat poorly with her. But there was nothing that she or Xiulan could do in the face of the living storm that was the cloud tribe army though. Even with her every technique active, she had no doubt that the tribe had enough arrows to fill every inch of her mist with many to spare. It would be suicide.

Ling Qi had not lived her life until this point taking risks like that. She had grown bolder as she grew stronger, but she wasn't a fool. So Ling Qi ignored the occasional scream she caught on the wind and the sound of burning homes and farms, focusing on the path ahead. She and Gu Xiulan split when they reached more level ground with Ling Qi heading west and her friend east. They would circle the city and gather everyone they could on the way to the outpost. Then they would head north, moving away from the road to avoid detection but not straying so far as to risk riling up the spirits of the deeper wilderness.

Ling Qi just hoped the distance needed to count for the purposes of the test wasn't too long. It would be troublesome if she wore herself out entirely during this first test. She would try to stick to her less expensive techniques, the ones whose efficiency were refined by the talismans she wore and used.

With thoughts of such efficiency in mind, Ling Qi did her best to stay under the cover of the trees without use of the active techniques of Sable Crescent Step. Combined with the storm clouds overhead, it was enough to let the cooling chill of the meridians in her legs and spine speed her movements further. That it hid her better from the sight of the barbarians far overhead was a bonus as well.

Every step she took felt tenser than the last, her full focus split between looking for the stones placed to point the way to her targets and remaining as silent and unobtrusive as possible. She kept a tight grip on her qi, not allowing so much as a wisp to escape into the environment. The world blurred around her as she ran, a testament to her speed, even while remaining unseen.

The first waystone, she caught out of the corner of her eye. A single mossy white stone nestled among the roots of a tree, only a bit larger than her fist, and the markings upon it were little more than scratches. Pausing to push a whisper of qi into the stone revealed where to head.

Another stone and another followed until at last, she was led to a small ridge with a single tree clinging tenaciously to the weathered edge, its roots trailing down in a way that vaguely resembled an arch. Ling Qi could see a certain haziness to it, her senses made supernaturally sharp by the Discerning Gaze technique of the Argent Mirror Art.

Her hand passed through dirt and loose rock as if it were not there, and she found herself before a stone door inset into the ridge. Recalling her friend's words, she studied the pattern on the door and quickly traced her fingers over the appropriate marks, injecting them with a tiny wisp of qi to activate and release the 'lock' upon it. She was a little dubious about the passes being the same despite this being an event from hundreds of years ago, but they were apparently standardized in each province to prevent confusion and only reacted to human qi.

In any case, it worked, and the door ground open, revealing a cramped, square chamber, dimly lit by glowing stones set in the ceiling. A tunnel was at the rear of the chamber, its direction leading toward the city. What brought Ling Qi pause were its occupants. More than a dozen people, who had been engaged in speaking to each other. had turned to face the opening door.

Three of them wore the uniform and armor of guards and had cultivations in the late first realm. One wore polished armor, a plumed helm and the colors of some noble house or another. He looked a few years her elder and was in the early second realm. The rest though were children and servants. Some of the children were as old as eleven or twelve with the first hints of cultivation; others were much younger, down to a boy who couldn't have been older than a year held in the arms of a trembling woman in servant's livery only a bare step up from mortality.

Briefly, she froze at the eyes falling upon her, unsure of what to do. She relied upon her experience with Meizhen, Xiulan, Cai Renxiang and other ladies of rank and drew herself up, not allowing a hint of her own lack of confidence to show.

"I am glad I did not waste my time coming here," she said cooly. "We must leave this place quickly. All shelters are being evacuated to the north."

That statement drew wide eyes and whispers from the servants and guards, and the older man in the polished armor stepped forward to speak, an expression of worry on his features.

"Lady Chu," he began hesitantly, almost throwing her off with the title. "Though I thank you for your effort, is the situation truly so bad that it is worth risking travel through the forest with children?" he asked, a hint of incredulity in his tone. "It is only a barbarian raid, if a large one. Surely-"

She couldn't let them start to doubt her, or they would never come out of this hole. She knew people well enough for that. Since he recognized her as someone of rank, she would simply lean on that.

"Would I have wasted the time to come here if not?" she cut him off. "That I would risk myself alone outside the walls trivially? This is no simple raid. It is more dire than that." She felt a stab of guilt at the growing fear among the servants and children and the whispers her sharp ears caught.

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"Father..."
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"Elder Sister will..."

"What is happening..."

"Follow me or don't. My duty is to help as many escape as possible. I won't fail in that, and there is no time to waste." Ling Qi couldn't break character, and distant and cold was the best method to avoid being questioned.

The man who had spoken to her had grown pale, and he gripped the hilt of the sword at his hip with a white-knuckled grip. He quickly bowed, his back stiff. "My apologies for questioning you, Lady Chu! Please give us a moment to prepare. We did not expect such a journey."

She nodded once sharply and turned away, pacing back to the edge of the illusion to keep an eye on the stormy sky. She was closer to the city now, close enough to hear the distant beat of thousands of hooves thundering through the sky like a low rumble in her bones. Thankfully, they were still distant enough that she could only see the roiling edges of their unnatural storm clouds amidst the more normal ones that were gathering.

Shortly thereafter, she was on the move again, albeit slower given those she was traveling with. This was going to get dangerous quickly, she knew. With the exception of the armored men, the adults were occupied with carrying the smaller children, and her group would grow more and more difficult to hide as she picked up more people from the shelters.

On the upside, the spokesman had a much better idea of the locations of the shelters remaining on her path, which allowed them to travel a more efficient path. It remained, however, a trial to keep the train of people moving as quietly and unobtrusively as possible.

Somehow, she managed. Channeling her best impression of Meizhen, her harshly whispered commands kept everyone in line and moving with utmost care. Even the children failed to make a ruckus, accidental or otherwise.

It was mentally exhausting, keeping track of everyone, especially as time passed and they reached shelter after shelter, picking up more civilians. Twenty, then thirty, the group swiftly grew until she had more than half a hundred people under her care, the vast majority of which were children and other non-combatants. She had perhaps a dozen guardsmen and two additional early second realm officers by the time the group turned to begin heading north.

It was painfully slow to move such a group carefully. Unseen was out of the question, but she could manage to keep them to the more covered parts of the forest. The invasion seemed to have put most of the spirits to flight at least so they went mostly unmolested in that regard.

There was trouble when their circling brought them close enough that the group could see the wavering, weakened barrier of the city and the broken towers on the walls. She did her best to keep them moving, despite the grief and fear that rippled through the group at the sight.

By her measure, nearly two hours had passed and the sky was beginning to grow dark above the clouds. She wondered how the city was still standing. Either the barrier and walls were much stronger than she imagined or the barbarians were merely harassing the defenders, refusing to engage and suffer casualties when their target could be worn down with simple time.

... It was what she would do after all. Why engage an enemy who could be defeated with patience? The cloud tribe's chosen tactic worked in her favor for the moment though. The group was still a couple kilometers from the arranged meeting point. Hopefully, she could reach the damaged outpost before the city fell.

As that thought passed her mind, she felt a change in the rumbling from behind and above. There was another sound now that rose above the thunderous beat of hooves.

"..ei!"

The clouds twisted overhead, lightning flashing in their dark bellies, as a light rain began to fall. Was it her imagination or were the clouds beginning to swirl over the city?

"...dei!"

As the rain began to fall in earnest, the circling columns of horsemen fell back from the churning clouds overhead, and she saw, through the rain, the mounted barbarians raising their fists to the sky. As the wind began to scream, she finally understood what she was hearing.

#### "OGODEI!!"

Ten thousand voices exulted in unison as the wind picked up and the clouds began to stretch down. A thousand crackling strands of lighting traced the edges of the distorting cloud as the swirling winds reached a peak, drowning out their cries.

A massive funnel crackling with heavenly wrath stretched down like the finger of a great spirit, and the barrier over the city shattered. The governor's manse, standing high and proud at the center of the city, vanished, torn apart by screaming winds, the central district of the city obliterated in an instant.

Ling Qi's face could hardly pale further, and from her charges, she could hear the rising sounds of terror as well. It looked like their time was up.

# **Chapter 100 - Dark Dreams 3**

As the rain began to pound on the canopy of the trees above, Ling Qi spun on her heel, giving her a look at the fear, anger, and despair blooming on the faces of the people she was leading.

"Keep moving!" she snapped, pushing her own fear down. "We cannot stop now. Grieve later!"

Her command startled those nearest out of their shock, but there was still hesitation and milling about from the group as a whole. Ling Qi grit her teeth and turned her eyes to one of the three second realms she had with her, the older man in the plumed helmet she had met in the first shelter.

"Help me get them moving again. We can't afford to be spotted now. Get the guards and your peers to start organizing people. Every second we stand here is one wasted."

The officer hastily bowed his head to her and muttered an acknowledgement, and Ling Qi cringed. She would have to hope he could get through to everyone because she did not have the skills for this scenario. Organizing people, calming down panicked civilians... The Elder of this trial might as well have asked her to fly unaided.

She set off through the intensifying rain to spread her commands to the others who might actually be able to accomplish soothing the group and to make it known that she needed volunteers to play scout and potential distraction. A fearful glance back showed the barbarian army pouring into the city like the rain, the lines on the walls breaking as the men atop them were trampled by lightning-shod hooves.

Luckily for her, some among those she had gathered had the knack for doing what she could not, and soon, everyone was moving, if painfully slow for her liking. The pounding rain turning the ground to muck certainly didn't help matters. On the other hand, the reduced visibility could favor them... if the barbarians were also hindered by it.

She didn't really want to think much at all. She had seen brutality on the streets of Tonghou - seen grown men beat a child half to death, seen the marks on girls less fleet of foot than her, and ran across corpses in the alleys and gutters - but the scale of what was going on behind her shook her. She fell into the breathing exercises of her Argent Mirror art to keep herself calm and focused. She could think about things like that later.

She leapt from the ground, landing in a crouch on a tree branch that wavered under her weight, and then blurred to the next branch, the edges of her limbs growing misty as she took advantage of the waning light. Ling Qi needed to make sure the perimeter stayed clear and that everyone kept moving in the right direction. She would take an outrider role, alongside a handful of others that had an art or two suitable for the role. If it seemed discovery was inevitable, the scout would make themselves known and draw attention away from the main group.

Ling Qi thought she was likely the only one who would survive doing so; none of the others could throw off pursuers well enough by her measure. But it was the best they could do, given the situation.

So they moved, leaving the rapidly falling city behind them with all the haste that could be instilled in the terrified people, even as the rain grew more intense, falling in heavy sheets.

It was a hard thing, keeping the group heading in the right direction while also preventing them from making too much of commotion. Only rapid reaction on her part and discipline among the guards allowed it. They proceeded as quickly as could be expected, which was still all too slow for Ling Qi's taste, but all things considered, they ate up the ground covering the first kilometer with relative alacrity.

Behind them, the situation of the city continued to devolve. When Ling Qi took an opportunity to peer back from a shaded perch, she found the walls empty of defenders and the gates open. Even at this distance, she could see the movement of people fleeing from the city in the flat, cleared land around it. The barbarians ran rampant over the rooftops and through the streets, and clumps of horsemen and smaller, wing-mounted figures were splitting off to chase down those fleeing and ranging further afield.

Several times, there were close calls with the roving bands, and she got a proper look at the barbarians as they rode overhead on their stocky steeds. Their blue-grey horses were thick of limb and somewhat short compared to the horses she was used to seeing with long, untrimmed black manes.

The barbarians themselves wore thick furs over plate-slatted armor of bone or wood. It was odd how little metal she saw on them. The helms they wore were pointed but slanted backward, and thick tassels of fur and beads hung down over their ears and necks. Their faces were obscured by odd mask of bone and crystal over their faces, with painted and carved patterns in different color and shema for each warrior.

She also got a look at the figures on the gliders. Some were young men, boys really, by their builds and the bits of their faces she could see They lacked the older warriors' masks, and instead, they had their mouths wrapped under cloth. They were uniformly in the first realm from what she could tell.

A rather smaller number of them were women, or at least she was pretty sure they were. They wore thick and heavy robes just like the men, but their hair was braided long and the shape seemed to match. They wore thick bands of bead and cloth around their heads, and their faces were shrouded by visors of the same clear substance as the warriors' masks with cloth attached to the bottom that hung heavy with embroidery and beads of painted bone and stone.

There weren't very many Cloud tribe women, and they were never alone or in small groups like the younger men on their strange wood and cloth wings. Instead, when she saw one, they were always with a group of five or more second realm warriors. Unlike the men, who were armed with heavy recurve bows and swords or spears with curved blades, they had no apparent armaments at all.

Her closest calls were with those larger groups for the pairs and trios of warriors young and old were enthusiastic with victory and not as observant as they could be. Twice though, Ling Qi found herself holding her breath and qi alike as a group of five or six horsemen thundered overhead with a sharpeyed glider in the center of their formation.

Once even, she found herself having to distract them, a fired arrow drawing eyes away from her escaping charges. Luckily, it had been one of the smaller bands so she had lead them on a merry chase before escaping and circling back to her charges, once she was sure she had them chasing sightings of her in the wrong direction. It cost her a bit of qi though, both to speed her movements and render her trail trackless.

Others were not so lucky. By the time the group reached the ruined outpost, five of the guardsmen were dead or missing, selling their lives to draw the attention of the barbarian outriders.

The sun was setting behind the storm clouds when they arrived, and many of the refugees she had lead here collapsed from exhaustion when she finally called a halt, allowing them to rest for the moment. She left the two remaining second realms in charge while she went east to scout for the approach of Gu Xiulan and whoever she had managed to save. The rain had let up somewhat, now falling in a steady patter rather than drenching sheets, but Ling Qi was already soaked to the bone so it hardly mattered.

She was pleased to see the sun setting. Not only would it empower one of her best arts in Sable Crescent Step, but also the Cloud Tribe probably didn't have universal night vision so it would be easier to avoid their attention. The great moving storm cloud over the city had either dispersed or been grounded by this point, and the roaming outriders seemed thinner in the air. They were likely settling in for the night.

Her worry grew as time passed and she saw no sign of Gu Xiulan. She scanned the horizon and found far greater numbers of still active barbarians in the east. Ling Qi ranged further east cautiously. She did not want to go too far, but it would be some time before her group was ready to move again. The pace had been punishing for the many civilians, particularly as more and more of the children had run out of stamina, requiring adults to carry or help them.

She first saw sign of Xiulan in the form of an occasional sparking light within the trees. That something resolved itself quickly enough. In the shadow of the trees, she saw a small group of people, a bit less than a score, moving rapidly through the woods in the wake of a flickering, light-shrouded figure in Xiulan.

The girl looked distinctly unhappy and just as soaked as she was, steam rising from her soaked skin and clothing even as sparks danced at her heels with each step. A quick glance at the rest showed only a handful of guards among the civilians she lead. There were few adults, and every one of them was weighed down by a young child or two. Ling Qi was glad the girl was alright, but going by the feel of her qi, her friend had spent a significantly larger chunk of her energy than Ling Qi.

Ling Qi raised her fingers to her lips and gave a sharp whistle, the signal they had agreed upon beforehand, and Xiulan quickly looked toward her general direction, slowing her run as those with her tensed.

"I suppose I should not be surprised that you made it here first," her friend said, glancing up at the trees as she continued moving toward the outpost. The other girl's eyes snapped to Ling Qi the moment she stepped out of the shadows, and some of the tension bled from her shoulders.

"You know me, I guess," Ling Qi said lightly. "Anything I can do to help?" she asked as she kept pace with them in the tree branches.

"Keep us informed of any obstacles in the path," Xiulan replied tersely. "We should have time, but we will need to rest before heading north. We cannot afford to get diverted."

Ling Qi replied in the affirmative, already casting her thoughts back to the path she had taken to this point. For the next half hour, she directed Xiulan's group, avoiding the less passable bits of the forest and occasionally correcting their course.

Once they had arrived at the outpost and linked up, she got the actual story out of Xiulan. They had ended up in a couple skirmishes with the barbarians, and her group, initially forty or so people, had had to split in half in the end, many of the guards and adults taking the responsibility of leading the pursuit away. Xiulan seemed fairly unbothered by the deaths, but she was angry at herself for the perceived failing.

Ling Qi did her best to encourage her, but she wasn't sure how successful she was. Her friend was prickly at the best of times, and several hours spent under the pouring rain hadn't improved her temper. So rather than trying something futile, Ling Qi quickly turned her attention to what would hopefully be the last leg of the test, the travel north to safer territory. They both agreed that going while it was still night was best. Pursuit was muted by this point, but the roving bands would be on the hunt when the sun arose.

But it was obvious that their charges were exhausted and demoralized. It would be hard to get everyone going again before dawn. In the end, Ling Qi left the matter to Xiulan, once she had recovered her poise and dried off a bit. Her friend was much better at speaking and giving commands. For her part, she just moved among the civilians, offering quiet words and encouragement. She was hardly a physician, but she recalled enough to help people bandage wounds and provide minor aid.

Still, even with Xiulan's efforts, it was a couple of hours before it was reasonable to move again, and even that was pushing what could be expected from civilians. It was only the confidence that her own group had in her to lead them well regardless of visibility that allowed them to move in the middle of the night once the rain had tapered off.

Ling Qi set as fast a pace as she thought would be reasonable, marching everyone north and away from the ruined city behind them. Already, it looked like a ruin. To her eye, it seemed that the barbarians were actively destroying the walls. She didn't understand the purpose, but at least it was occupying them from searching the outlying areas more diligently. Ling Qi could not help but feel nervous. This escape had seemed almost too easy.

It didn't help that her own thoughts churned unhappily as she had time to think about what she had witnessed. How many people had been killed today? How many had been run down and murdered? It seemed worse somehow than the individual cruelties she had seen. What was even the point? By the looks of things, the damned tribesmen didn't even intend to keep the city. Did they just enjoy destroying things?

Some part of her knew that there had to be more to it than that, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Not when she observed the downcast and broken expressions on the newly orphaned children in her train and the helpless anger of the men and women whose home had been obliterated.

In the end, there was no great climax or battle to cap off the trial, only a sullen, weary, and grueling march through mud and darkness, punctuated by sudden violence from spiritual predators picking at

the edges of their train. The sun was beginning to crest the horizon by the time it ended in a sudden fade into gray mist as they reached the waystone marking the road to the next city.

As Ling Qi blinked and opened her eyes back in the starting cavern, she wondered if that had been the lesson in and of itself. Was the trial meant to show what defeat was like? A clattering sound drew her attention to the jade tile that had hit the ground in front of her, along with two wax-stoppered clay containers.

"What a miserable mess that was," Xiulan grumbled from beside her, sitting up from the slumped position she had been in. "I do not think I have ever truly appreciated how vile the weather is in this province."

"Is that really all that bothered you?" Ling Qi asked as she examined one of the containers.

Xiulan pursed her lips as she picked up the other container, giving Ling Qi a curious look. "The world is deadly, the borders more so. It is our duty to prevent such things... but losses happen," she said matter-of-factly. "Spirits, barbarians, even the world itself fights us at times. All that can be done is to attain the strength to overcome such trials."

Ling Qi grunted, not really happy with the answer, and popped out the stopper on the container, revealing a couple of glittering pills within, along with a wafting cloud of medicinal vapor. Ling Qi recognized these from her studies. Eightfold Path pills were an Argent Sect specialty. The Argent arts supposedly focused on the balance between Imperial Eight elements, and these pills assisted in the cultivation of arts that used those.

"Well... regardless, we are not done." Her friend's voice drew her attention again, pulling her eyes away from the potent rainbow-colored pills. Ling Qi hastily re-stoppered the bottle as she looked up to find Gu Xiulan weighing the jade tile in her hand, the girl's own pill case having disappeared already.

Gu Xiulan was right, Ling Qi mused as she looked at the remaining potential trials. There were two missing tiles in the pool so there was probably one more trial to go to finish at least this portion of the trial, if not the entire trial. Ling Qi hadn't expended much qi, but she still felt exhausted, fatigued mentally and physically. It wasn't enough to slow her down yet though. She could handle one more trial.

# **Chapter 101 - Dark Dreams 4**

Ling Qi closed her eyes and tilted her head back, resting it against the cool stone behind her. The mud and grime she had collected during the dream was gone, and she was no longer drenched to the bone, but she still felt drained. The task of keeping so many people moving while avoiding the attention of the cloud tribe outriders had been exhausting. She had largely been winging it the entire time, and despite the fact that she had gotten half a hundred people to relative safety, the achievement felt empty.

The sight of a city falling to a massive funnel of wind was burned into her mind. It made her feel small and weak in a way that she hadn't since before she had come to the Sect. It brought to mind memories of crouching in a water barrel, praying that a merchant's guards wouldn't find her,of running for her life from a street gang that had taken offense to her being in their territory. When she thought of all the people left in that city to die, it left her feeling cold and empty.

"You can pick the next one, Xiulan. Just give me a few minutes," Ling Qi said without opening her eyes. In the end, everything she had seen had happened long before she was born; it may as well have been a play. She wasn't foolish enough to think she could have done anything to prevent the tornado, or even that she owed an effort to try, but it was unsettling that something as permanent and enduring as a city could be torn down so easily by the power of a higher realm cultivator. She should have realized the gap when she had seen the giant sinkhole Elder Ying had created, but Ogodei's attack had been more visceral somehow.

"Well, if you are offering..." She cracked her eyes open as Xiulan spoke, watching her friend peer at the three remaining trials. She caught the girl giving her a furtive look of slight concern though.

Ling Qi couldn't bring herself to comment on it. She knew she was being foolish. There would be plenty of time for meditation and reflection later, after the trial. Still, she remained seated, focusing on quieting and centering herself while Gu Xiulan considered the remaining options. Glancing toward the exit, Ling Qi noted that the intensity of the light hadn't changed much; here, in the outside world, it seemed that only an hour or two had passed.

"This one," Xiulan announced, drawing her attention once more. "I have little desire to see the frozen seas in the north, nor to skulk about. Facing the beasts in the west is the best option for us together."

"Oh?" Ling Qi had been leaning toward the white owl herself, but she supposed Xiulan wouldn't be interested in something like that. "What makes you think that one will be a straight fight?" She didn't object, but she was curious as to her friend's reasoning. "The last one wasn't after all."

Xiulan frowned at the reminder. "I cannot guarantee it, of course, but it seems the most likely option for a fight compared to the other two."

"Fair enough," Ling Qi said, pushing herself up to stand and moving beside her friend in front of the image of the malformed beast man on the wall. "Anything I should know about the destination?"

Xiulan cupped her chin thoughtfully, taking the question seriously. "Trust nothing in the environment. The trees and plants are as dangerous as the beasts," she responded. "Were this real, we would want lotions and medicines. The insects, air, and water contain many foul illnesses that may lay even a

cultivator low. Unless the trial is to last days or weeks though, that should not be an issue... but if need be, my arts allow for a degree of purification."

"Sounds like a lovely place," Ling Qi said dryly, toying with the clasp at the end of her braid. "Anything else?"

"We should stay together if possible this time," Xiulan said. "I know little more beyond tales, but every person who has spoken of those jungles in my presence has called them dangerous."

Ling Qi raised an eyebrow but didn't question that. Xiulan looked determined again; she seemed to be taking this trial as a personal challenge. Ling Qi was alright with that. She shared a look with the other girl and nodded, reaching out her right hand in time with her friend

Once again, everything vanished into darkness

The first sensation Ling Qi noticed was the heat, an overbearing, humid weight pressing down on her from all sides. As her vision cleared, she found herself in a clearing surrounded by a riot of color. Tall trees, stretching many meters overhead, yet lacking the rough, gnarled bark of the trees from home. Instead, their trunks were smooth expanses of green and brown, overgrown with bright red vines with flowering blossoms of yellow strewn about. The ground was uneven with the thick growth of roots and nearly invisible under the dense carpet of fronds and other flowering plants.

More unsettlingly, the tree branches and the vines that hung from the trees swayed subtly despite unmoving air around them, any breeze long since choked out by the unbroken canopy above.. The ferns at her feet reached above her ankles and their pinnae were edged with red, uncomfortably reminiscent of a murderer's knife She was glad she had not worn sandals or low shoes for this trial. At the side of the clearing was a stream, a little over two meters across. It did not look deep, but the muddy brown water was too opaque to tell for sure, the rippling surface only broken by the occasional flash of color. Fish, perhaps?

The other detail that drew her eye was a path hacked out of the thick surrounding vegetation. Several stumps lined the path, their surfaces stained with deep red sap that seemed to quiver with life, sprouting little blossoms of green that visibly strained upward towards the gaps in the treeline overhead. The path extended well out of sight, curving around a dense copse of particularly massive trees.

Before she could examine the surroundings further, the air in front of them distorted, and characters formed, seemingly drawn from the moisture in the air.

To walk the myriad paths is to seek immortality.

A futility for most, yet in striving against the shadow, we find strength.

Here lies foes without end. Death without end.

Let not fear dog your steps. Follow your path to the rising of the sun.

"A survival test then," Xiulan said, frowning as she crossed her arms. "I suppose a simple battle was too much to hope for."

Ling Qi glanced up at the sky, visible due to the gap the stream carved through the canopy. It was fairly early in the morning.

"It looks like we'll be here for a while too, if the last line is any indication," she said, glad that her cultivation made her resistant to extreme temperatures. She had a feeling she would be drenched in sweat if she were still a mortal.

"Quite," Xiulan sighed, visibly dismissing her irritation as she focused on the task ahead. "I suspect we will want to keep moving. Staying still will likely draw more and more enemies."

"Or we might just tire ourselves out," Ling Qi pointed out, listening closely. She could hear the sound of water falling from upstream. "If we can find a good defensive position, we might give ourselves an advantage."

"I suppose," Xiulan said reluctantly, peering down the path. "Of course, there may be potential allies here as well. The natives do not damage the jungle so crudely to my knowledge."

"Well... "Ling Qi said, considering the options before them and the frustratingly vague instructions they had received. "I don't believe that staying in one place is the best way to survive this," she decided. It seemed like it would send the wrong message. And it's not like they had a reason to expect rescue. If this were a real situation, what would hunkering down achieve?

"I am glad to see you being less passive," the other girl said agreeably, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "I agree, of course. Shall we take the path then?"

LIng Qi nodded, peering down the torn-up path. The dirt was churned up as if the lesser plantlife had been torn up by the roots. "It might be dangerous, but yes, the path feels like the right way to start," she said, glancing toward the treeline warily. "... And I don't really like the way those vines are moving. I'd rather avoid them."

Xiulan followed her gaze and frowned. "I agree. They unsettle me," she admitted, eyeing the subtly wriggling vines. "Sadly, I do not have enough qi to afford to burn them all."

"I would prefer that we not set the whole jungle on fire anyway," Ling Qi said dryly, heading toward the path. "I might not mind the heat much, but unlike some people, I can't breath in the middle of a cloud of smoke."

"As if you could not simply blow it away easily enough," Xiulan retorted with a sniff, falling in beside her. "Shall we keep a moderate pace?"

Ling Qi nodded. There was no reason to run or rush; they didn't have a destination or a time limit after all. They could afford to be cautious.

Picking their way through the stump-lined path without stepping into the gooey crimson sap that bled from the shattered wood was a trial, and maintaining footing on the churned dirt that writhed under their feet with new growth was hardly easier. Several times, Ling Qi nearly tripped when a fibrous feeler grasped feebly at her feet. It was even worse when they strayed too close to the edge of the path.

The first time Ling Qi had allowed her attention to wander a little, she had to throw herself to the ground, losing several strands of hair as grasping, wriggling vines passed through where her neck had

just been a moment ago. When they had come across a fallen tree lying across the path, several branches had whipped to life as they climbed over it, and jagged, claw-like twigs had drawn a line of blood on Xiulan's cheek.

Even more than such dangers though, it was the insects that truly made the trip hellish. Ling Qi was constantly feeling the pinch of some buzzing pest on her neck or hands, and even after swatting them by the dozen, there was always more. It was enough to make her consider deploying her mist and its hungry phantoms just to ward them off. She only restrained herself because she was certain that it would draw greater threats, and she was still wary of spending qi frivolously.

The two were not without resources though. Ling Qi was adaptable, and so was Gu Xiulan. For Xiulan, it was as simple as letting her irritation surface, frying the little pests in snapping displays of smoke and sparks. Ling Qi found it easier to cycle the wind around her, little gusts of air blowing her own tormentors away.

All the while, the sun beat down on them overhead, and despite the resilience that allowed her to traverse snowstorms without trouble or hold her hand in an open flame, Ling Qi found her head pounding painfully in the almost red sun's light. She was able to keep going despite the headache, but it left her in increasingly poor temper when combined with all the other irritations. The two conversed little as they traveled, saving their breath for hiking, pointing out dangers, or conferring on bypassing obstacles.

Ling Qi was tentatively optimistic about their choice of a trial. Despite the many, many irritants, they had yet to run across anything truly dangerous, and they remained mostly out of reach of the environment's basic hazards. On the other hand, it was far too silent. There was the constant buzzing of insects, of course, but no birdsong or other signs of life as they followed the winding path north. Going by Xiulan's uneasy expression, the girl had noticed as well.

Their caution only grew as the two of them caught a horrible, cracking sound in the distance that Ling Qi was able to recognize as wood splintering and the yowls of some injured beast. She had a feeling they were coming up on the maker of the path. However, before they did, they found themselves at a crossroads. The torn-up path crossed with an actual road of sorts formed of flat white stones, caulked together with something glistening and red. The road was strangely undamaged despite the destructive path that continued unabated on either side.

To the east, a good sixty meters down the road, the jungle opened up, revealing a vast field of bright yellow flowers taller than Ling Qi was. The jungle stopped abruptly at its edge, as if held back by some invisible wall. She recognized them as the flowers Sun Liling had summoned after after all. She felt a tinge of unease just looking at them, and the pounding in her head seemed to intensify.

"It seems east is out," Gu Xiulan replied tightly, her stance guarded as she glanced warily toward the continuing path where the animal sounds had ceased.

"Yeah, I can agree with that," Ling Qi said quietly, eyeing the flowers warily. "What is up with those anyway? Sun Liling summoned them in the council fight."

"The barbarians worship them," Xiulan explained tersely. "They water them with blood and flesh. We need to move-"

A loud crash and a bloodthirsty howl interrupted her. A massive figure slammed down across the road from them, cratering the torn-up earth as it landed. It was shaped like a human but huge and distorted, skin the color of tarnished bronze stretched tight over powerful muscle. Its belly was fat and distended, wobbling as it stood to its full height, and its face wholly inhuman with a mouth far too wide filled with twisting, curling fangs that dripped gore. Its eyes were solid black without iris or pupil, and sharpened spikes of black bone rose from its scalp like hair. Knobby ridges of bone protruded like armor from its flesh, protecting its vitals.

There was no time to confer as the beast bellowed again and charged at them. Ling Qi felt a thrill of fear at the speed, and she belatedly realized that its physique breached the third realm. She summoned her flute and began to play, hurriedly backpedaling from the charging giant. Mist rolled out, and their surroundings cooled as her qi shrouded the monster, clouding its sight and senses. However powerful its body, its spirit was weaker, if still on a level with her own.

As her mist rolled forth, Xiulan darted away in another direction, and blue-white flowers of flame bloomed in the path of the giant's charge. They burst as it ran through them, and the bronze-skinned beast let out a furious scream that sent a shiver through Ling Qi's bones as the flames scoured its flesh and left its bony growths blackened and crumbling.

Its black eyes rolled angrily in its head, and its charge stumbled to a halt. The beast threw its head back and forth like a bull stung by insects, and for a moment, Ling Qi thought she had managed to make the creature lose them. Then its gaze snapped to her. She was still more than fifteen meters away, but something told her she wasn't safe. She let her dark qi flow through her meridians, blending with the mist.

The giant's hand snapped out, open as if to grab her, and her eyes widened as the limb rocketed toward her, covering the distance in an instant, too fast to fully avoid. She felt its thick fingers close around her waist, and the world blurred around her as she was yanked back toward the beast. Ling Qi tried to flit away as a shadow but failed, something more than brute strength keeping her in the creature's grasp.

She heard Xiulan cry out, and lashes of dark red flame curled and pulled at the creature's limb, burning deep black lines into flesh and muscle. But the giant simply snarled, ignoring the other girl in favor of dragging Ling Qi closer to its gaping, fang-filled maw.

# **Chapter 102 - Dark Dreams 5**

Distantly, she noticed that she had stopped playing, a scream escaping her lips as the monster stuffed the entire upper half of her body into its impossibly wide maw and bit down. The potent qi woven into her gown strained against the tremendous force, and she felt a fang pass through her upper arm like smoke without harm, but more fangs punctured through, driving sharp knives of pain through her back and stomach.

Panicking, she drew deeper than ever on the dark qi within her dantian. For just an instant, she felt as if she was everywhere within her mist at once and flowed from the giant's grasp, resolving back into physical form a half dozen meters away with wide eyes.

She was just in time. A blazing column of white flames slammed into the beast from above. Several of the spikes on its head shattered, and flesh sloughed from its shoulders and back, exposing muscle. Ling Qi could see Gu Xiulan with her hand extended, breathing heavily as flames flickered on her skin and smoke rose from her hair.

To her shock, the giant just shook its head violently, burnt skin flaking away. It let out a loud, plaintive sob, clutching at its wounds then turned on its heel and fled. Ling Qi felt a terrible pressure on her mist, a dark, unintelligible whisper in her thoughts, and her diapason technique shattered, allowing the giant to exit her mist, running toward the sunflowers.

She was covered in spit. Her hair was in disarray, and her gown clung to her, soaked through by the giant's saliva. The punctures on her back and chest burned painfully. She had just escaped being eaten alive.

Her eyes narrowed, and she met Xiulan's gaze. Her intent was communicated, and her friend's expression sharpened into a bloodthirsty grin. Ling Qi banished her flute back into her storage ring and summoned her bow, precious seconds ticking away as the giant's feet pounded against the stone-tiled path.

Lightning flared in a crackling corona as she drew back the string of her bow and sighted down the arrow, a blazing star forming at its head. The giant's head slung too low. Arms irrelevant. Legs pumping too quickly. Center mass. Xiulan's lance had burned away armor and flesh, exposing weakness. Her gaze sharpened, and everything aside from her target ceased to exist.

Her arrow tore through the air with a crackling howl and slammed into the giant's back just under its shoulder blade. It punched through the remaining flesh and muscle, and the spirit let out a wet, gurgling howl as a hole the size of a fist was punched straight through its chest. It stumbled. She had hit a lung. Good.

The sky burned as another radiant bolt slammed down from above, forcing the already unsteady giant to its knees. Crying out, it shaded its head with its hands, smoke and the stink of burning meat rising from its melting flesh. Ling Qi felt its guttering qi flare up, and its flesh darkened to black, taking on the consistency of stone.

It wasn't enough. The giant wasn't moving any more, and she had a clear shot. A second arrow was drawn, nocked, and fired in one smooth motion, punching another hole straight through the giant's temple. The arrow erupting from the other side of its head in a spray of green-black gore. A rush of satisfaction filled her as the thing that had stuffed her into its mouth fell to the ground with a crash.

She pulled her eyes away from the corpse to peer out at the jungle through her steadily dissipating mist. Her ears strained to hear any sound of others drawn to the fight, but it seemed they were clear for the moment.

"Disgusting creature," Xiulan said haughtily even as she took a small, bone white pill, restoring some of her flagging qi. "Shall we collect our spoils then?"

"Do you think it's a good idea to hang around here?" Ling Qi asked dubiously.

"Of course not," Xiulan dismissed. "That does not mean that I am willing to abandon the spoils from such a formidable spirit."

Gu Xiulan did have a point. It wouldn't sit right with her to pass up hard earned loot. Ling Qi fell in beside Xiulan while keeping a wary eye on the jungle. "You know... as strong as that thing was," Ling Qi said, voicing the niggling worry, "didn't that seem a little too easy to you?"

"Speak for yourself," Xiulan huffed, giving her a cross look as they stepped up to the corpse. "Burning through that thing's defenses was quite a drain."

"Not what I meant," Ling Qi clarified. "I mean, the way it acted, if it had stood and fought or used that technique at the end right away..."

Gu Xiulan scowled down at the thing but nodded. "I suppose you are not wrong in that," she admitted. "It did seem quite dim."

Ling Qi focused her senses as she got to work with one of her knives. Thankfully, some qi remained in the dead giant's core, making the harvesting easier. She still ended up having her arm coated in sizzling, dark green blood up to the elbow as she dragged the gleaming red sphere out of its belly.

As she pulled it clear of the gristle and meat though, the core warped and shimmered before her eyes. She nearly dropped the thing before the effect faded, revealing a slip of white jade. Her alarm quickly faded, and she brightened as a brush of her qi revealed that it was active.

The slip was for Argent Current, the basic form of Argent Sect's melee combat art. It combined the devouring nature of fire with the persistence of water to break through enemy defenses and bolster allied assault into an unstoppable flow. With mountain and lake for Argent Mirror and now fire wand water for Argent Current, it appeared likely that the other basic Argent arts must also use opposite elements in the Imperial Eight - thunder and wind for one and heaven and earth for the other.

"Xiulan, look! This must have been a bonus objective. We-"

"Ling Qi," Xiulan interrupted her, tone thick with dread. She looked up to see the other girl pointing at the sunflower field. "Look there, and tell me if you see what I think I see."

She followed the direction of the girl's hand, squinting a little to make out the details of the still distant field. She didn't sense any qi other than the pervasive aura of the jungle itself nor did she see anything moving or alive. "What are you..."

Then she saw it. A dark green lump was on the ground among the sunflowers. At first she had taken it for a rock or some kind of gourd, but on a closer look, it was covered in bony spikes and had a certain familiar shape. A second lay a few meters to the right and was more exposed. She could see the outward curve of hairless brows and the pointed tips of ears. Her eyes flickered from one lump to the next. There were easily half a dozen, and those were just the ones she could see.

"... Why don't we get on our way then?" she said, voice pitched high. "We can examine the prize later after all!"

"Yes, I believe so," Xiulan agreed fervently, backing up several steps. "Shall we get off the road as well? I cannot imagine that imperial construction would lead to such a place." It seemed there was a limit to her friend's usual bravado.

Ling Qi nodded quickly, backing away from the corpse and sending the prize into her ring. She was suddenly very glad that her first shot had been such a good one. What would have happened if the giant had reached the field?!

Although the two of them did not throw caution to the wind, they picked up the pace sharply, using the broken path in the trees to quickly retreat from the sunflower field and the white road. Unfortunately, the path did not last much longer. It ended only a few dozen meters away where the messy remains of some beast or another lay scattered over the ground. Ling Qi quickly scanned through the mess for anything of value, but all that remained were chunks of bone and meat, nothing she could immediately detect as useful.

There was a silent agreement between the two girls to push on further before pausing to patch up, though Ling Qi did quickly pop one of her restorative pills into her mouth to top off her own qi.

She wanted to be prepared for pushing into the jungle proper because she was sure it wasn't going to be pleasant. Sure enough, within a minute of stepping into the shadow of the trees, the two of them had to avoid assault from twitching vines and grasping roots, and the teeming insects were seemingly only growing all the more vicious and determined. It was hard going, and they had to slow down considerably to avoid being caught out.

Ling Qi very quickly found her dislike for this place growing, particularly after receiving a spurt of gelatinous red sap when she sliced through a particularly persistent vine with one of her knives. It stung and itched, and no amount of scraping seemed to get it off entirely. She hoped it would fade with the end of the dream. Otherwise, she might have to cut off her hair just to get the mess out.

Still, despite growing frustration and a worsening headache, they pushed on. Even when the birdsong picked back up and they began to notice the presence of beasts again, they avoided the worst of the trouble. They found themselves under attack several times during their trek, this time by lesser beasts and predators. The attackers ranged from black-red versions of the little biting bloodsuckers that had

hounded them from the beginning to many meters long snakes that blended in with the hanging vines and plants.

Once, they had even come under assault from a troop of screaming, bright green monkeys with jutting, tusk-like fangs wielding crude rock and stick weapons caked in... excrement. It was bizarre. The monkeys were easily driven off as their strongest was barely second realm, but the constant harassment left them more and more drained. As conservative as she was being with her qi, Ling Qi's hand-to-hand and knife skills were certainly getting a workout.

As they traveled through the jungle, Ling Qi began to notice a presence periodically nearing the edge of her awareness before backing away. There was little she could do about it, but she found her thoughts and focus turning toward the stalker more and more. Eventually, they were able to stop and rest upon finding a pond large enough to contain a rocky islet for them to rest upon, allowing them to apply some healing salves and recover their stamina and qi.

# **Chapter 103 - Dark Dreams 6**

Ling Qi was silent as they rested, listening to the background noise of the jungle as she considered their options. This entire jungle seemed like one giant deathtrap, and she was already growing weary of trudging through it. The idea of simply taking a stand and hunkering down to let their enemies come and die on the teeth of their defense was tempting.

"I think..." Ling Qi began carefully, "that we shouldn't waste qi attacking something we can't even be sure is really there or something that might be too cowardly to actually attack us outright if we keep moving and leave its territory."

"You think it better to leave an enemy dogging our steps?" Gu Xiulan asked incredulously. "Ready to strike the moment we find ourselves occupied?"

"I think we don't have any good choices," Ling Qi replied a bit snappishly. "We need to conserve our energy, and taking blind shots into the jungle will do that. Worse, I think sitting in one place is just asking to get overwhelmed. Maybe I'm taking it too literally, but the instructions did say to keep walking, didn't they?"

"Fighting conservatively is all well and good," Gu Xiulan said irritably, "but it is foolish to ignore an obvious foe. I cannot believe you do not see that."

"If you actually see it, feel free to take a shot," Ling Qi answered hotly. "I know I will, but as long as it wants to screw around trying to scare us, I say let it since it means we aren't fighting. We still have half a day or more left here, Xiulan, and I know the fight with that giant took a lot out of you."

The girl at her back fell silent. "Fine," Xiulan eventually said, irritation obvious in her tone. "The moment I catch sight of the thing, I will set it alight."

"You won't hear any argument from me," Ling Qi responded lightly, trying to reduce the tension. She had a niggling feeling that the jungle's oppressive atmosphere might be getting to her friend a bit. And herself as well. "We'll get moving once we've caught our breath.

The two of them lapsed into silence after that, quietly keeping watch on the jungle and meditating. Between the salve she had applied earlier and the rest, she found herself reinvigorated, the scratches and bruises quickly fading.

The presence tested them again and again while they rested, lingering at the edge of her senses. She could feel Xiulan tense up behind her while it stalked around them, but the girl held her peace. Unfortunately, it did not approach close enough for either of them to catch sight of it. Once they were rested, a light jump carried them across the water, and they resumed their slog through the jungle.

As the sun reached its zenith and passed over it, the hazards the jungle threw their way seemed to only grow worse. The vines and trees grew more vicious and aggressive, and the insects swarmed all the harder. At one point, Ling Qi found herself waist deep in a sucking pit of mud with crawling, biting, bulbous black worms as thick as her arm. Gu Xiulan was nearly snared by the drifting, mind-fogging pollen from some gigantic, horrible flower that smelled of rotten meat.

All the while, the thing stalking them kept pace, keeping its peace even when they were forced to stop and fight off further predators. Ling Qi found herself losing track of the direction they were traveling in, as one thing after another kept them distracted while the stalking presence constantly keeping them on edge. Only once did Ling Qi catch sight of the stalker's midnight black fur through a gap in the trees before Xiulan had reduced the vegetation and tree bark in the vicinity to ash with a flung ray of fire and an angry snarl.

Caked in mud, her legs covered in painful welts and the odd circular wounds left when she tore the worms away, Ling Qi was not in a great mood by the time they found another clearing to rest in. Considering her friend was literally smoldering, Xiulan was probably not in a better mood than her. Ling Qi's instincts whispered that they were being herded.

The jungle was not done with them. Both girls could feel the presence, prowling at the edge of their perception... but this time, it was not alone. There was another, circling on the opposite side, slowly closing in on them in a spiral pattern. Gu Xiulan caught her eye, and Ling Qi nodded, dismissing her bow and pulling her flute out of storage. She wasn't going to argue for anything but fighting at this point.

The clearing was silent as the two presences circled out of sight, the only sound the crackling of the flames dancing over Xiulan's hands. Ling Qi refused to stand here and wait. If the pursuers wanted to give her time to set up, she would take it and gladly. Raising her flute to her lips, she began to play, and cool clinging mist washed away the humid mist of the jungle as it poured from the gaps in her instrument, already flush with the dark shadows of her constructs.

Her timing proved prescient. The underbrush churned with life all around them, and the air vibrated with the buzzing of countless wings. Behind the aggressive opening, a different melody played entirely upon unknown strings. The black cloud of insects that erupted from around them clashed with her mist, and Ling Qi winced as she felt the weight of another being's qi pressing down on her own. She could recognize the technique as something similar to her own. As real as the swarming, finger length bees pouring from the treeline looked, they were actually qi constructs like the shadows in her mist.

Her mist held in responses to the onslaught, phantasmal claws and beaks ripping apart the invading insects. But Ling Qi could feel the other's qi slipping between the gaps in her own, struggling to overwrite her mist. Tendrils of the swarm penetrated the shadowy gauntlet, forcing the two of them to dodge apart to avoid the stinging vermin.

Gu Xiulan's flames seared away a chunk of the canopy, exposing a flash of yellow and black as the hidden figure dodged. When it halted atop the branches of another tree, Ling Qi got her first clear look of the attacker. It was shaped like a human woman, mostly, but the yellow and black chitin that grew from and encased her limbs, disturbingly insectile eyes, and waving antenna on her bald head put the lie to that. Glittering wings fluttered on her back. The insect woman was also naked, save for a roughly spun skirt of red cloth that hung past her knees. Ling Qi focused on the odd, stringed instrument in the woman's hands. Foreign qi was flowing outward as glistening chitin claws plucked the strings. She did her best to ignore the way the woman's cheeks split open as she sneered down at them, her mandibles working in the air.

Ling Qi dodged to the side as a heavy weight slammed into the ground where she had just been standing. The beast that turned to face her, bright green eyes gleaming in the mist, was a massive black cat of some kind, a collar of intricate metal and cloth over its neck and shoulders. Ling Qi distanced herself quickly, pulling away to the center of the clearing the jungle along with Xiulan, who had dodged her own attacker, going by the meter long bronze spear sticking in the dirt where she had stood.

Said spear vanished like smoke, reappearing in the hands of a tall, muscular, and dark skinned man. He regarded them with a hungry expression shadowed by the unkempt black hair that hung over his face. Unlike the woman, he wore thick white leather breeches and a cloak of the same material. Something about the material made her skin crawl, and she found herself hesitant to look at the heavy hide cloak for long.

The man said something in his guttural foreign tongue in a slightly mocking tone that made the insect woman bristle and hiss something angry back. Meanwhile, the great cat circled away from them, eyes locked on Ling Qi, clearly looking for another opportunity to pounce. All of them were in the late second realm, although the cloaked man's qi was strange and muted.

It looked like their hunters were out of patience. The only thing to do was decide how to fight and who to target first. Ling Qi caught Xiulan's eye as her fingers danced over the length of her flute. She only had time for a slight gesture, flicking her gaze in the direction of the enemy musician before returning her focus fully to her foes. Her melody changed, growing mournful as the mist darkened with her qi, and she launched herself towards the insect woman, feet blurring over the muddy ground as she dragged her mist with her to engulf the enemy.

The woman's wings glittered as she leaped from the tree branch, retreating only slightly slower than Ling Qi's advance. The opening notes of a new melody flowed forth from the insect woman's stringed instrument, ominous and rising in intensity as Ling Qi's own melody failed to take hold, flowing off the woman like water from a duck's feathers.

The claws of her dissonance constructs proved more difficult to avoid, and she felt a surge of satisfaction as misty talons scraped across carapace, leaving deep grooves in the black chitin. She had little time to celebrate though, and she twisted her body to the side, dark mist trailing after her limbs to avoid the dark shape of the massive black cat brushing past her in the mist.

As it passed her by, the cat warped, bone and flesh twisting noisily and painfully as the beast's body became that of a man and its paw lashed out, glittering bronze talons catching her across the stomach and ripping through her gown to scrape lines of blood across her skin.

She leaped back, feeling the burning of poison in the wound and grimaced as the creature turned back to face her, fangs bared in a twisted grin. Its head was still that of a great cat, though subtly warped and black fur still covered rippling muscles, but it now stood on two legs.

More disgustingly, thousands of fuzzy gold and black bodies swarmed across his flesh, a living armor made of the swarm that had failed to penetrate her mist. Similarly, the cloaked man had gained his own living armor as well. A glance toward her other foe showed the insect woman emerging from a burst of blue white flame, trailing charred insects.

That glance almost proved her undoing. The white cloaked barbarian swept his garment from his shoulders and brandished it in his free hand like a shield. Lingt Qi shuddered, not quite knowing why the cloak unsettled her, until it writhed with life and a multitude of red slits opened across its surface.

Faces. The thing was made up of human faces, impossibly stretched and stitched together. Her gorge rose at the sight, even as the tortured things gabbled and screamed, releasing a bloody mist from the grotesquely stretched mouths. It was an abomination, and she needed to destroy it. She didn't want to imagine what that *thing* had done to create such a talisman, but she would...

Ling Qi shook off the anger clouding her thoughts and refocused. No, disgusting as the talisman was, she needed to stay on target. The insect woman was keeping enough of a distance that she would have to choose one or the other to keep within her mist, and as someone with support arts herself, Ling Qi was well aware of the snowball effect of a support free to act as she pleased.

Ling Qi cycled her internal energy as she turned her eyes back to the insect woman, drawing on the exercises of Thousand Ring Fortress to erase the toxins she could feel in her veins. She began her elegy once more, putting the full force of her will into the melody. This time, the woman shuddered as dark qi invaded her meridians, sapping stamina and the will to fight. Despite the trembling in the woman's limbs though, her song continued, clashing with the Melody of the Vale and picking up tempo, eliciting the feeling of the approach of a terrible foe.

The notes washed over Ling Qi like a wave of needles pricking at her skin, but she threw off the spiritual assault with some effort. Gu Xiulan seemed unaffected as well and was now clad in pulsing strands of near liquid fire that twined about her like armor.

The half cat thing rushed her, appearing more and more like the grotesque image of the skinchanger that symbolized the start of this dream. The thing's eyes were narrowed and frustrated, but that did not stop it from overtaking her, its clawed fingers punching through her gown to dig into her side and twist. Ling Qi tore herself away from the beast, and blood trailed from his fingers in unnatural ribbons even as she felt foreign qi sapping her stamina and weakening her muscles. Despite the assault, she maintained the presence of mind to leap aside and avoid a black cloud of bees that descended to engulf her.

To her side, brilliant white hot flames erupted, punching into the shroud of shrieking souls that had risen to encase the enemy clad in human skin. The disgusting barbarian threw back his head and bellowed in pain as the lance pierced through his defenses, destroying the armor of bees and searing his flesh. Xiulan flinched as burns seared across her own flesh, mirroring the damage the barbarian had taken. The distraction cost her as the man's flung spear tore a gash across her thigh and slammed into the dirt behind her.

Xiulan froze, trembling and wide eyed. Ling Qi reacted instantly, activating Deepwood Vitality to pulse cleansing wood qi that purged the curse from Xiulan while fortifying herself at the same time. That was all the attention she could spare as the next measure of the enemy's song washed over her, clawing at the weave of her own technique.

For the moment, it proved ineffectual, but the bloodthirsty song pounded in her ears and incessantly wore at her qi. Despite that, she was able to dodge when cat man lunged at her, bronze claws glistening with poison. Although he was faster than her, she was beginning to get the measure of his movements.

Gu Xiulan let out a furious scream, and dozens of beads of flames flickered into existence in the clearing. They bloomed, exploding in showers of blue and orange sparks that seared and engulfed all three of their enemies.

Ling Qi could tell that Xiulan's energies were guttering as she desperately dodged and avoided the clawing hands of the cloaked barbarian still shrouded by shrieking and gibbering spirits. His cloak fluttered and struck like a third limb as he drove her friend back, blood and qi torn from her wounds every time he so much as grazed her.

Xiulan wasn't the only one struggling though. The fires had hurt the insect woman badly, and she now slumped atop a tree branch, her music faltering. A knife flew from Ling Qi's hand, striking the woman dead center in the chest and dropping her remaining qi precipitously. It cost Ling Qi to retain her song for an attack, but she wanted the woman down before she could finish her melody

The woman shot her a venomous look, mandibles snapping angrily. Ceasing her sonata, she called back her swarm, armoring herself and her allies once more then slumped, qi entirely depleted. The echoes of the woman's song remained though, and Ling Qi nearly screamed as what felt like thousands of hungry insects pricked and stabbed at her skin. Blood rose from scores of tiny cuts and pinpricks across her body, even as she dodged another increasingly frustrated attack from the cat man.

Flowers of flame bloomed again, bursting across their enemies. The woman was flung limply from her perch, but the others merely flinched, protected by the woman's last act and their own tough hides.

That was the last thing Xiulan did. Ling Qi saw her friend stumble, her wounded leg buckling underneath her. It was all the opening her opponent needed. Rippling white leather covered in distorted eyes and mouths coiled around Xiulan's throat, and the barbarian's hands, twisted into bloody talons of bone, plunged into her stomach, only for him to to tear in opposite directions, blood and other things spraying from the wound.

Ling Qi screamed as she watched her friend slump in the barbarian's grasp, her fires finally guttering out.

Then she knew no more.

The moment she regained consciousness, Ling Qi shot to her feet, every muscle tense. Her vision was blurry with tears, and the sound of her own heartbeat and ragged breathing filled her ears. She heard a sob and the sound of someone retching. Swiping at her eyes to clear them, Ling Qi turned her head toward the source. Gu Xiulan was hunched over, hands on the floor, shuddering in the aftermath of a dry heave.

They were back in the starting cave.

Ling Qi couldn't bring herself to care about the trial. She hurried to her friend's side and dropped to her knees beside the other girl, examining her for wounds. Xiulan was covered in bruises and burns still,

but the terrible gash in her belly was nowhere to be seen. The girl jerked violently as Ling Qi touched her shoulder, eyes flying up to her face, wild and panicked.

"I...What... Ling Qi?" Xiulan croaked.

"It's fine," Ling Qi reassured her, her own grief and panic fading to relief. "It was just a test. It's over." Ling Qi had half feared that the wounds would carry over from the dream; Gu Xiulan had crippled someone in Elder Zhou's test before. It was alright though... even... even if they had failed.

Xiulan grimaced, shakily sitting up. "I was too slow. I could not keep up with that damned barbarian." Ling Qi could hear her friend's anger at her own failure in her voice.

"It's fine," Ling Qi repeated. "I... don't think I could have lasted much longer myself. Even if we had beaten them, the next fight would have finished us. There was no way we could have made it until morning." Ling Qi's own energy was precipitously low, and she could feel the ache of her wounds. The test seemed impossible. Unless they were supposed to find a way to avoid all conflict, the enemies in the jungle were simply too strong and too many.

"Well, at least you have that much sense." Both of their heads shot up at the sound of a third voice. Ling Qi recognized that lax tone.

Sure enough, across the pool in the center of the room stood a figure in bright magenta robes and a scholar's cap sitting crookedly on his bald head. Elder Jiao looked down at them with a vaguely amused expression. "So, how does defeat taste, children? Rather sour, I imagine."

Xiulan schooled her expression and ducked her head, but Ling Qi could still feel the frustration practically radiating from the girl. "Honored Elder, the failure is mine. I apologize for wasting your valuable time."

Ling Qi bowed respectfully as well, a cold feeling in her stomach. An irreplaceable chance was gone now. She couldn't blame Xiulan. It had been Ling Qi's choice to press on through the jungle. "I apologize as well, Honored Elder."

"Enough of that," Elder Jiao said dismissively, flicking his outrageously colored sleeve. "You were entertaining enough, and your performance in the first task was even quite good. Tell me, what mistakes do you two imagine you made?"

Xiulan spoke up first. "I expended my energy too recklessly. I grew panicked when a more conservative approach would have fit our strategy better."

"Fighting through the jungle at all, I think," Ling Qi added. "I do not think we could have finished the second task regardless, unless we somehow stayed undetected the entire time." Ling Qi felt the Elder's gaze rest on her, even as she kept her eyes on the floor.

"You are both right, although Disciple Ling has the truth of the matter. That battle could have been won, but the war was lost before you began," the Elder said with a chuckle. "Regardless of choice, the first task was a test of your ability to fulfill an objective. The second... was to see how far you push in the face of truly insurmountable odds. That it gives many arrogant whelps a taste of true defeat to spur them forward is merely a bonus."

"Then we... passed?" Ling Qi asked hopefully.

"Not entirely," the Elder responded, dashing her hopes. "Nightfall would have been sufficient, but you fell too soon. No top prize for you," he said lightly. She snuck a glance up to find him glancing to the side and pursing his lips, as if listening to someone else speak. "Still, your performance in the first task was admirable, Disciple Ling," he added grudgingly. "I suppose I have the free time for a little tutoring over the next month. I shall not be providing you with any materials however. You will have to make do with what you have."

Ling Qi felt a swell of relief, but it twisted as she glanced at her pale-faced friend. "Thank you, Honored Elder," she replied carefully. "Might I ask if this is for the both of us?"

"No," he said blandly. "Dealing with one child is the limit of my patience, particularly when Disciple Gu's performance was... merely above average. The pills and the technique slip you two acquired are sufficient for her."

"I understand," Gu Xiulan replied, sounding wrung out and defeated. "Thank you, Honored Elder."

The Elder glanced at her and simply nodded. "Be here at midnight tomorrow, Disciple Ling," he said carelessly before turning away and fading into shadow.

"Gu Xiulan..." Ling Qi began.

"Please do not say anything," her friend requested, not raising her head. "He is right. I do not deserve anything else. Thank you for inviting me. The experience was invaluable."

Ling Qi fell silent. She could read the atmosphere well enough. Xiulan didn't want to talk. All they could do was keep moving forward.

# Interlude - Li Suyin

"We are not using spiderwebs to hold stuff," Su Ling said flatly, her arms crossed. "I will build you as many damn shelves as you could want if you really need storage that badly."

"It is very convenient though, if the web has been treated properly," Li Suyin pointed out tentatively as she put down the heavy box in her arms on the floor of their new home. Even if she was still nervous about returning to the residential area, she could admit that it was... nice to be under a proper manmade roof again.

It was strange though, to come back here for the first time in weeks to find many homes empty and the remaining inhabitants... polite. It spoke of how poorly behaved everyone had been in the beginning that the return of simple, basic courtesy was able to surprise her. With a few exceptions, they were not sneered at, pushed around, or insulted in the process of selecting a home. Li Suyin knew it was because of Ling Qi. She certainly hadn't accomplished anything worth respect.

"Oi. Stop that."

Li Suyin blinked, looking up to find Su Ling regarding her with a serious expression as she shifted the weight of the pack on her shoulders. "Stop what?" She asked, despite knowing what her friend was talking about.

"Doing that thing where you start beating yourself up in your head," Su Ling replied gruffly, turning away to survey the empty room they were setting up as a workshop. "... You can put some netting up on the ceiling if you want. Just do it when I'm not here."

"Ah, thank you." She knew she often overthought things, but it was very hard to stop. "I don't understand the problem though," she added, managing a smile as she crouched down to remove the lid of the box at her feet. "I think the fuzzy ones are a little cute."

"I should never let you start hanging around that girl," Su Ling responded in a long-suffering tone, shrugging off her own pack as she crossed to the other side of the room. "Nobody should be comfortable around things like that."

"They aren't much different than cats," Li Suyin protested lightly as she began moving books to the shelves. True, she had been a little disturbed when she had begun studying under Senior Sister Bao, but the children of her mentor's bound spirit companion were not much different in behavior from her own mother's beloved pets. "I think I will request to be allowed to bind one when I fully break through."

"When, huh?" Su Ling asked rhetorically as she began to carefully remove the wrapped package containing her pill furnace from the pack with a reverent care that Li Suyin didn't often see from the other girl. "Well, it's good to hear you being confident," she grunted absently. "You should definitely reconsider your choice of companion though. Seriously. I'll help you find something better."

Li Suyin couldn't help it. A laugh escaped her at Su Ling's discomfort. It just seemed so out of place. Her friend was usually so rough in her mannerisms so seeing her behave like one of the girls she had

interacted with at home was strange, especially over something so trivial. Su Ling would happily put herself elbow deep into a beast's viscera, but she was nervous about creatures with a few extra legs?

Su Ling did not share her humor given the look she got in return but didn't retort further, instead focusing on her task while studiously ignoring Li Suyin.

Li Suyin did the same after taking a moment to regain her composure. She began moving her texts to the shelf on the wall, falling into comfortable silence. Pausing as she reached the last book, Li Suyin found herself tracing the scuffs and scars on the cover with her fingers. Unlike many of the other tomes, it was a collection of stories collected from the early Empire, meant to teach the important virtues. It had been a present from her father, and she could fondly remember him reading to her from it despite how busy he was with his duties.

That bitch Xu Jia and her friends had trampled and ruined it like everything else they hadn't stolen. Li Suyin had repaired the binding and pieced the pages back together as best she could, but looking at it still made her ruined eye throb. She grit her teeth and forced down the ugly emotion now bubbling in her chest.

She knew father would be disappointed with her for thinking such things, but she was not done with that girl. She hated the part of herself that had awoken that day, but in the end, it was a part of her. She could only accept it.

Senior Sister Bao understood as well, she thought. Li Suyin had found it odd that the older girl had seemed to take a shine to her. While she was careful and precise in her preparations, there were many others at the Medicine Hall of similar skill. It had only been after that shameful incident with that mean-spirited boy assigned to share her testing room that Bao Qingling had started to take Li Suyin under her wing.

Senior Sister Bao had showed her so much and hinted at more. Li Suyin would always be grateful to Ling Qi for helping her get through those early days when the urge to do something foolish and short sighted had been nearly overwhelming ... but she felt unworthy of her. Ling Qi had started from a worse position than her, yet she still strove to be better, unlike herself. Su Ling was the same. The two of them were both good people in the way that she now knew she wasn't. That didn't mean that she couldn't pay her friends back. She might be a petty, vengeful, and deceitful girl, but she could still be of use to them because of that.

Nodding to herself, she placed her precious memento on the shelf, carefully adjusting it to align with the others. Her first step would be to break through into the realm of Silver. She had put it off far too long, worried at the implications of doing so while scarred and crippled as she was.

"You doing alright over there?" Su Ling's gruff voice pulled her from her thoughts. "You kinda spaced out."

"Ah, yes. I was just lost in thought," Li Suyin replied with a smile, looking up from her work to find Su Ling giving her a concerned look. It made her feel all the worse that she hadn't been allowed to heal the wounds the girl had inflicted on herself in the aftermath of her breakthrough. Su Ling had refused her offer. At least she had been able to stop her friend from further mutilating herself, as she had been

trying to do at that time. "So, once we finish unpacking, which perimeter formations do you think we should add first?"

Su Ling watched her then sighed. "The three layer alarm, I think. We can probably get that done in a couple hours. We'll have to add ventilating formations to this room though, if we're going to use it."

Li Suyin blinked, the last of her darker thoughts fading away. "I suppose so. I forgot that this room would not actually be built for pill crafting already." She shook her head, dusting her hands off on her smock.

They had quite a lot of work to do before they could call this place home.

# **Chapter 104 - Tutelage 1**

The trial cave was not as she remembered it.

When Ling Qi arrived back at the site the next day, she was not terribly surprised to find that the maze around it had been dispersed. However, she did find herself stopping to stare when she reached the entrance and found not an empty, dimly lit cavern, but instead, what seemed like a nobleman's sitting room. The dim lantern hanging over the pond remained, but now it cast its light over plush rugs and wall hangings that concealed the rough stone walls. Cushioned chairs and polished wooden tables holding braziers of smoldering incense lined the walls, and across from the door was an ostentatious divan seemingly carved from a single massive piece of white jade cushioned with acid green silk padding covered in gleaming embroidery.

The air was smokey and thick. She was certain that it would have left her coughing mere months ago, but for now, her breathing was controlled enough that it did little more than make her eyes water. She peered around carefully but saw no sign of the Elder yet. She very carefully did not let her eyes linger too long at the scenes of... revelry depicted on some of the wall hangings that interspersed the more normal scenes.

Instead, she found her eyes were drawn to the painting which hung over the divan. It depicted a familiar red-eyed woman, peering back over her shoulder at the viewer with a mischievous smile on her lips. In the painting, her gown was falling from her shoulders and her hair loose and unbound, but she could still recognize Xin, the spirit that had given her the arts in Elder Zhou's test which had carried her so far.

The emotion in the red eyes made the painting seem almost alive. Maybe it was. It wouldn't be the strangest thing she had seen since she had joined the world of the Immortals. It was distinctly uncomfortable though. Like Meizhen at the lake uncomfortable. That wasn't the kind of look she wanted to be on the receiving end of.

Ling Qi carefully removed her shoes before actually stepping inside the 'room' and finding a seat on the floor. She had an inkling that Elder Jiao was not a man who had a great interest in propriety, but this was beyond her expectations. In the end, the Elder's foibles didn't matter. She still had to seize this opportunity with both hands.

It seemed she would have to wait though, so Ling Qi closed her eyes and began to meditate, beginning on the next stage of qi exercises for her Thousand Ring Fortress art. If she had managed to achieve the second pulse before the trial, she and Gu Xiulan might have been able to hold out long enough to win that encounter with the jungle barbarians. For all that she had been given a pass, Ling Qi was certain she had made mistakes. While Xiulan had gone too far in the opposite direction of conserving qi, she should have been more aggressive and less afraid to drop her flute once her effects were set up. As the flute was now, it was nigh impervious to harm unless she was facing an opponent in a higher realm.

Ling Qi reviewed the battle in her thoughts as she cycled wood natured qi, pushing it out through the channels in her body to suffuse the air and soak into the ground beneath the rich carpeting. She wasn't

sure how long she spent in meditation, but eventually, she felt a subtle chill and a feeling of presence, causing her eyes to snap open.

"Well, at least you are not wholly blind," Elder Jiao commented dryly from where he now sat, or rather lay, leaning against the arm of the divan. His bald head was bare today, and he wore robes in an absolutely hideous shade of yellow that hurt her eyes to look at for too long.

"Greetings, Elder Jiao," Ling Qi said hastily, clasping her hands to bow respectfully to the older man. "Thank you very much for granting me the honor of your time."

He looked down at her with a neutral expression and then sighed, waving one bony hand dismissively. "Yes, I think that will be quite enough simpering. Get off the floor and take a proper seat, girl. The chairs are not entirely for decoration."

"Of course, Honored Elder," Ling Qi agreed, rising quickly to her feet and moving to do as instructed. She settled herself in the nearest seat nervously. She still wasn't comfortable with formality, and Elder Jiao's lax attitude made it hard to judge what was appropriate behavior.

The Elder watched her, a spark of amusement in his odd eyes. "You have decided what you desire to be instructed in for this week, I hope?" he asked, turning his gaze to study his fingernails, seemingly losing interest in her.

"I had hoped to receive your instruction in the ways of improving my perception of the world," Ling Qi said, inclining her head respectfully. "More specifically, I have had trouble with unraveling the trails and secrets left behind by my enemies and was hoping for your insight in investigating such matters."

He looked up with a hint of interest. "Is that so? Not quite what I expected, but then again, I suppose you are playing at being half a spymaster for that Cai child, aren't you?"

"I am honored by your attention," Ling Qi said. "Yes, I have been performing a few small tasks for Lady Cai. I have my own interests to seek out as well." She considered her next words. The Elder was a moon cultivator with an aspect of the New Moon bound as his companion so she added, "The Grinning Moon has given me a task."

"I see," he said, not sounding particularly impressed. "And your second request?"

Ling Qi hesitated then drew the bundle of bags she had looted from the barbarian shaman out of her ring. "I humbly request instruction in the formation arts, so that I may break the seals upon these. The script is very complex, and I worry that my current skill is insufficient."

The Elder squinted at the unassuming hide bags in her lap before his expression soured. "You were one of those involved in that little mess, weren't you? I suppose it speaks well of your luck that you are sitting here today and not lying buried in our new lake to be," he said irritably. "Junior Sister Ying would not have allowed you to keep that prize if she sensed anything truly dangerous within."

Ling Qi looked at the man in consternation. "Junior Sister Ying?" she muttered under her breath. Elder Jiao appeared much younger than Elder Ying, although his qi was near non-existent to her senses.

Unsurprisingly, the Elder heard her and let out an amused snort. "Girl, if you still believe the appearance of age means anything, you have not been paying attention. Shi Ying looks as she does

because she has always been a nosy old woman, even as an unblossomed girl. I too remain as I always have, a refined gentleman of impeccable taste and charm."

It was a true monument to her self-control that Ling Qi managed to keep her expression utterly neutral in the wake of that statement. Her gaze did not flick down to the monstrosity of a minister's robe the man wore. Not even for a moment.

The Elder could probably sense the gist of her thoughts though, given the look he gave her during the uncomfortable silence that stretched in the aftermath of his words.

"Hmph. Children these days," he grumbled. Then he was standing in front of her, less than a meter away. She did not see him move or even feel a fluctuation of qi. He simply changed positions from one moment to the next. "Put that away, and come along then, girl. I shall be assigning you some coursework to determine your formations skill for future lessons, so we will begin with honing your observational skills."

"Of course, Elder Jiao," Ling Qi said, hurrying to stand up and dismiss the bags back into her ring before following after the older man already striding toward the entrance of the cave.

In the hours that followed, she was forced to strain her senses and recall details far in excess of what she normally noticed. Remembering the number of leaves on a particular branch or the exact placement of stones on the side of the road was merely the beginning. To an outsider, it might seem like she was simply following the man on an easy stroll through the upper mountain, answering a constant stream of questions, but to her, it quickly grew painful as she was forced to channel qi through her eyes and ears for far longer than before until her head throbbed and her dantian grew empty.

Trying to track and catalogue every detail of her environment left her feeling bleary and exhausted by the time the Elder waved her off and vanished. He left her with a thick workbook full of formations problems and questions to be completed by the day after next. ... Apparently, they would be adding her qi senses to the training efforts tomorrow.

Ling Qi spent much of the evening that followed working through the complex and difficult workbook, stopping only to meditate and cycle qi through the exercises within the Argent Mirror jade slip as she incorporated the insights gained during the day's exercises with Elder Jiao.

As the sun rose over the horizon, she set aside her work for other pursuits. She couldn't afford to sit inside and study all day. Zhengui's bottomless appetite saw to that. Given his growth and restlessness, she had decided to start giving him a more active role in acquiring his food, but she found herself unsure of how best to do that due to a certain mismatch in their abilities.

There really wasn't any getting around it. Zhengui was very slow and lacking in agility. He was also very easily distracted, which brought them to the current situation.

"Don't go running off like that," she scolded, crouching in front of the snake-tortoise.

"Sorry, Big Sister." Gui gazed up at her with doleful green eyes.

"Wanted the sparkly bug," Zhen grumbled, not looking up at her. "Could have caught it."

"I'm sure you could have," Ling Qi said evenly, keeping a straight face. "But this forest is dangerous. You have to stay close when we're hunting, okay?" They were down in the forest at the base of the mountain. There was a population of wood-aligned hares down here, and their cores made for good eating for the little spirit, even if the meat tasted like wet tree bark to her.

Surprisingly, that wasn't the end of it. His serpentine head flicked its tongue at her. "Big Sister is boring. She doesn't let us do anything."

"Rude!" The tortoise head glared up at his other half. "Don't talk to Mo... Big Sister like that!"

She watched the two heads bicker with some bemusement. That was the first time Zhengui had talked back to her in any way. She wasn't sure how to feel about that. Zhen was the more brash of the two, and she had strong suspicions that most of the trouble her spirit got into was instigated by the serpent. Well, not all of it. When it came to nibbling on random things, Gui was usually the guilty one.

Ling Qi hesitated to scold him further though. It was true that she had brought him out here to participate, but her lack of certainty as to what his role should be had left her doing everything herself. She glanced briefly around the small sun-dappled meadow they were in.

"Well," she considered, drawing out the word to get their attention. "If you're bored, I suppose I should give you some work too." She recalled the scorched divots left throughout the house garden, and a plan began to form. She needed to test his abilities after all.

Gui regarded her with rapt attention and Zhen with reluctant interest as she continued. "If you want to help your Big Sister hunt, you're going to have to be able to hide like me. Do you think you can do that?"

Zhengui scuffed his stubby paws against the dirt, both sets of eyes looking uncertain. "... Can't reach the branches to be like Big Sister," Gui said, sounding embarrassed and worried. He was afraid to disappoint.

"Too heavy and slow," Zhen scoffed. "I could," he added proudly.

Ling Qi huffed and reached out, brushing her fingers over Gui's eye ridge affectionately, even as she fixed Zhen with a stern look. "You'll need to work together," she admonished. "I know who's been digging up the flowerbeds to get at the roots," she continued lightly, drawing guilt from the tortoise. "So I want you to use that skill to bury yourself into the dirt. I'll chase the food back here, and then you," she said, pointing to the black-scaled serpent, "are going to catch it. Does that work for you?"

Gui pawed at the dirt thoughtfully, but Zhen gave an excited hiss of agreement. She stayed behind long enough to watch Zhengui dig. Gui's efforts were fueled more by qi than his little stubby feet, but it still took only a minute or so for him to hide himself in the tall grass with his shell sticking out of the dirt, looking like no more than a particularly jagged stone.

She smiled when she felt a fluttering, hesitant fluctuation in his qi. Zhengui was trying to ape the way she suppressed her own energy when sneaking around. She thought a simple reassurance to him then set off to circle the clearing to flush out their prey while keeping an eye out for anything actually dangerous approaching. It took some time, but she eventually found what she was looking for, an

oversized hare with earth-toned fur nibbling away at some wild plant or another. Ling Qi could have killed it with one shot from her bow, but that wasn't the point of this exercise.

Instead, her arrow thudded into the dirt beside it, and she flared her qi, sending the beast running in the desired direction. Ling Qi followed along lazily, slipping through the branches silently and putting down additional shots as necessary to guide the beast. Shortly thereafter, it erupted from the brush into the meadow, and a final shot sent it swerving toward Zhengui's position.

The hare let out a high-pitched yelp as the loose dirt parted and a black shadow shot out, Zhen's fangs sinking into the rabbit. Ling Qi almost winced at the noise the rabbit made as it convulsed, steam rising from where the fangs bit into its flesh. She nocked an arrow as the hare jerked free and kicked Zhen in the head.

But there was no need for her to act. The hare crashed to the ground, its leg bound by a writhing tree root. This time, the serpent got it by the throat, and that was that.

Zhengui erupted from the dirt with a puff of dust and detritus, trundling excitedly toward her even as Zhen let out a displeased hiss, his lower half dragging him away from his still twitching prey. "I got it, Big Sister!" he sent, accompanied by a happy chirp.

Ling Qi dropped down from the tree, grinning as she moved to crouch in front of him and pat his dusty shell. "That was a good trick," she praised. "I didn't know you could do that."

"It was my venom that killed it," Zhen scoffed in displeasure. The thought had a slight taste of a childish whine to it.

"You did a good job too. You're such a tough little guy," Ling Qi soothed, stroking under the serpent's chin in the way that she knew he liked.

Zhen nuzzled against her fingers, and his tongue tickled her skin. "It was easy," Zhen bragged.

"Can we eat now?" Gui asked, looking up at her with hunger in his bright eyes. "Big Sister will get the core?"

"I will," she reassured, glancing at the kill. "Just hold on while I divide it up for you, alright?" Ling Qi would have to encourage Zhengui to keep trying new techniques, but it seemed she had hit on a method for including him in hunts.

Once she had let Zhengui eat his fill, she took him back home to rest. At just over a month since his hatching, he still tired out relatively quickly. Of course, with the advancement in his cultivation, she had a feeling that wouldn't last long. He was growing more energetic by the day, and he would soon reach the late stage of the first realm. At that point, she would start bringing him with her, stored away in her dantian.

# **Bonus Chapter - Cold/Alone**

Her feet hurt. Ling Qi's last set of sandals had broken a month ago, and the dirty rags she had wrapped around her feet did little to keep out the cold. The loose, baggy clothing that hung off of her stick thin frame weren't much better. Whatever color they might have been once, they were now the dull brownish grey of excessive wear, marked by ragged patches and stitch works. At least, in combination with her sloppily shorn hair, they helped to make her look like a boy to anyone who didn't care to look closely.

Glittering flakes of snow drifted through the cold air to alight on streets and homes, painting a dusting of white over the city, and turning the often muddy streets hard and cold. People hurried along on their business, the winter's chill adding urgency to their steps. It did not snow often in Tonghou, but when it did, it meant that the winter would be a hard one.

Ling Qi did her best to keep her head down as she wove through the late evening crowd, clutching a worn and dirty basket to her chest. Though she was tall for her age, adults still towered over her, and she had no chance of pushing through a crowd of workmen returning home from their labor. Her breath hitched as a man nearby glanced her way, but she kept her eyes down and tried not to look suspicious. He looked away, and she relaxed.

No, running was a mistake, she had learned that well in the last year, better to appear normal, just a poor boy running errands. Her heart beat faster as she considered the faint warmth still emanating from the basket she clutched to her chest. Under the scuffed linen cover, there were still two dumplings, the last of the sellers stock for the day. With every step she took, her hope grew that the late hour and the chill would be enough for the woman to ignore the loss. The market would be closing down for the night in a matter of minutes after all, what were a couple of dumplings to her?

Her stomach rumbled, and she clutched the basket tighter. To her, they meant quite a lot. A night without an aching belly from eating bread that was only a *little* moldy, a night without having to try and pick grains of rice or other scraps out of the trash.

She just needed to make it a little further.

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Her hands hurt. Bai Meizhen sniffled as she held her hands against her chest, sitting beside the garden pond. The burns and blisters had been cleaned and her fingers wrapped and bandaged, but the teacher had said the pain would teach her not to make such mistakes in the future. She lowered her head further, letting her white hair hide the shameful redness of her eyes. The only mistake she made was not watching her cousin Nuying more closely.

She remembered the faint clink of glass containing the Viper Lotus Essence had tipped over, the other girls smirk as her hands had started to burn. She should have been more careful. She knew that she had to rely on herself. If she accused Nuying, it would only make things worse. Nuying's Mother was, Bai Zhilan the General of Zhengjian's soldiers, and her Father a skilled alchemist. They would support their daughter.

Who would support her? Mother was gone, and father was a cowardly outsider who could not even meet her eyes, let alone Aunt Zhilan's. He had not even been home when she returned from her lessons anyway. Despite herself, she sniffed again. What good would he have been anyway, she didn't care about his stupid apologies and empty words.

She shivered, but did not move. She did not want to be in their apartments right now, no matter the winter chill. The small girl curled up beside the pond, and very carefully did not cry.

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Ling Qi ducked into the mouth of a narrow alley. Over head, the sagging roofs of the two buildings almost touched, showing only a tiny sliver of the iron grey sky. She clutched her basket tightly as she ducked behind a stack of worn and broken crates, and strained her ears. She heard the sound of feet beating against pavement, and caught a flash of her pursuers running past. An older boy with a dirty yellow scarf on his head, he didn't even look down the alley at all.

Ling Qi let out the breath she had been holding, and tried to hold back tears. Why had the yellow scarves chosen now to expand their territory? It was a miracle that she had spotted the boy before she had gotten any closer. She had offended them already by refusing recruitment, but she had seen what happened to their 'look outs'. Bait was more like it. She would have to find new streets to haunt.

Her eyes widened as she heard footsteps approaching again, beyond the dull clamour of street traffic. Fearfully, she peered around the corner, and saw the scowling boy ducking into the alleyway. With only a moment to react, Ling Qi acted on instinct, clutching the basket in one arm, she shoved the teetering crates as the boy stepped into the alleyway. He only had a moment to shout in alarm before the whole rickety stack crashed down on him.

Ling Qi didn't even look back. She fled.

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Bai Meizhen trudged inside, all attempts at grace abandoned, her sodden gown leaving a trail of pond water across the polished floor. She stood silently as the household servants toweled her dry and changed her clothes. None of them spoke to her, none of them could look her in the eye. Even as pathetic as she was, the embers of Grandmother Serpent that burned in her eyes cowed even the Awoken.

It was too bad that it was meaningless against her own cousins. She should have known that they would find her in the gardens. Another stupid mistake, Mother would be ashamed of her. Bai Meizhen was silent as she returned to her room through hollow and empty halls. Her cousins words hurt because they were right. She was a shameful existence, too soft and weak to be a proper Bai, when the clan needed every ounce of strength it could get. That was why Mother had died after all. The clan had been too weakened to refuse. Enemies circled them always, just waiting for weakness to show.

Shutting the door to her room silently, Bai Meizhen sat on the edge of her bed, a flat pallet with only a minimum of cushion. Luxury unearned corrupted and bred weakness. Grandfather's words echoed in her ears. It was one of the things he had changed, she knew from listening to the words her elders

deigned allow her to overhear. She stared blankly at her empty room and it's plain walls, only slowly turning her eyes to the only other furnishings in the room.

Bai Meizhen slid to the floor in front of the small bookshelf that stood beside her bed, and traced her small hands over the spines. Lesson and workbooks made up the majority, but there was one that was different. Carefully, she slid her only treasured possession from the shelves, and cradled the illuminated copy of *Thousand Lakes*, *Thousand Tales* to her chest, clutching it tightly, despite the ache in her fingers.

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Ling Qi smiled as she nestled herself amidst the warm straw filling the crate. It was an almost miraculous find. A packing crate fallen from some wagon or another, empty of its goods, but still full of straw. She had found it in her flight from the Yellow Scarves boy, tucked away at the end of a winding combination of alleys that she had never found before. It was only pure fortune that she had spotted a gap in the barrier nailed into place, eyes drawn by the gleam of an old glass chime, and its gleaming crescent charms, sealing the entrance to the winding corridors between ramshackle old buildings.

She took another bite of the dumpling in her hand, chewing slowly and carefully to savor every last bit of flavor. One was already gone, and she wanted it to last as long as possible. Warmth and comfort filled her for the first time in a very long time, despite the scratchy straw surrounding her.

It wouldn't be forever, she knew, the owners of the buildings would notice and drive her out eventually... but she might just make it through the winter after all.

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Bai Meizhen sat in bind, wrapped in her thin blanket, looking down at its' pages. There were many illustrations in her book, the last thing Mother had given her, but this one was her favorite. It lay at the end of the Tale of the Sisters, and showed White Serpent and Black Viper in their bloodstained gowns, embracing atop the mound formed by the broken bodies of their foes.

Gently, she traced her fingers over Black Viper's tearstained face, resting on White Serpent's shoulder. She drank in the relief on her painted expression, and then her eyes drifted to the face of White Serpent, full of affection and love for her younger sister.

Her heart ached, as it always did when she looked upon her favorite image. Such things seemed so impossibly far away. She remembered Xiao Lin, her Mother's handmaiden. She had been stern and humorless, but nonetheless, Bai Meizhen remembered the older woman slipping her still wriggling treats from the kitchens.

But she had followed Mother.

"Young Miss," a servants voice arose from outside of her door, careful and tentative. "Your Father is returning soon, and the Lady Suzhen will be visiting with him. They wish for your presence. May I enter to prepare you?"

Bai Meizhen closed her book hastily. "Y-you may," she said, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. She cared not for Father, but Aunt Suzhen, what could such an esteemed figure want with her?

Some part of her was afraid, afraid that her shameful weakness had finally drawn true censure, but... That would be Grandfather's duty.

No, she decided as the servant entered her room. She would just have to be on her best behavior, and show her Aunt that she was a true Bai.

# **Chapter 105 - Tutelage 2**

Ling Qi soon fell into a new routine of training and cultivation. With the aid of Elder Jiao's lessons, Ling Qi's cultivation of the neglected Argent Mirror Art began to progress again. As she learned to channel qi through her mortal senses, its lessons grew clearer. By taking those same weaves and turning them inward on herself, she could ward herself from foreign qi attempting to infiltrate her system to deceive or debilitate. This Tranquil Rebuke technique could, in some circumstances, even retaliate against such attempts.

In turn, this self-awareness and her training with Meizhen fed into her cultivation of the Sable Crescent Step art. More and more, it was growing easier to channel dark qi through her legs and spine without losing her focus, and she was on the cusp of being able to utilize her Crescent's Grace technique even during the day. The dense water and dark qi of the Black Pool where they sparred certainly didn't hurt.

Even ignoring her arts, there were benefits to personal lessons with Elder Jiao. Although the Elder's manner was irritating and his utter lack of praise for her efforts frustrating, she was learning. She learned how to pick out a dozen visual details at a glance and parse the sounds, smells, and feel of natural qi. She was even beginning to learn how to better read people through both physical and spiritual tells. Ling Qi just wished Elder Jiao didn't phrase those lessons as commentary on how easily read and open her own tells were.

It was with these lessons in mind that she continued her investigation into Yan Renshu.

She began her search for information in the market, after having taken a bit of time to disguise herself to avoid any questioning being traced back to her. She had fallen out of practice with such things, but she thought she did a pretty good job. It helped that her usual wear, the Cai-gifted robe, was pretty recognizable these days so spending a handful of red stones on makeup, clothes, and other things had a disproportionate effect.

Her new strategy was to determine if there were any major purchases of cultivation supplies going out into the more wild areas of the mountain. She had exhausted physical trails last week, so this time she was going to try the economic trail. The first few leads turned out to just be older disciples who had chosen to build freestanding homes out of the usual areas, but eventually, she came upon something more suspicious.

There were several shops in the market which were selling semi-regular bulk shipments to disciples that, according to her investigations, should not have been able to afford them, or who had been among those who had run off in the aftermath of Sun Liling's return. Tracking the disciples' movements proved difficult however, Most lead to dead ends out in the woods. But she caught a break when some lead her to discover sites that showed signs of being used as temporary camps.

From there, she found further traces leading her deeper into the wilder parts of the mountain until. she managed to catch sight of an early second realm disappearing into the side of a rock formation. Hiding nearby, she witnessed others doing so as well, and in following the disciples that left whatever base was hidden behind the rock illusion, she heard the name of Yan Renshu on their lips.

Her first urge was to immediately slip inside, but she restrained herself. As galling as it was to stop so close to her goal, she was wary of going into enemy territory alone. She hadn't truly suffered a loss yet, and she wasn't eager to find out what it was like.

She managed to pick up a bit more about the base she had found from watching the comings and goings. There were, from the looks of it, around ten to fifteen disciples residing there, most of which seemed to be production students, talisman crafters in particular. Her fingers itched at the loot that must be inside such a place, unprotected by the rules of the market.

However, much to her frustration, she could not confirm whether Yan Renshu himself was inside.

All too soon, the time for her lessons with the Elder drew near, and she had to withdraw. As Sun Liling and her allies remained stubbornly hidden, Ling Qi would continue observing and investigating Yan Renshu's forces in the afternoons to follow.

She was a bit nervous about today's lessons. She would be turning in the formations workbook the Elder had assigned her, and given the number of problems she had failed to solve, she wasn't feeling confident about it.

That feeling only grew as she sat stiffly in one of the plush seats lining the room as Elder Jiao paged lazily through the book. She was certain he was doing it on purpose to wind her up; there was no way the man really needed that much time to examine her work. She kept her gaze on her own lap rather than on the room around her; with the exception of the painting of Xin, the decorations changed every day, and today, the hangings depicted disturbing images of twisted, misshapen spirits against backdrops of stars and disquieting underground vistas that hurt her eyes to look at.

Minutes ticked by in silence, and she could do little but endure and think. Su Ling had spoken to her earlier this morning, asking if she would be training at the vent. She was happy to find one of her friends seeking her out for once, and even more glad to have one of her training partners back. She was looking forward to spending time with her after this lesson.

"Your technical proficiency is somewhat lacking." The Elder's dry voice shook her from her thoughts. "And I cannot call any of your solutions, such as they are, inspired. Nor can I find among your work any particular specialization." His tone was neutral and bored. "What in the world do you want?"

She hunched her shoulders defensively. "My apologies for the penmanship. I will take more time in the future," she responded, even though she had taken more time than usual. "I'm afraid I do not know how to answer such a broad question." A bit of irritation slipped in despite her best efforts, and she winced out how snippy her words sounded.

He scoffed, but thankfully, did not seem offended. When she chanced a glance upward, she thought he actually looked amused.

"Then consider the context of my words, child," he said, making the book vanish from his hands in a swirl of shadow. "What do you seek from the formation arts? I would hope you are not wasting my time here. Your skill is sufficient for everyday minutiae already."

"Honored Elder," she began carefully. "I admit, most of my interest is in breaking and bypassing formations rather than crafting them. You recall the bags I showed you the first day?"

"I do. I am hardly senile yet," Elder Jiao said dryly, leaning back against the wall where he sat on the divan. "Is that truly all you want? Do you find the formation arts so uninteresting?" he asked, raising one hairless brow.

"Not as such," she replied, picking her words carefully. Ling Qi was wary of the attention he was giving her and the slight undercurrent of danger in the air. "They are versatile and useful, but nothing I have been able to acquire is useful in the immediate sense. I just have so many things to do that spending time learning individual arrays seems..."

He regarded her coolly before snorting. "Well, not an unexpected answer. The sort of arrays available in the archive are hardly the sort of thing to compete against the ability to shoot lightning from one's eyes."

Ling Qi blinked. "Is there an art like that in the archive?"

"I would not suggest it," he said airily. "Very unstable, and difficult to aim. It can give the user rather terrible migraines as well." He flicked his sleeve dismissively. "The formation arts are a thing of infinite complexity... but its masters are not prone to sharing."

"So, the arrays in the archives..." Ling Qi reasoned out slowly. "They're just the things everyone knows, aren't they?"

"Quite so," Elder Jiao said with a chuckle. "Formations that are used so commonly that no one is going to hide them. That is not to say that you cannot advance in the art using those materials however. Can you tell me how?"

Ling Qi's expression soured. "... You have to create them yourself, don't you? By using the primers available."

"Or convince a master to teach you, yes," Elder Jiao agreed. "I will inform you now that I have no inclination to do so."

Ling Qi smiled bitterly. The reminder that these were limited training sessions was hardly welcome. "Of course, Honored Elder," she replied, inclining her head. "I would be happy to receive your insights into the foundations of the art."

He eyed her consideringly then flicked his billowing sleeve again. This time, she had to hastily raise her hands to catch the scroll and brush case he had tossed at her. "Then pay close attention, child. I will not repeat myself."

Ling Qi hastily moved to unroll the blank scroll and prepare herself to take notes. She absolutely would not waste this.

Elder Jiao was, for all his irreverence, obviously an expert in formations. She could barely keep up with his words on the interactions between the basic characters and the functions of their components, as well as the ways in which the characters could be altered in order to nullify or bypass their effects.

For the next few hours, there was no sound except that of his voice and her brush, and numbers and characters danced behind her eyes by the time she staggered out of the cave. His words had given her inspiration though, and she fell upon the bags the moment she got home.

With a new eye for the difficulty of the 'locks', she was able to quickly divide the more difficult ones from the less secure containers, allowing her to work on disarming the less lethal countermeasures. The first bag opened easily but was useless, containing only small curiosities like strings of beads, a lock of dark brown hair, a polished bone hairpin, and other such things. No talismans, elixirs, or anything else useful.

The next bag contained a rather large amount of crow bones, which was creepy but equally useless.

Only on the third did she find anything useful. The bag had three stoppered clay vials full of liquid, two of them airy and light and the third thick and black. Ling Qi could tell they were potent elixirs at a glance. At the bottom of the bag, wrapped in leather, lay a book with a pale white cover. It was full of text that she could make neither heads nor tails of. The characters were crude and blocky, completely unlike the Imperial script.

Unfortunately, her efforts ended there. The 'locks' on the final bag stymied her, proving frustratingly unbreakable in their construction. Still, it was not a bad haul.

# **Chapter 106 - Tutelage 3**

Her efforts to unlock the shaman bags nearly made her late to her meeting with Su Ling, so she abandoned the project for now to meet with her friend at the vent. Since Su Ling intended to practice with her sword, Ling Qi thought it appropriate to cultivate her Thousand Ring Fortress Art. Ling Qi felt like she was really beginning to get the hang of the art, even if it was against her usual inclinations.

Of course, that turned out to have its' own problems....

"Fuck! It feels like I hit a mountain." Su Ling grimaced as the practice blade fell from her hand. "I can't feel my fingers," she complained as she shook her hand

"Are you alright?" Ling Qi asked, lowering her own hands from a guard position.

"It's fine," Su Ling said grumpily, glaring down at her trembling hand as if to still it by sheer force of will. "I guess I forgot just how ridiculous you are."

Ling Qi looked away uncomfortably. Su Ling had actually landed a pretty good hit, driving her blunted blade into Ling Qi's gut while she had been distracted trying to fully activate of her Thousand Ring Fortress techniques. It just... hadn't mattered. Between her greater physical cultivation and the layers of defensive qi woven into her flesh, she had barely felt it.

Was this what Meizhen felt like when sparring with her?

Dismissing that odd thought, Ling Qi suggested, "Why don't we take a breather then? You still haven't told me what brought this on. I don't mind practicing with you, but I'm curious."

Su Ling huffed and bent down to pick up her weapon, twin tails swishing behind her with agitation. Ling Qi didn't miss the still unhealed wounds and patches of torn fur. "I need to get better at this. I've been relying on my illusions too much."

"Yeah, I can understand how that might be a problem," she said noncommittally. Ling Qi suspected it was less a matter of necessity and more a desire to avoid using the illusionary skills granted from her heritage. "That said, do you have an art lined up? Mundane swordplay will only get you so far."

The girl's pointed ears twitched violently, and her expression grew sour. "I have some points stored up," she said gruffly. "Gonna go to the second floor. I just figure it's no good to get an art if my skills are still crap." Ling Qi couldn't help but feel that there was something Su Ling wasn't saying.

"Have you considered a tutor?" Ling Qi asked tentatively as she moved to sit down by the vent. She needed to cycle her qi to solidify the gains she had made with her defensive art. "I can barely hold a sword without stabbing my own foot. Sparring with me won't help with learning swordsmanship."

"Too expensive," Su Ling answered, sitting down herself to cycle. Ling Qi could see the bruises on her palm start to heal already. "Just getting an art is gonna cost me."

Ling Qi hummed in response. That was true. Inner Sect tutoring was pretty pricey. She didn't regret trying it herself though. "Well, if you think so..." She trailed off awkwardly, and an uncomfortable silence fell between them.

"What's bothering you?" Ling Qi asked bluntly after a few minutes. "You've been really wound up," she added, looking at the other girl out of the corner of her eye. "It's not about the sword arts."

Su Ling kept her eyes on the stars overhead. "I just wanted to hit something for a while. Got the damn silly idea to ask you, and all I managed was to hurt my hands."

"What's wrong, is someone making trouble for you?" Ling Qi would take care of it if so.

Su Ling snorted. "No, and if there was, I'd tell ya to stay out of it. The usual assholes aren't bothering me. I got someone else to sell my stuff through. Just... been thinking about things."

"That usually makes me want to hit something too," Ling Qi quipped. "... I'm guessing it has something to do with your breakthrough?" Ling Qi waited for Su Ling's answer in the silence that followed.

"I'm fucking tired of not having any choices on my path," Su Ling admitted quietly. "Seems like I can only get stronger by being like that fucking fox. But, well, you can see that I'm pretty shit with a sword."

"You're not great, but it's not like you've been practicing long either," Ling Qi pointed out, knowing that Su Ling wasn't in the mood for pretty lies.

"Says the girl who picks up a bow and starts tagging bullseyes a few hours later," Su Ling replied dryly. "Nah, I've worked at it, and I can tell. I'm just not good with it. All I'm good with are illusions and hunting techniques. I wanted something that was mine, and I don't want to give up on the sword. At the same time, I feel like an idiot wasting resources on something I'm not much good at."

Ling Qi didn't really have the experience to speak on this. She hadn't really failed at anything she had tried her hand at since coming here.

"I think it's too soon to begin giving up on swords. Besides, what it comes down to is that you enjoy using a sword, right? It's worth doing just for that. We don't have so little that we have to put everything into just getting by anymore."

"Hmph. Easy for you to say," Su Ling retorted, but there wasn't any heat in it. "You ready to keep going, or are you just gonna sit around all night?"

Ling Qi looked back to see the other girl standing up and dusting off her pants, ready for another round. "Sure," she laughed. "I can always use the exercise."

The two of them practiced well into the night, and soon, sparring and cultivating with Su Ling at the vent in the evenings became another part of her routine. The rest of the week flew swiftly by.

However, there remained one thing to do that Ling Qi had been putting off. Namely, she had to compose a response to her mother's last letter. She honestly wasn't certain what to think of the idea of a younger sibling. Despite what she had told Zhengui to call her, she had only the vaguest idea of what siblings were supposed to do. She was glad her... younger sister was apparently healthy, as was her mother, and that her support was helping them both. At the same time, she was even more unsure of what to say.

The tone of her mother's letters also bothered her. Her mother was good at talking in circles and not saying what she meant. It was hard to tell what she was really thinking, especially through the medium of letters. Ling Qi wished she could meet her face-to-face again and have a proper conversation.

Unfortunately, meeting in person just wasn't possible. Ling Qi could probably pay for transport, but the presence of her sister complicated any plans. A child that young had no business going on such a trip, and even without a child, travel between cities was deadly for mortals. They were just so... fragile.

That in itself was a slightly discomfiting thought. When had she started thinking of people that way? Ling Qi did not particularly care for that line of thought and wasn't sure what to do with it frankly. She shook her head and began to compose her letter.

#### Mother,

I was glad to hear back from you, even if the contents of your letter was a little shocking. I admit, I have little idea of what to do with the knowledge that I have a sibling. I am glad the two of you are healthy and well.

I enjoy my life here at the sect, but it does have its own troubles. I have made a few friends among my fellow disciples. I never thought that I would end up mingling with nobility, but my best friend is a member of a ducal family. She has helped me a great deal in fitting in. I also had some trouble with a very persistent boy for a time, but that trouble seems to have passed.

Right now, I am training hard to prepare myself for the end of the year tournament, as well as supporting my allies' own preparations. Much of my time is spent taking care of the spirit I have bound. Would you believe that I hatched a xuanwu, Mother? I did not even think them real before coming here. Zhengui is adorable, if endlessly hungry, so his care can be taxing. It is well worth it though.

Oh! I seem to have discovered a real talent for archery, as well as music. I cannot thank you enough for the lessons you gave me. I do not think I would be where I am now if you had not taken the time to teach me the flute.

*I miss those lessons very much.* 

So in turn, let me ask you, Mother. How are you? What are you doing now that you no longer need worry about money? I do not know you as well as I should, but I would like to rectify that.

#### Ling Qi

It had taken her a few tries, but eventually, her letter was composed and sent. She was unsure about blatantly discussing cultivation matters with her mother, and she certainly wasn't going to tell her about the fights she had been in, but this... It felt like something a child should write to their parent.

She would look forward to the response, and perhaps, in the not so distant future, she would find the occasion to visit Tonghou City again. She wondered if any of the guards would recognize her when she did.

She hoped so, if only to see what their expressions would look like.

# **Chapter 107 - Tutelage 4**

The sky was a tapestry of dark storm clouds hanging low over the icy mountain peak. Howling winds and driving snow both flowed around the black pool and its ravine, guided away by an unseen force that allowed no more than gentle flurries to fall, drifting among the notes of the song played by its occupants.

Ling Qi sat beside the icy spirit Zeqing upon a bench of ice sculpted from the permanent frost of the mountain peak and played a melody of forgotten places and loss. She wondered briefly if an observer might think her a spirit as well, given the similarities in garb she shared with her teacher. Ling Qi had gotten used to proximity with the snow woman; the perpetual chill that surrounded Zeqing was hardly a bother, and even contact was merely uncomfortable, rather than painful.

She allowed her thoughts to drift elsewhere as she played, gazing up at the churning sky. Her weekly schedule remained densely packed, and juggling everything she wanted to do was difficult. But beyond anything else, she wanted to reconnect with her friends this week. Training was all well and good, but she couldn't repair her relationship with Meizhen with such impersonal actions. There was Li Suyin and Su Ling to consider as well. Xiulan's continued absence worried her, but there was little she could do about that for the moment.

She did not want to end up alone again.

"Are you well?" Ling Qi nearly jumped out of her skin when Zeqing's cool voice reached her ears, interrupting her thoughts. She hadn't even noticed the spirit ending her own melody. She met the spirit's empty white eyes.

"I'm sorry for my distraction," Ling Qi apologized, dipping her head in a brief bow. What did it say about her Sect's Elders that she was more comfortable acting casually with an inhuman spirit of ice and winter?

"It was not unpleasant," Zeqing responded, her hair billowing in unfelt winds as she turned her gaze back to the pool of black ice. "Those thoughts, whatever they were, resonated with the melody."

Ling Qi grew quiet at the unspoken question, fiddling idly with her flute as she gazed down at her lap. "I was just thinking about my friends and the distance between us lately. I'm going to fix it, but I suppose I'm still worried."

The snow woman let out a thoughtful hum. "I see. I suppose you speak of the serpent child you brought to this place?"

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably on her icy seat. "Among others. I apologize for not asking permission."

"It is nothing," the spirit assured, her nearly transparent fingers of ice making a clear clinking sound as they tapped thoughtfully against the body of her flute. "While I would be displeased to see half the Sect traipsing about, a companion or two in a private rendezvous is acceptable."

Ling Qi flushed slightly. "It's not like that," she replied, deflecting the spirit's implication. "I just...

There's been a bit of trouble between us lately, and things haven't been quite the same."

"Troubling," Zeqing mused. "I see your plight. That one's blood is far too strong for the most obvious methods of retaining companions. She could not be easily bound to your side."

Ling Qi shivered, reminded that the creature at her side was not human. "That... isn't really the problem," she said, choosing not to engage with that statement more than necessary.

"Isn't it? Your core is not so distant from mine. Of course you would desire to keep your... friends at your side for all time and ensure that they may never leave you," Zeqing said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"I suppose," Ling Qi said carefully, avoiding Zeqing's empty white eyes. That wasn't wrong, but it sounded bad somehow when it was said like that. She didn't really want to talk about this any more. "Where is Hanyi's father then? How do you keep him around?" she asked, deflecting the subject from herself. She was a little worried at the possible answer but was also curious.

The temperature plunged, and the light grew dim. Ling Qi winced.

"I devoured him spirit, blood and bone, so that he could never betray me again," Zeqing replied in a voice more akin to the howling of a blizzard wind than a human voice. She regained herself almost immediately, and the ominous feeling faded. "Beware those who come to ply you with gifts and flattery," she said, now appearing merely unhappy rather than murderous. "Far more reliable are those you bring and keep through your own efforts."

That sounded about right. It was much better to be the one in control of any given situation. It wasn't entirely right though in that a relationship couldn't be entirely one-sided and be any good. "Well, let's not dwell, right?" she asked, her voice perhaps a touch high. "Will you show me that altered sequence for Diapason again?"

The spirit of cold hunger at her side inclined her head, gown billowing. "Of course. No need to let unpleasant things stain our recreation." Zeqing raised her flute to her lips once more. "Listen closely."

It was harder to get comfortable practicing again. It wasn't as if Ling Qi was unaware of what sort of spirit the snow woman was; Tonghou was far enough south to sometimes see heavy snows in the winter, but hearing Zeqing casually discuss devouring someone was unsettling. Even if it was in the context of attempting to offer helpful advice.

Well, when she thought about it, that actually made it worse. Awkwardness aside, her time up on the peak was an enjoyable break from her hectic schedule, and she reluctantly descended the mountain peak after her lesson to return to her other tasks.

Not that it was unpleasant to spend more time with her friends. But while she may not have agreed with the extremity of the spirit's statements, Zeqing wasn't fundamentally wrong about her motivations.

When she arrived at the vent for the meeting she had arranged with Li Suyin, the other girl was already present, seated in the grass with an open text on her lap. Suyin looked up when Ling Qi arrived at the edge of the clearing and smiled brightly, raising her hand in greeting. "Ling Qi! It is good to see you again."

"And you as well," Ling Qi agreed, feeling happy at the genuine warmth she could see in the other girl's expression. She knew she was being silly. "We didn't exactly get a chance to talk at our last meeting. How is your arm?" she asked as she crossed the clearing to approach her friend.

"As good as new," Li Suyin replied cheerfully, flexing her formerly broken arm to demonstrate. "How have you been, Ling Qi? Su Ling said you were well, but said you didn't speak much of yourself."

"I'm doing alright," Ling Qi said, dropping to the ground beside her friend and allowing herself to sprawl without worry for dignity. "I've been really busy, but I'd like to think I've made some real gains from it. I managed to eke out some attention from Elder Jiao."

Li Suyin's eye widened in surprise and she smiled, reaching down to close the book in her lap as she did. "How wonderful for you! I am so glad to see you getting the attention you deserve."

Ling Qi glanced away, embarrassed at that assertion, but quickly forged on, sitting up straight as she summoned the manual she had found in the shaman's bags out from her storage ring. "That isn't the only thing I've gotten ahold of. I figured we could have a bit of fun working this one out together."

Her friend blinked but accepted the tome Ling Qi pushed into her hands. Suyin carefully opened the blank cover to peer at the somewhat crinkled pages inside, scanning across the odd blocky text. "How strange. Where did you get this?"

"I just found it while exploring," Ling Qi lied, remembering Elder Ying's warning not to speak of the shaman shehad encountered. "It was tucked away in some ruins," she elaborated. It was better to avoid outright falsehoods if she could. "Why is it strange?"

"Well, it looks like the script of the hill tribes in this region before they accepted Imperial rule," Li Suyin explained, interest lighting up her eye as she paged through the book. "Father had a handful of fragments in his collection, but nothing so complete."

Ling Qi cocked her head to the side. She had expected it to be Cloud Tribe writing. She hadn't been aware of any other languages in this area. "Oh? Your Father collected stuff like this? Are you from this province then? I never really asked."

Li Suyin looked up from the open manual and nodded. "I am from Jizhou," she said easily, only to grow sheepish at Ling Qi's lack of recognition. "Um... It is the northernmost city in the province and the primary hub of trade for goods going to and from the central provinces. Jizhou is second only to the capital seat of the Emerald Seas in splendor and size."

Ling Qi remembered that Suyin had mentioned that her father was some highly placed scribe. If she was from a place like that, her family must actually be pretty wealthy by mortal standards. "Ah, well, I'm just a bumpkin from Tonghou. Nothing exciting I can really say about the place." Nothing appropriate for company anyway.

Li Suyin chewed her on her lower lip. "... Well, there isn't anything wrong with that. Tonghou is still an important stop on the central north-south routes, even if the mines in the region are played out."

"You would know better than me," Ling Qi acknowledged, not feeling any need to talk up her old home. "So, our project," she continued, steering the subject back on track. "Can you read it then? This might be easier than I thought."

"Not... really. I know some of the characters, but I am hardly fluent," she admitted sheepishly. "But the language is very closely related to some of the older dialects of the Imperial tongue, so it should not be overly difficult to learn," she said more brightly.

"Hm. Maybe I can check out the archive and see if they have anything," Ling Qi mused. Before coming to the Sect, she would never have considered something like learning a language to be 'easy'.

"I can give you a list of useful texts to look into," Li Suyin agreed.

"Yo. Sorry I arrived a little late," Su Ling called as she approached from the edge of the clearing, making them both look up in surprise. Su Ling's qi was familiar enough that it tended to blend into the background if Ling Qi wasn't paying attention. "I had to finish up a batch of pills."

"No worries," Ling Qi said. "Suyin and I were just catching up. We have a project to work on together."

"Mm, it seems like it will be fun," Li Suyin said cheerfully. "Will the two of you continue working together as well?"

"That's the idea," Su Ling said gruffly, glancing between the two of them. "Assuming it's not gonna interrupt anything?"

"I figured we could take turns between physical practice and studying," Ling Qi replied, standing up and brushing the grass from her gown. "Anyway, Su Ling, I wanted to give you something. I got my hands on an art that I think would be great for you, and I figured I could save you some Sect Points." Ling Qi summoned the jade slip containing the Argent Current art to hand.

"Is that so," Su Ling said, her expression growing conflicted. "You don't have to do that."

"It's no trouble," Ling Qi said. "You can pay me back later if you feel the need," she added, hoping to assuage the girl's pride.

Su Ling frowned. "That's..." She trailed off, frustrated, then glanced at Li Suyin, who was looking at her worriedly. "That's not really the point," she said finally.

"What do you mean?" Ling Qi asked, lowering her hand.

"I want to find my own path," Su Ling said bluntly. "How can it be mine if I just take what you give me? I know you're not gonna take advantage of a debt, but all the same, I'd rather learn an art that I earned and picked out for myself."

That was understandable. Ling Qi may have gotten a little ahead of herself. "Well, the offer is there if you want it," she said, vanishing the slip. "We can just continue sparring with you practicing the sword then."

"Sounds good," Su Ling replied, looking relieved. Was the other girl really so worried about offending Ling Qi?

With that awkward moment past, the three of them were able to make an enjoyable afternoon of it, advancing their skills and cultivation. The translation efforts were off to a slow start, but that would improve once Ling Qi had time to swing by the archive for references. There was no rush because Li Suyin would be busy in the latter half of the week with an attempt to breakthrough to Silver.

## **Chapter 108 - Tutelage 5**

Ling Qi enjoyed a few hours of relatively relaxed training and study with her friends, but soon enough, it was time to start heading up the mountain to meet with Elder Jiao for the week's training. The paintings had changed again, this time depicting fancy halls filled with people in elaborate and expensive clothes mingling. They remained eerily lifelike, but it wasn't as distracting as the twisted eye and mouth-studded shapes that they had depicted the week before.

Ling Qi took her usual seat and clasped her hands neatly in her lap to wait, silently rehearsing the lines she had come up with to convince the Elder to teach her to be a better thief. The room was silent as Ling Qi practiced her lines, hoping to perfect her speech so as to avoid offending the prickly old man teaching her.

Given her distraction, Ling Qi jerked in surprise when a cool hand fell on her shoulder, instinctively jumping out of her seat to turn and face the person who had touched her. Unfortunately, she put too much force in the motion and practically launched herself out of her chair, only to crack her head against the low ceiling of the cavern.

Ling Qi managed to land on her feet but winced as she rubbed the top of her head, which throbbed with the force of the impact. She peered warily through the gloomy room to see who had startled her so. It took only a moment to recognize the person in question; a portrait of her had been staring at her all last week after all.

Xin stood beside her seat with a bemused expression, one hand on her hip. She wore a gown of dark blue and black, which glittered with starry light at her every movement, and her white hair was styled in an elaborate updo pinned in place with glittering onyx pins and jewelry.

"Feeling a little wound up, dear?" Xin asked compassionately, although Ling Qi could see the twinkle of humor in her red eyes.

Ling Qi wrestled her breathing back under control and did her best not to glower at the older... woman? Spirit? "My apologies," she said with a bow. "I was only startled by your presence, Honored-"

Xin clicked her tongue and for lack of a better word, flickered, appearing directly in front of Ling Qi to peer down at her. Had the woman been tall enough to do that before? "Don't be like that, young lady," she admonished, examining the point where Ling Qi had banged her head. "There is no call to speak to me so formally."

"Ah... Sorry?" Ling Qi tried, thrown off-balance as she felt Xin's cold hand come to rest on top of her head, washing away the minor ache with a feeling like cold water being trickled down her neck. "Why are you here?" she blurted out, feeling tongue-tied in the woman's presence. "I mean, did something happen with Elder Jiao?"

Xin took a step back, examining her with a critical eye. The gaze made Ling Qi feel vaguely childish, like it was her mother standing in front of her, checking to see if she had torn one of her gowns.

"Oh, he's just a little delayed," Xin replied dismissively, finally meeting Ling Qi's gaze with her own slightly luminescent one. "You have grown so well, haven't you," she said warmly. "I can hardly compare you to the skinny, dim spark you were when last we met."

"Thank you?" Ling Qi asked. It was true that she was no longer quite so malnourished, and she had grown much stronger. "You're looking well too?" she tried again, only to remember Elder Jiao's words at the end of the second part of Elder Zhou's test. "I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble."

"It was nothing, dear," Xin said, waving her hand carelessly to brush off the apology. "Becoming a voice for my greater self is merely uncomfortable at worst, and you have grown for it." Xin's gaze drifted downward to fix on Ling Qi's stomach, or rather, Ling Qi's dantian. "Well, I did have some hope of poaching you for myself. But the Grinning Moon will not treat you poorly."

Right, Xin was an aspect of the New Moon, Ling Qi thought. It made sense that Xin could tell what choice Ling Qi had made. "I hope not to fail in meeting her expectations. I did consider your offer strongly as well."

Xin looked pleased, raising her eyes back to Ling Qi's face. "I suppose we will see. You are hardly ready to choose a Way properly regardless. You're still in that experimenting stage, trying anything and everything," she said impishly. "Your spirit is quite muddled as of yet."

Ling Qi's expression grew concerned as she looked down, as if to examine herself. "... Is that bad?" she asked cautiously. "And what do you mean about choosing a Way?"

"You simply haven't found your true drive yet, which is hardly unusual for your age," Xin reassured. "As for a Way, all cultivators must eventually choose the concept which defines them. It is impossible to advance beyond what you call Cyan without..."

"XIN." Ling Qi flinched as Elder Jiao's voice boomed through the cavern, rattling the furniture. The shadows in the room roiled and swelled, tendrils of absolute darkness, opaque even to her vision, writhing across every surface as the light of the lantern flickered wildly. Worse still were the eyes, wide and glaring, gleaming like kaleidoscopes, that opened by the dozen across the shadows in the room.

"Oh, bother. I really thought that would hold him longer than this." The spirit sighed, resting her cheek in one hand but otherwise unperturbed. Ling Qi shot her an incredulous look.

"Twelve layers." The Elder's voice no longer rattled the furniture, but it was still painfully loud. The shadow of the divan boiled upward, bubbling like a pillar of tar as it took on Elder Jiao's features. He ignored her entirely in favor of glaring at Xin. "Why would you leave a twelve-layered dream cage around the workshop, you insufferable woman?!"

Ling Qi quietly scuttled off to the side, not wanting to be in the Elder's line of sight. As it was, his qi was nearly suffocating.

Xin crossed her arms, turning a frown on the Elder. "Do not take that tone with me, and cease the dramatics. You'll scare the poor girl to death."

Ling Qi hunched her shoulders, instinctively trying to appear small as the Elder glanced her way. Elder Jiao let out an irritated huff, but the twisting, reaching shadows receded, along with the oppressive

weight of his qi. "Did it occur to you just to ask if you wanted to accompany me?" he asked Xin pointedly, still sounding irritated.

"Is it not my duty as a wife to ensure that my husband does not grow lax?" Xin asked flippantly.

The Elder stared at Xin, unmoving, unbreathing, and utterly still. "I am ignoring you," he declared abruptly, as if handing out a proclamation from on high. "You," he continued, pointing at Ling Qi, "will also be ignoring her, or this lesson will end."

"That is hardly fair," Xin protested. "Come now. It wasn't that bad."

"Which of my teachings do you seek this week, Disciple?" Elder Jiao asked airily, as if he hadn't heard Xin.

Ling Qi glanced between the two, feeling terribly off-kilter. Somehow, her image of the Sect's Elders had been changed in a fundamental way. She fumbled with her words, trying to remember her rehearsed speech. "I... That is... I was hoping for the Honored Elder's advice on the matters of retrieving enemy resources from guarded locations or containers, as well as their person."

The "Honored" Elder gave her a flat look. "You want me to tutor you in the arts of thievery. Is that truly what you want to ask?"

Ling Qi shuffled her feet, ignoring Xin's laugh. "... Yes," she said in a small voice.

"My, what an insightful girl," Xin said smugly.

Still ignoring Xin, Elder Jiao merely palmed his face. "Why not? Come, Disciple," he said, flickering from the divan to the doorway.

"What are we doing?" Ling Qi asked, hurrying after him. She cast an apologetic look at Xin, who drifted after them, no longer pretending to walk.

"Live targets are required for this training," Elder Jiao said. "You shall be testing yourself against your fellow disciples at my instruction. You will, of course, be required to deal with the fallout of failure on your own. You will not mention your training."

Ling Qi grimaced. She really should have expected something like this. She supposed she would just have to do her best to avoid getting caught.

What followed was... tense. Elder Jiao would set her a task like pilfering stones or pills from a disciple or slipping into a home unnoticed and planting tokens in specific locations. There was nary a hint of advice, only a few casual pointers for improvement in the aftermath of such tasks. The difficulty ramped up quickly as they proceeded to the part of the mountain where many of the older disciples lived. Ling Qi switched the contents of people's bags, broke locks, planted pills and tokens in bedrooms and bathrooms, and rearranged furniture and knickknacks in the instants when their owners were out of the room.

... Somehow, she managed without getting caught once, even when the Elder commanded something ridiculous, like replacing a girl's hair pins from her dressing table without her noticing while the girl was putting them in.

Her success did seem to put the man in a better mood at least, and with each success, his advice on improving her cultivation of the more larcenous parts of her Sable Crescent Step art grew more useful. Indeed, the insights she gained from the Elder was enough to finally master the usage of Crescent's Grace technique even under the light of the sun, albeit at an increased qi cost. Xin was encouraging as well, but sadly, she had to ignore the spirit. Xin did not appear to take offense, focused as she was on needling Elder Jiao, who ignored her every attempt with great dignity.

It was, overall, quite a useful evening.

... Even if the news which reached her later of a spree of paint bombs, surprise hair dyes, and other prankish things, as well as fights breaking out over stolen property, made her desperately hope that no one ever discovered what she had been doing. She *knew* those tokens the Elder kept handing her were suspicious!

Ling Qi quickly fell into her week's routine after that. She spent the early hours practicing her music on the mountain top, meeting with Li Suyin and Su Ling in the afternoons, and receiving tutoring in the evenings. At night, she scouted and prepared for her eventual raid on Yan Renshu's base.

Translating the manual was slow going, although Li Suyin assured her that they were making great progress given the limited amount of time spent on it. It appeared to be a manual on the creation of formations constructs, focused around the use of bone as a medium, but the details and actual technical instructions still eluded them.

More important than any of that though was her upcoming outing with Meizhen. Well, she hadn't really billed it that way or actually told Meizhen that they would be having an outing. But since she knew that Meizhen was intending to go out, she simply rearranged her plans to walk with her to the market.

This... was a little awkward because Meizhen clearly hadn't expected her presence. Not that anyone else could tell Meizhen felt anything out of the ordinary at a casual glance. The pale girl beside her still moved with an effortless grace that made her seem as if she were gliding across the ground, all ethereal and fairy-like. Meizhen would look like a princess out of a storybook, Ling Qi mused, if not for the aura of gut-wrenching animal terror she radiated.

Ling Qi couldn't really compare to the other girl's poise. Though her balance was good, her strides were long and obvious, kicking up the hems of her dark gown with each step.

"What, precisely, did you need at the market?" Bai Meizhen questioned without taking her eyes off the path ahead of them as lower realm cultivators made way for them on the road. Meizhen did not acknowledge them.

"I thought I would shop around among the pill makers again. It's been awhile since I've stocked up," Ling Qi said. "And I might need to trade up on knives soon. My old set is subpar."

Meizhen gave a quiet hum of acknowledgement. "I see." To anyone else, it probably sounded like simple disinterest, but Ling Qi could read her friend a little better than that. Meizhen was uncomfortable.

"How about you?" Ling Qi pressed on. They could do this. Things didn't need to be awkward between them. "I don't think you've ever gone to the market with the intention to buy."

"My own resources are typically superior," Bai Meizhen acknowledged. She looked like she was going to fall silent again, but Ling Qi caught her eye and raised an eyebrow. Meizhen let out a near inaudible breath in response. "It is a matter of recreation. Nothing I would bother my family with."

Ling Qi blinked, her other eyebrow joining the first. "Really?" she asked with a hint of incredulity. "Just what kind of hobby would catch your attention?"

The pale girl stared ahead, her bearing stiff. "I have decided to improve my embroidery. It is a useful exercise in manual dexterity." Ling Qi wasn't sure who Meizhen was trying to convince with that excuse.

"Huh. I never expected you to pick up something so... delicate."

Meizhen furrowed her brows slightly. "What are you implying? It is a perfectly acceptable recreational activity for a young lady."

"Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it," Ling Qi apologized. "Did you practice at home?"

"... No," Meizhen admitted. "I had other priorities in my limited free time." Ling Qi suspected that those other priorities had been things like 'sleep' and 'extra training'.

"Well, I don't know too much about embroidery," Ling Qi said slowly. Mother had only just started teaching her that when she had run away. "But I can use a needle and thread well enough. Maybe we could practice a bit together?" She didn't miss the way her friend's shoulders subtly hunched inward, a sure sign of even greater discomfort in the reticent girl.

"... Cai Renxiang has already offered instruction," Meizhen finally said. "I am afraid I will have to decline."

Ling Qi's expression fell as they passed one of the milestones on the path to the market before she masked her disappointment. "Oh, well, that's fine. I can hardly compete with that. So you're going out to pick up a sewing kit?"

"I am," Bai Meizhen said, looking at Ling Qi out of the corner of her eye. "... I will still be available for our spars," she offered awkwardly.

"I'm glad. I just wish there was something we could do together that wasn't just work or practice," Ling Qi said, surprising herself with her own honesty.

"I do not see it as such," Meizhen said thoughtfully. "We are cultivators. Polishing one another's arts as we do together is hardly without its own... intimacy." Ling Qi hadn't thought about it like that. In the end, the one Meizhen showed her techniques and arts to in their entirety was Ling Qi, not Cai Renxiang.

"I guess so," she said, feeling better. "I'll tag along for your purchase all the same though. Even if you have all the money in the world, it's important to get a good price," she said, giving a sage nod at her own words.

Bai Meizhen let out an amused huff. "What manner of pampered songbird do you imagine me to be?" she asked scathingly. Her tone didn't hold any real heat though.

The shopping trip was quite fun. Meizhen could certainly make the disciples running the shops sweat, making it all the easier for Ling Qi to haggle them down. It made for an amusing diversion, and in the end, Ling Qi found herself glad that she had decided to tag along anyway.

## Chapter 109 - Theft 1

Unfortunately, her free time was still pretty limited. Taking Zhengui out to hunt and play was still time-consuming. He was growing quickly and getting close to reaching the late first realm. Ling Qi was anticipating the day when she could safely dematerialize him indefinitely, allowing him to come with her wherever she went.

Once he hit peak first realm though, she would have to help him prepare a proper nest. Snake-tortoises could apparently hibernate for upward of a month on their breakthrough to the second realm. That was something to worry about later. For now, she simply continued teaching him on being a patient and sneaky hunter. Zhengui was eager to please her and took to the lessons well. Mostly. He still got distracted gnawing on tree roots while digging sometimes, despite his serpentine half's protests.

Spirit rearing aside, the second half of her week's lessons with the Elder proved much less stressful but also less interesting. Xin had stopped popping in by that point, and the next subject she requested tutoring in, after expending the Sect Points to pick up the successor art to her first art, Zephyr's Breath, didn't seem to interest the Elder.

It didn't stop him from making it hell for her though because of course it didn't. She was left on her own in a steep ravine and told to follow the path to the end while hitting the targets he would present to her. What the Elder didn't say was that his targets, flickering, shadowy things shaped like humans, would be shooting back. The shadow missiles stung and bruised, even through her defenses, and she found herself having to rapidly adapt and learn their ranges and patterns, just to avoid getting pelted into the ground.

Which she kind of did the first time, and the second... and the third.

As the techniques were mostly improvements upon techniques in the Zephyr's Breath art, she found herself rapidly improving in the use of the Fleeting Zephyr successor art.

After she reached the end of the course the first time, the difficulty only redoubled. In order to pass the course, she now had to command and lead 'allied' constructs without loss. It forced her to further master the Fleeting Zephyr art, especially the new enhancement technique Encircling Winds, which allowed her allied constructs to quickly put down a target enemy, and On the Wind, which called upon the wind to help speed the steps of herself and her 'team' in their escape of the course.

By the time the week was nearing its end, Ling Qi was feeling quite wrung out. Su Ling and Li Suyin were busy that afternoon, the latter having secluded herself for breakthrough, and the former spending the afternoon in the archive to research and select her new sword art after being satisfied with her base swordsmanship skills.

With Meizhen busy as welland Gu Xiulan still absent, Ling Qi was left with surprisingly little to do. She spent some time simply puttering around the house, idly picking out melodies on her flute, but restlessness and lack of inspiration eventually drove her out for a walk with Zhengui snoozing away in his dematerialized state.

Her directionless stroll took her across the mountain, eventually turning toward the area dedicated to the pavilions and smaller meeting places. It was surprisingly busy, and she soon found herself drifting along to see what was going on.

As it turned out, there was a construction project at the pavilion where the council meetings took place. A dozen or so disciples wearing Cai's colors were at work around and within the pavilion, some with chisels and brushes and others with shovels and stakes. The commotion had drawn a crowd.

Observing from the edge of the clearing, Ling Qi grew curious. While she did not recognize most of the disciples in question, she did spot Xuan Shi strolling from one workstation to the next, his jangling ring staff tapping out a rhythm on the stone floor. Pausing at a workstation, Xuan Shi spoke quietly to the disciple there. The other boy hastily bowed his head to Xuan Shi and returned to his chiseling at the tiles with much more care than before.

Ling Qi approached, strolling across the unseen line that the crowd seemed reluctant to pass. A couple of the working disciples looked up, and one irritably turned toward her about to say something, only to freeze when their eyes met. Instead of speaking, the boy flushed and hastily bowed, stepping out of her way.

"Brother Xuan!" she called, remembering the odd formality the boy used, as she reached the bottom of the pavilion steps. "I see Lady Cai has you working hard!" Ling Qi felt a twinge of guilt; she had heard the boy had a rough time during Sun Liling's recent attack, but despite how helpful he had been to her previously, she hadn't spared him a thought. At least he looked fine now.

"Sister Ling," Xuan Shi greeted, dipping his head slightly in her direction, his wide conical hat bobbing with the motion. "The Lady grants us tasks in equal measure to our ability and no more."

"I guess so," Ling Qi said thoughtfully as she mounted the steps to reach level with him. "How have you been? I've been meaning to stop by, but things got busy." It was a little lie, but a harmless one.

He regarded her silently, most of his expression concealed by his hat and high collar, then glanced away, giving a nearby disciple who had paused to listen to them a sharp look. "I am unbowed. Though a storm may lash the shore, the island remains. Patience brings ultimate victory," he said with quiet surety. "What purpose guides your steps, Sister Ling?"

So he wasn't too troubled by the loss and was already planning his reprisal. Ling Qi reached the center of the pavillion, drawing aside Xuan Shi. "Just a whim," she admitted. "I was out for a stroll, looking for something to inspire a song, and caught sight of your work. I guess Lady Cai wants to make sure our meeting place is secure?"

"A throne must be radiant and solid as the mountain rock," he said agreeably. "Theatre sways the hearts of the unworthy," he added in a much quieter tone. Going by the stillness in the air, she was certain that only she had heard that last statement. A useful technique.

"So it does," she mused. "I am glad you're doing well. You've been nothing but helpful to me, and I'm afraid I haven't done much to pay that back."

"Sister Ling's concern is appreciated like a fine moon shining over rough seas," Xuan Shireplied, and she thought she saw the corners of his odd eyes crinkle for a moment with a smile. "There is no debt. Generosity is a virtue."

Ling Qi almost snorted, giving him an arch look. "Come on now. We're cultivators. Isn't everything a competition?"

"Perhaps," he said, tapping the butt of his staff on the stone. "If so, a generous spirit is the mark of the strong, is it not?"

She gave him a measuring look but nodded. "I suppose so. Still, I'm free for the moment. Did you need any help here?"

He made a thoughtful sound. "Sister Ling is much like a cold sea breeze, finding the tiniest cracks to slip through and chill the home. Perhaps an examination of the arrays with that in mind?"

She blinked, her eyebrows drawing together in consternation. "You were keeping an eye on my practice in the Archives."

Xuan Shi tipped his hat marginally in her direction. He was definitely smiling now. "Other perspectives remain invaluable. Am I begrudged?"

She let out an unladylike snort. "No, it's my fault for not guarding my notes," she said with a huff. "Where do you want me to start?"

The next couple hours passed quickly. Poking holes in the arrays being built was an interesting diversion, and some part of her enjoyed the grumbling of the disciples who had to adjust and fix the formations.

Xuan Shi was an agreeable sort, and in doing this, she felt less of a burden of debt toward him, so it was time well spent. Even without that though, she wouldn't mind speaking with him in the future. Perhaps she could prod him for advice on getting Zhengui to develop his abilities. His "Xuan" family name made it pretty obvious that he was associated with "xuanwu" spirits, of which Zhengui was one.

As the pavilion faded away behind her, Ling Qi's thoughts turned to her plans for the evening. She had made her preparations for venturing into Yan Renshu's base, warned Meizhen to raise the alarm if she was not back by morning, and even borrowed the girl's spare storage ring. She had also fully scouted out the surroundings beforehand and gotten a feel for the patterns of activity at the base. There was nothing further to do but execute the plan.

... She really needed to get a better ring of her own though. Meizhen's spare storage ring had ten times the space hers did. The thought of filling it with loot warmed her heart.

Her infiltration began simply enough. The defenses at the doorway were keyed to a token the disciples kept on their person, so her first task would be to snag one from the disciple going out on an evening supply run. He would be out for at least an hour, giving her a good window to work with. She had figured out which of the errand boys had storage rings, which she wouldn't be able to steal the token from, and she had chosen tonight for her infiltration because the boy tasked with the evening supply run was one of the disciples who didn't have a storage ring.

Was there an art that would allow her to steal from a storage ring? Surely there had to be.

The first part of her plan went off without a hitch. After Elder Jiao's training, slipping her hand into the boy's pocket and retrieving the token as she passed him on the market street was a trivial task. Vanishing into the darkness of the forest was likewise an easy. It took mere minutes to return to the hidden entrance, and with the token in hand, she passed through. The sheer cliff face gave way to a smooth tunnel, likely carved with an earth art given the lack of marks from tools.

She did not linger in the doorway, exposed as it was. With Crescent's Grace and Formless Shade techniques active, she darted down the hall in a flash of black, slipping into the nearest side room. It was a storage room from the looks of it, a place to put the products that the suppliers would sell at the market. She did not find anything of great interest with a cursory search. No talismans or pills she herself would use. She did dematerialize a few choice pills into Meizhen's ring anyway for later resale.

Her exploration then began in earnest. The cramped complex was not especially large and consisted largely of work rooms and a few housing areas. There were a bit less than ten disciples present, so she tried to avoid stealing anything too obvious.

No matter the urge to steal the large pill furnace in one of the rearmost rooms. Su Ling had indicated that those were very valuable, right?

She tore through the base like a sticky-fingered hurricane while searching for any signs of Yan Renshu. Ling Qi tried to avoid distraction, but there was only so much she could do. Minor pills, talismans, and stones abounded, and in one room, she even found carefully organized parcels containing the required goods for several basic gathering Sect Missions. Those, she shoved into her ring, not even bothering to fight the grin stretching her lips.

She did manage to (mostly) stay on target though, and among the treasures, she also found information. Missives to this base's leader, one of Yan Renshu's direct subordinates, proved the most helpful. It was clear the boy was a careful sort, but hints of inexperience showed. He lacked the true paranoia of those who stood to lose everything. Ling Qi was able to secure the notes that his subordinate had kept on the symbols and cyphers they used for their meetings with Yan Renshu. With that in hand, she could track down the main base.

As long as she struck before he had a chance to change things anyway. Although, even if he did, knocking over this base alone would starve his group of resources since it was his primary stone farming location.

And she was certainly going to report this place to Cai Renxiang.

After she left the base with her new pill furnace of course.

## Chapter 110 - Theft 2

Meizhen's ring struck the bottom of the drawer with a faint clink, and the false bottom of the drawer slid over the hidden compartment.

Ling Qi knew, from a strategic perspective, she had made an error. With the rush of having easy access to so much wealth fading, she could see that. She should have just gathered information and struck at Yan Renshu's main hideout without alerting the boy. But there had been just so much free for the taking.

She had wanted for most of her life. Though she didn't have to worry about base survival anymore, it seemed that even without that excuse, she was still a greedy girl and a thief at heart. Some things didn't fade easily.

Ling Qi ghosted out of her room and the house, pausing only to scribble a note for Meizhen. She might have made a tactical error, but that didn't mean she had to give her enemy time to capitalize on the knowledge that he was in her sights. It had been less than an hour since she had torn out of the stone farming base, and it would take only another half hour or so to reach the location of the meeting point that Yan Renshu used if she hurried. She could definitely still do this.

But first, she had some shoes to buy. Wouldn't Xiulan be proud?

A short time later, her new presence-muffling slippers fitting snugly around her feet and a note detailing the location of the stone farming base left for Cai Renxiang, Ling Qi bounded up the side of the mountain, a dark shadow flitting up the rough trails that criss-crossed the steeper part of the slope, toward where Yan Renshu had hidden the heart of his operations.

The plateau was a nondescript ledge populated only by a few scraggly trees and an overabundance of dry brush. According to what she had read in his subordinate's notes, the entrance was a trapdoor, but she saw nothing of the sort. Nor did she see the telltale distortions of qi that would indicate the presence of an illusion.

As time ticked by with no success, Ling Qi began to wonder if the information she had found was a simple red herring. No, she didn't think security would go that far. Even if the note was wrong about this being the main base, there should be *something* here because this was where the other base leaders made tribute to Yan Renshu.

She almost missed it. It was chance, really, that her eye caught on an unusual angle of stone. Her interest and instincts pricked, she stopped to examine the large, half-buried stone that had caught her attention. It seemed too uniform.

A closer look revealed seams in the dirt around it, recently disturbed, and a miniscule string of characters carved and inked around the base of the stone. She wasn't sure what all the characters and combinations did at a glance, but she was sure they were a dangerous array that would make an interloper deeply regret attempting to open the passage.

It was slow going, made worse by the fact that she couldn't be sure her tampering wouldn't be sensed. Scratching out portions of the tiny characters with a tool as imprecise as a knife was enough to make her fingers cramp.

She managed. Slowly, laboriously, she disabled the triggering characters one by one, only narrowly avoiding setting off a cascade of activations with her disruption of the array. But by the end, the security was quiescent. She could sense the arrays' imbued qi trying to reassert itself. It would repair itself, but that would be a matter of several hours. She had time.

The ovoid trap door was heavy, being attached to a small boulder, but such things hardly troubled her anymore. Soon, the opening into the base yawned, a circular tunnel in the earth that transitioned from dirt to perfectly smooth stone about a quarter of a meter down. There was no ladder, no handholds, and no method of descent that she could detect at all. Thanks to her ability to see in the dark, she could see the bottom some twenty five meters down, but it looked like she would have no choice but to take a plunge.

It cost her qi to activate her gown's flight, but it prevented Ling Qi from finding out if such a drop would leave her with a pair of broken ankles or not. Luckily, there was a latch on the bottom of the trapdoor for her to use in closing it after her. She didn't want to make her presence too obvious. The tunnel she landed in was formed from smooth stone and perfectly circular, just like the shaft she had just descended. Annoyingly, the low ceiling forced her to crouch.

The tunnel was also positively ringed with alarms and traps. She slipped through them one and all, feeling as if her feet were barely touching the ground. Several times, she allowed darkness to flood through her meridians, rendering her spirit and body smoky and indistinct. She found it easier to avoid the many traps and alarms by visualizing them as a web of taut wires which she had to weave through, and she did so flawlessly, never setting off even a single trigger.

The tunnel continued downwards on a sharp slope, straining the limits of her balance to descend it without sliding and running into a trap, but eventually, she began to come upon rooms. Pausing briefly only to take a wellspring pill and restore her expended qi, she began to explore.

This time, she didn't allow herself to get distracted by treasures. The book and the slip were her only priority at the moment; everything else could come later. She passed through a meditation room and a strange chamber full of mirrors, but nothing useful could be found in either. There was a storeroom full of beast cores and other reagents, but she forced herself to turn away from it.

The next room centered around a low writing desk surrounded by bookshelves carved right into the stone walls. She searched through the books for one that matched the image in her vision. Most were mundane treatises on varied topics while others were ledgers containing dense lines of records about various transactions and inventories of Yan Renshu's assets. None of the books felt right so she turned to searching the desk.

At first, that proved fruitless as well, revealing nothing beyond mundane items and a particularly nice brush that seemed to generate its own ink when the handle was squeezed. She pocketed that, figuring Suyin might like it, but otherwise left everything in place. Careful inspection revealed something quite interesting indeed. There was nothing so simple as a hidden compartment, but a storage array was

painted on the wood behind the drawer in the center. The array was surrounded by four separate circles of writhing inky characters that seemed to practically snarl with the violence inherent to the qi they contained.

Without her perfect night vision, she doubted that she would have seen it, hidden as it was. As things were, breaking that set of security arrays with the awkward positioning afforded to her was going to be rough.

Three times, she felt her heart nearly stop as the traps wavered on the edge of triggering. She grimly held back the cry of pain that wanted to leave her lips as the traps' caustic qi seared her fingers, eating into the protective qi that cloaked them.

She had a feeling she would lose a hand if the trap activated. Eventually though, using everything she had learned from Elder Jiao in the past two weeks and every ounce of skill she had, the final array cracked, and she was able to activate the storage array, expressing its contents. There was a pill case, a gleaming silver beast core that hummed with power, a dark green core that burned to the touch... and a tiny slip of jade.

Her breathing hitched, and a grin broke out on Ling Qi's face. It wasn't the objective she expected, but she could handle that. She swept all four items into her own ring and darted out of the room, ready to hurry on. There was only one more thing to worry about.

The silence of the place was starting to unnerve her. She hadn't been sure what to expect, but the place being so deserted wasn't one of them. Perhaps Yan Renshu had gone out to deal with the fallout at his other base? She had left Cai a message about it after all.

It didn't matter. She needed to remain cautious regardless, but questioning good fortune wouldn't help anything. The path soon went down steeply, and below she could see a faint green glow. She ghosted down, quite literally given the number of times she activated her darkness arts, and reached the bottom where a familiar unsettling sight awaited.

As in the Grinning Moon dream, there was a wide chamber lit by pale green flames contained within heavy, iron lanterns that hung from the low-slung ceiling. The smooth, flat ground was pierced at regular intervals with two meter wide pits, six in all, covered by iron grates. Squat columns stood between the pits, supporting the ceiling. Set against the walls were worktables and tools, as well as a small, personal pill furnace. Most disturbing were the figures jerkily moving through the room performing mundane tasks.

They were wooden mannequins, like something one would see in a dress maker's shop but with articulated limbs. They lurched around the chamber, some rendering down raw materials, others dumping buckets of raw, bloody meat into the pits, and still others simply patrolling. Pulling her eyes away from that disquieting sight, Ling Qi found her last target. The book, at more than half a meter a side, was rather larger than she had imagined in her visions. It rested on a raised podium at the far end of the room, attached to it by a sturdy iron chain.

That would be trouble. But first, she had to reach it.

Ling Qi moved out from the entrance area carefully, a wary eye kept on the patrolling constructs. She couldn't be sure of their senses so she moved as conservatively as possible, barely breathing and a tight grasp on her qi. There were no traps here, but there were certainly alarms, and she danced on the edge of tripping them in the process of crossing the room.

Yet she managed. The columns provided momentary cover even as they brought her close to the pits from which the eye-watering stench of rot and blood issued. The sight she glimpsed in their depths turned her stomach. No sound emerged from the pits, but she could see churning pools of blood and flesh within which writhed pale white worms with slavering, circular maws lined with far too many teeth. The largest were as thick as one of her legs. They thrashed and snapped, splashing through the filth. The inhabitants of each pit were clearly doing their level best to devour each other. The pits were void of qi to her senses.

Ling Qi passed them by, creeping closer to the pedestal with the book. Weaving through the eerie room, she eventually reached her goal. She used the shadow of the pedestal itself to remain out of sight and examine the book.

What she found was not terribly encouraging. The chain itself was heavily reinforced, its links practically glowing with earth qi and layered with protective formations. The bindings and covers of the book itself were similarly reinforced. Oddly enough, this close, she could feel what felt like dozens of qi signatures from the pages.

The arrays were not nearly so complex as the traps she had avoided and disabled in the study, but they were densely packed on top of each other. They should have disrupted each other, but they didn't. It reminded her of the work on her flute. Slowly, she peeled back layers of protection, weakening the point where the metal was joined to the spine of the book. Worst case, she might be able to just tear the plate off and lose a chunk of the binding if she couldn't fully disable the arrays.

Then her knife slipped. It was only by a hair, a slight jerk due to a tremble in her fingers, but the result was the blade scratching across a brushstroke she had not meant to break yet. Qi immediately thrummed down the length of the chain and into the floor, setting off all the other alarms. There was no audible sound, but the constructs stopped dead in their tracks, their faceless heads turning toward her in unison.

Nope. She wanted no part of any of that.

It took all of her strength, but her knife dug into the leather spine of the book. She gritted her teeth as she carved a jagged wound in the binding before using the knife as a lever to yank out the metal bolts.

There was a snap, and she hissed in pain as a shard of metal cut one of her fingers. The knife had broken, but the book was loose. She seized the heavy thing from the pedestal and tore it free with a loud rip.

"YOU!"

Ling Qi winced as the powerful presence a third realm cultivator washed over her, although it felt oddly distant. Her heart hammering in her chest, she turned back to the room at large and saw the source.

The feeling of presence poured from one of the constructs. A ghostly image of a boy a couple years her elder enveloped the construct. Short and broad-shouldered with a shaved head, he had a crooked nose and and numerous ugly scars on his rough blocky features. The rest of his figure was hazy and difficult to make out in the ghostly overlay, but there was something wrong with his right arm. It seemed malformed somehow.

"I should have known you would be the real danger." Yan Renshu, for that is who he must be despite the differences from her image of him in the visions, glared hatefully at her.

She didn't stop to listen to him. Ling Qi ran, darkness billowing from her limbs as she vanished the book into her ring, dashing around the perimeter to the room, unwilling to pass close to the pits. Her decision was vindicated when the hatches on the pits popped open and worms boiled out. Ling Qi sprinted up the tunnel away from the chamber.

"Shenyuan, do not let her leave!"

Yan Renshu's words sounded through the cavern, loud enough to rattle her bones. Alarmed, she felt his qi flare, and the ground vibrated. Violet mist stung her heels as it billowed outward from the puppet, and she sped up still further, her gown flapping in a phantom breeze as she rushed for the entrance.

Her haste almost doomed her. Stone erupted, pelting her with shrapnel as a massive white worm as thick as her waist emerged, clear sizzling liquid dripping from its grasping jaws. It was grade three, she noted distantly. Ling Qi forced still more dark qi into her limbs, rendering her partly immaterial as she dodged through the shower of acid that erupted from the thing's gullet.

With mist at her heels, the worm in front of her, and the stone itself churning below and above, narrowing the exit with every passing moment and grasping at her feet like hungry mud, there was only one response.

Run.

Ling Qi drew sharply on her energy, imbuing her gown with power. The cloak flapped around her shoulders, spreading like dark wings, and her feet left the grasping stone. She rushed past the worm, biting back a scream as she flew through the cloud of acidic droplets left by its spit.

There was a moment of disorientation as she passed through the closing gap. Ling Qi felt both compressed and stretched as she squeezed through. In the tunnel, the cold air rushed around her even as traps and alarms tripped and exploded in her wake. She had seen the many, many formations on her way down, but to stop was to lose. She ran harder than she ever had since coming to the Sect. There were no allies she needed to keep pace with, nothing to slow her down.

Ling Qi blurred, and although she felt her energy ebbing with each trap she set off and was not quite fast enough to avoid, she threw off effect after effect, even as Yan Renshu's angry voice echoed up from below. When she could see the bottom of the shaft reaching upward, she expressed her bow. Lightning sparked as the roar of the worm reached her and she jerked and juked through the air, avoiding the tendrils of stone that grasped at her, tearing at the hem of her gown and her hair.

A bolt of roaring black lightning charred across her side, almost sending her into the wall, but she did not turn back. As Ling Qi skidded into the shaft, she drew on her qi, nocked an arrow, and loosed one arrow, then a second, even as she rocketed upward nearly fast enough to catch up with the arrows.

The trapdoor above exploded violently as the two arrows struck it, and she soared out, dismissing her bow as she did. Still, Ling Qi did not stop. She flew straight up, and wind shrieked in her ears as she made a sharp turn and burned qi to keep herself airborne. A powerful restorative fueled her flight from Yan Renshu's base.

Ling Qi did not stop until she had reached the home she shared with Bai Meizhen far below and crashed into the garden pond, qi expended.

## Chapter 111 - Theft 3

She had succeeded. As she crawled out of the pond and collapsed in the garden, breathing hard, Ling Qi could feel something changing within her, the circulation she had practiced with the Eight Phase Ceremony intensifying. Already, a greater understanding of her movement art lurked at the edge of her understanding.

Ling Qi put it aside for the moment; she could discuss her art with Elder Jiao later tonight. Right now, she had loot to inspect.

Despite the smaller number of items, the value could not be underestimated. Two of the Sable Light pills that had boosted the cultivation of her qi so greatly at the start of the year were effectively priceless to her, and the high grade cores were valuable as well.

The Abyssal Exhalation art in the jade slip was nothing to scoff at either. Similar to Forgotten Vale Melody, the art had been designed by a wanderer, although this one had wandered the deep paths under the earth where things best not seen gnawed at the foundations of the world. In that darkness, the wanderer found truth, that earth and dark were as one, devouring all things in the end. In line with that lesson, the art allowed its users to consume the energy of their foes and call upon the things that slumbered in the dark. Along with the jade slip was an Abyssal Earth pill that would help her cultivate earth and dark arts. She was glad that she had fled with all her speed.

This left only the book. Once she had made it back inside the house, she removed it from her ring to examine. At first, the characters within seemed unreadable, swimming in her vision, but a bit of effort undid the array causing that. What she found within disturbed her.

The pages appeared to be filled with extensive contracts written in dense legal language that went quite far over her head. But at the end of these contracts, the signers were required to not speak of the contract or the contractor, Yan Renshu. Breaking any provision in the contract would cost the signer a significant portion of their cultivation, or even their health.

Surely, this couldn't be legal, right? Such thoughts rarely occurred to her, but why would the Elders allow something like this? She strongly doubted the Sect would be unaware of such contracts. There were dozens of them in the book, each one with dense formation arrays lining their borders.

No wonder Yan Renshu had wanted Cai undermined. He was clearly trying for the same goal, albeit through vastly different means. There was a weakness to this method though. The effect was tied directly to the pages of the book, and they were only marginally reinforced. She could find no negative effects to simply destroying the contracts, which probably explained why the place had been defended so well.

She could probably figure out how to subvert them too. They were complex certainly, but not incomprehensible. She could even get help with it, she imagined.

She needed to bring this book to an Elder. She just didn't have enough information to make a good decision, and she didn't want to involve Meizhen in this just yet. She had her own pride and didn't want to go running to her powerful friend for every problem she faced.

And it was a problem. Yan Renshu wouldn't take this theft lying down. Ling Qi was burnt and tired, and Yan Renshu had quite a lot of followers, willing or otherwise. Elder Jiao wouldn't be at their meeting point until evening, and she didn't want to chance the fickle man deciding to take offense if she came early. Even Xin, who seemed to like her more, wasn't guaranteed to show up, and the last thing she wanted right now was to be in an isolated place alone.

Ling Qi flipped the red cover of the book open again, ignoring the dense text as her eyes scanned to the bottom, memorizing the name next to Yan Renshu's. She flipped the page and memorized the next one too. She might not be able to commit everything in the contracts to memory, but a couple dozen names wasn't too hard. She kept her ears open as she paged through the book, straining to hear any sound of pursuit, pausing only to take her second and last qi-restoring pill for the day.

The moment she finished memorizing names, the book went back into storage. She retrieved Meizhen's spare ring, coaxed Zhengui into dematerializing, and set out from the house.

Ling Qi made a beeline for the closest pair of girls wearing one of Cai's armbands. It felt weird to bark orders, but she wanted backup in case Yan Renshu's agents tried to jump her. She confirmed first that their names weren't in Yan Renshu's book of contracts of course.

Her next priority was her friends. Li Suyin was safe. At this time, she would be ensconced in an Inner Disciple's workshop, untouchable even to someone like Yan Renshu. Suyin would be there until late afternoon at least. Likewise, Meizhen was strong enough to handle herself against all but truly overwhelming force.

If she remembered Su Ling's schedule correct, that girl was probably off mountain somewhere, maybe even in town. Su Ling had taken to working with the mortals in the mornings, whether of her own accord or for Sect Points. Starting trouble in town was frowned on, but all the same, Ling Qi sent another of Cai's enforcers off with a hastily scribbled message, warning Su Ling to go to ground.

That left just one stop before she swung by the mansion in the center of the residential district, which Cai had made her base of operations. She had heard that Xiulan had returned to her home a short time before her heists had started. Yan Renshu had already made it clear he didn't mind having Gu Xiulan attacked with the successive duel challenges and encirclement during the last flare-up of Outer Sect chaos. The two of them could even find Han Jian and the others after Ling Qi talked to Cai. Ling Qi would feel much more confident about her chances of making it to the evening with the book still in her possession if she were surrounded by the Golden Fields group.

"Xiulan! Open up! It's Ling Qi, and we really need to talk!" Ling Qi called loudly as she knocked, injecting a note of urgency into her voice. Her 'bodyguards' stood behind her to either side, nervous expressions on their faces as they kept watch for a possible enemy attack. Ling Qi had spread word through the other Cai enforcers ad they passed them; it wouldn't be too long before everyone in Cai's faction was on alert.

There was no noise, so Ling Qi rapped her knuckles against the door harder. It was a little rude, but she was in a hurry. She didn't know what Xiulan had been up to, but she really didn't have time for her emotional friend to seclude herself further right now.

"Xiulan!" She raised her voice further, ignoring the looks she drew from the other disciples outside. They scurried away when Cai's girl goons glared at them.

She heard a thump and shuffling from inside this time. A further hissing sound like boiling water came, but no response. She frowned and drew her hand back to knock again, but then the door jerked open a few centimeters. She found herself meeting Xiulan's narrowed eyes.

At least she thought so. It was a little hard to tell.

"... Xiulan?" Ling Qi asked, squinting at her friend. Her qi felt right, but... "Why are you wearing a veil and a scarf?" she asked incredulously. The lower half of Xiulan's face was entirely concealed behind crimson fabric, and the rest was covered by a semi-translucent veil. She could just barely make out her friend's eyes and the bare contours of her face.

"I can wear whatever I like," Xiulan replied, sounding ill-tempered and haughty. Ling Qi had not heard her friend speak to her like that in quite some time. "What in the world are you doing out here, pounding at my door like a peasant?"

Ling Qi studied the girl. Xiulan's qi felt a little muted and off, now that she focused on it.

"You can," she agreed slowly. "But I didn't think you liked to hide yourself like that." Ling Qi watched carefully as Xiulan's eyes narrowed and seemed to momentarily flare, glowing behind the veil. "Look, I don't know what you've been up to, but we have some real trouble on the way. I just hit the main base of one of our enemies pretty hard, and I'm afraid he might retaliate. I'm going to Lady Cai after th..."

Ling Qi leaped to the side as an arrow shrieked through the air where her body had just been, burying itself in the cobblestone with a crack. Turning around, she caught sight of three figures blurring across the rooftops. The first was blown backwards, flung from the roof across the street by a gesture from one of the girls she had commanded to follow her, who now held a wide, feathered fan in her hand.

The second figure leapt toward her, curved knives in hand, and was met by the second Cai enforcer. Sparks sprayed out as knives made contact with the long straight blade wielded by her ally.

The third blurred past their intercepted comrade, a spear trailing a stream of churning water heading toward her. Ling Qi dodged the side, dark qi trailing from her limbs, and ducked the sweep of the spear's butt before moving backward to gain some space. She hesitated as she reached for her flute. Was supporting her allies the best choice or going on the offensive herself?

"Miserable, skulking wretches."

Ling Qi heard Gu Xiulan's voice in the instant before a blinding flash came from above and a crack of thunder drowned out all other sounds. Looking up, she saw a half dozen forks of lightning sprouting from the form of a second archer she hadn't seen. The archer was flung from the roof, limp and trailing smoke, limbs spasming with residual electricity.

The combat seemed to freeze as Xiulan stepped out, the smoking and tattered scarf and veil drifting away from her face. Xiulan's face was covered in hair-thin lines of black with burns in the faint pattern of scales marring her pale skin. Her hand, which was raised toward the archer who had just been struck,

was shriveled and black like a charred corpse but alive with blue-white flames and crackling lighting. A tattered sleeve revealed that the damage went as high as her elbow.

"You would assault my friend on my very doorstep? Come and die then!" Xiulan said, her voice magnified enough to vibrate the air. Xiulan had reached late yellow, Ling Qi noted.

Ling Qi used her own opponent's distraction to slip past and put herself back to back with her friend, scanning the rooftops for any other hidden attackers.

"Don't actually kill them," she warned as the girl with the spear reoriented on her new position. "I see you've been busy. Any reason you aren't at the Medicine Hall?"

"I do not need it, nor would it help," Xiulan said haughtily. "And I will remember the rules. A few scars will do this scum good though, don't you think?"

Ling Qi didn't have time to respond as her opponent re-engaged. A knife flashed out of her sleeve, scoring a superficial wound across the girl's shoulder, and she grasped the wind, forcing the spear wielder to fight against her for mere movement.

Her two guards were handling their opponents well too, and for a moment, Ling Qi felt confident that this would be over shortly.

Then the ground beneath them erupted. Stone and earth writhed, thick tendrils of black muddy earth grasping at their limbs, almost concealing the forms of two mannequins of black iron with dirt-caked talons the length of a short sword. They both lunged at her, almost distracting her from her opponent's spear thrust, but one was blasted back, slammed into the house across the street by a sustained stream of azure flames erupting from Xiulan's burnt hand.

The second mannequin reached her, and the next moments became a blur as she frantically drew out her her flute and thrust the wind outward. Her gown flapped as a short-lived gale erupted, slicing through grasping tendrils and reducing them to crumbling dirt. The instant she had solid footing again, she leapt upward to land on the roof of Xiulan's home in a crouch, shortly followed by Xiulan herself, her own leap powered by a sweeping jet of flame that left the puppets below smoking and cherry red and drove back the spear wielder, who spun her weapon frantically to call up a barrier of water that exploded into steam on contact with the flames.

It did not stop either of the mannequins from launching themselves after the two of them, despite the damage and burns on their frames. Ling Qi threw herself backward, twisting out of the way of another arrow from the first archer that crackled through the air while deflecting the claw of one of the attacking puppets with a hastily drawn knife.

Already, if she strained her ears, she could hear the sounds of other battles kicking up. Fire and smoke rose from among the streets, but she could also see help approaching. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the remaining enemy archer duck low to avoid a projectile from below. She felt uneasy though, and not just because of the third puppet which had clawed its way onto the roof or the others rising from the dirt below.

Because this wasn't enough for Yan Renshu to win - and he was too intelligent not to know that. Another pair of enforcers had joined the two girls below, and the gray hooded enemies were being

pushed back handily. The mannequins rising from the dirt had the power of a weak second realm and obviously felt no pain, but it simply wouldn't be enough.

Ling Qi drew her bow from storage as she distanced herself from the puppets on the roof. Her arrow tore through a puppet's shoulder, disabling its arm just as a sweep of blue-white flames engulfed both mannequins. The one she had shot crumpled to the ground, the qi animating it fading. Something was wrong...

Cold steel digits grasped her wrist and twisted, forcing her arm behind her even as something sharp slammed into her back, a gasp of pain pulled from her lips as she felt it puncture her gown and drive into her side.

"Suffer as a thief deserves." The voice was harsh and metallic but recognizable. Craning her neck, she could see the blank face of another mannequin, differentiated only by the glowing green flames where its eyes should be and the feeling of Yan Renshu's potent qi. She felt the puppet's cold fingers clamp down around her ring finger and the storage ring on it.

He didn't need to win the fight.

## Chapter 112 - Theft 4

Ling Qi twisted away from the hold, years of practice at escaping informing her movements even as she drew on dark qi, the light of early dawn barely dim enough to allow it without greater qi cost. She dissolved and flowed out of his grip, but in doing so, she felt her finger bend, caught in his grip despite her current state. She grit her teeth and pushed on anyway, biting back a cry as she felt something snap. The blade buried in her back tore free, trailing starry blackness and blood.

"Not good enough," she snarled in response, restraining the urge to cradle her broken finger. She still had her ring, and that was what mattered.

A second pair of puppets had attacked Xiulan from below, grappling and blocking the girl from coming to her aid with their bodies even as she burned through them like firewood. Ling Qi would need to hold out on her own for at least a few moments. She dropped her bow in the grapple, so the flute was her best option now.

The possessed mannequin's response was a furious growl that echoed as if from the bottom of a well. It lunged toward her again, violet mist leaking from its joints.

Behind it, light bloomed, a near blinding radiance that shone with every color and cast the shadow of the puppet over her. The puppet's outstretched hand flew by her face, tumbling end over end, no longer attached to its arm. Then its head tumbled past as well, green fires guttering out as the puppet crashed to the ground at her feet, falling to pieces.

Cai Renxiang stood on the roof where the puppet had been, lips set in a thin line. Her eyes were narrow with controlled anger, and now fully in the third realm, her permanent backlight blazed brightly, casting the combat in shadow. The other girl's gaze focused on Ling Qi. "I take it your message was not idle boasting."

"He is pretty unhappy with me. But we need to help..." She glanced to her right in time to see the last puppet assaulting Xiulan fall as her friend drove her burnt hand into its chest, molten metal streaming from the hole as she tore a yellow spirit stone out. The enforcers who had taken down the other attackers were eyeing Xiulan with some concern as she straightened up, static crackling in the air around her. "... Never mind."

"This matter is under control," the heiress agreed as she lowered her saber, allowing the point to rest on the rooftop. Cai Renxiang looked thoroughly unamused at the chaos on her figurative doorstep. "I would have you report in more detail upon what you found to provoke such a foolish assault. Of course I am not ungrateful for your efforts. You have more than proven your value," she said seriously, thread spooling from the hilt of her saber to weave her scabbard anew. "I shall see you provided with care for your wounds first."

"I am grateful, Lady Cai," Ling Qi said politely, still tense even as she watched the remaining puppets being dismantled one by one by the growing number of irate disciples who had their morning disrupted. Blood dripped from the wound in her back, and her broken finger throbbed. She started slightly as Gu Xiulan stepped up to her side. This close, she could see the tracery of burn scars on the

girl's face more clearly and the blood seeping from her blackened arm as the aura of flames around it guttered low. "There are some matters I still need to verify before I can present them to you, but I would be happy to detail what I witnessed in Yan Renshu's lab."

Cai Renxiang studied her, eyes flicking briefly toward Gu Xiulan, who met her gaze with only a slight dip of her head. Whatever her friend had done, it had restored her prideful demeanor in full.

"Understood. I will see that rat's den cleansed then. You will have such protection as you need until it is done," the heiress said, turning away and gesturing for them to follow. "I would hope that you can resolve the remaining matters quickly though," she added more quietly.

"By evening," Ling Qi replied easily. "I wish to draw on Elder Jiao's wisdom before I move forward."

Gu Xiulan frowned slightly at the mention of the Elder's name but simply turned her head away and scoffed when Ling Qi glanced at her. Cai nodded once and leapt nimbly to the next roof, gesturing for the two of them and the enforcers who had aided them to follow, which she did. Sitting tight, surrounded by Cai's people, sounded like the safest way to spend her day until she could talk to Elder Jiao.

"What happened to you?" Ling Qi asked quietly, glancing at her friend as she landed on the next roof beside her.

"I decided to stop being left behind," Xiulan sniffed. "Though it cost me," she added, glancing down at her scorched limb, which she held close to her chest. With the adrenaline of battle fading, Ling Qi could see the trembling in her friend's shoulders indicated that it likely hurt exactly as much as she would expect from its appearance.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the Medicine Hall?" Ling Qi asked. "That looks like you could lose it."

"I won't," Xiulan scoffed. "I was going to wrap it and apply a salve, but someone decided to interrupt."

Ling Qi winced and ducked her head in apology. "I didn't know. Still, why are you so reluctant...?"

"This and the other scars will heal when I achieve steel, the fifth realm of physique, and not a moment before," Xiulan said tightly. "My body is simply too weak to fully contain my gift yet. I will endure." Ling Qi could tell that she didn't want to talk about it. "I suppose I will have to invest in a better veil though. That flimsy thing could not handle even a bit of combat."

"I'm not sure you need it," Ling Qi said, allowing the other subject to be dismissed. "It's not like you have anything to be ashamed of."

"Perhaps not, but such blatant markings are hardly beautiful," Xiulan replied as the group landed in the street in front of Cai's mansion. Ling Qi could not help but notice with some discomfort that the network of scars on Xiulan's face extended down her neck and under her collar. There were probably a lot more hidden beneath her clothes. "I do not regret it," the girl beside her breathed out, and Ling Qi was not sure of who she was convincing.

Xiulan stayed with her while Ling Qi was healed and made out her report for Cai on the lair. She added the names she had memorized to a list for the heiress, indicating only that they were potential spies and enemy agents who needed to be watched.

By the time she was done, she felt much better. Her wounds were reduced to a few dull aches and a stiff ring finger by the effort of a Medicine Hall disciple in Cai's employ. Xiulan's arm was no longer in plain view after being wrapped in tight cloth soaked through with medicinal elixir. Cai Renxiang had been amenable to sending a few enforcers to check on Su Ling and to inform Li Suyin that it would be best to stay with her mentor for the day, so her other concerns were addressed as well.

Ling Qi didn't much like staying in the guest room at the heiress' home for the rest of the day, but she could deal with it for one afternoon. And it did give her time to see to the opening of another heart meridian.

It felt good to be able to relax behind Cai's defenses, and Ling Qi added modifying her and Meizhen's home with similar protections against intrusion when she had a chance to her to-do list. People rushed to and fro dealing with the rising problems, and Ling Qi kept an ear out for the happenings. Bai Meizhen had apparently lead a purging force into Renshu's lair. There had been attacks all over the mountain from Yan Renshu's faction, but it seemed defensive at this point. There was even a rumor that Sun Liling had been spotted, making off with people and resources before Cai's enforcers could seize them. There was another attempt on the mansion - or rather on her, Ling Qi assumed, but it was repelled by the heiress herself, who was ensuring that any violence that flared in the residential area was crushed quickly.

Soon enough, it was evening, and she was on her way toward the cavern where Elder Jiao's lessons took place under the guard of four Mid Yellow enforcers with at least some skill at stealth. They only needed to get her there after all; it wasn't like she would be attacked in the Elder's presence.

Surprisingly, when she arrived, Elder Jiao was already seated on the divan at the far end of the room. The paintings had changed again, now showing landscapes under starry skies, some of which contained holes that resembled freshly dug graves.

"This year certainly has been noisy," the grey skinned man commented as she entered, leaning idly against the arm of the divan. "It is almost notable. You are quite the little agent of chaos, are you not?"

"I am thankful for your attention, Honored Elder," Ling Qi replied, her tone a bit dry. "But I can hardly be blamed for Brother Renshu's poor security and ensuing panic."

"Hah!" The older man let out a snort of laughter. "Brave enough to jape in my presence now, are you? It is good to have a little spine, but do not get above yourself."

"Of course, Honored Elder," she said, glad that her little slip hadn't offended the fickle man. "Might I ask you for advice on a related matter before we begin training?"

"I suppose I can allow that," Elder Jiao said, resting his chin in his hand as he regarded her. "You have proven to be not entirely dull."

She bowed her head in thanks and expressed the book, crossing the small room to present it to the Elder. "I wished to know the legality involved with this book. Such contracts must be outlawed, or else

everyone would use such things, right?" she asked, her formal speech slipping toward the end. The book really did bother her.

The book vanished from her hands to appear in his, and the older man sat up to begin paging through it. Ling Qi received no answer as the Elder studied the first contract, and she began to shift nervously.

"It is against Imperial law," he said finally, looking up from the book, "to hold any member of the Imperial government under coercion of any kind. This includes the heads of noble households and their spouses." Elder Jiao sounded bored as he snapped the book shut. "Of course, none of the Outer Sect Disciples falls under that rule."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows. "Then why doesn't..."

"Why do we not have great webs of cultivators bound to one another? Why do we require Ministries and investigations into lawbreaking at all? Because this is a rather grand bluff, workable only due to the ignorance of those involved."

Ling Qi blinked, startled as she cocked her head to the side. "So… they're fake? Surely someone would have figured that out by now."

"Not quite," the Elder explained, tossing the book back to her carelessly. "Compelling another cultivator is possible, but it is hardly as easy as this. One need be at least a realm higher to begin with. Distance greatly weakens the bond, and the qi invested in such an endeavor is similar to what is required for the binding of spirits and grows with each additional bond."

"So..." Ling Qi frowned, looking down at the book. "There's no way all of them are real. He couldn't have that much gi at third realm."

"Oh, I do not doubt that he can use those things to cause discomfort or pain as a way of furthering the bluff, but not the outrageous penalties within." The Elder shrugged. "One or two are real, going by the invested qi. Such things have fallen out of favor millenia ago. Maintaining the bonds are simply too much trouble, and those who use them are ill-regarded. I suppose a common-born boy would not necessarily know that though."

"Thank you, Honored Elder," Ling Qi replied after some thought. She would have to investigate the book further and break the 'one' or 'two' that were real, but she was satisfied with revealing this to Cai and letting her dump mud all over Yan Renshu's reputation.

Perhaps this week wouldn't be so bad after all.

# Bonus Chapter - Dynasties of the Emerald Seas

Of all the provinces of the glorious and everlasting Celestial Empire, Emerald Seas is perhaps the most troubled. The realm of woodlands has not suffered the great cataclysm of the Golden Fields, or the constant warfare of the Savage Seas, of course, but its troubles are more persistent. To discuss this matter, it is necessary to return to the beginning, to the still-savage days before the Empire's founding. The Emerald Seas then was not really a proper kingdom.

Tsu the Diviner was a wise and mighty sage, this is true, codifying the patterns of weather and season, allowing for the first recorded instances of sustained agriculture, but he was ultimately a man of his time. He had no interest in developing a strong and stable society and state. His people remained dispersed and decentralized through the vast woodlands of the province. The nature of their pacts and agreements with spirits lead them to avoid the building of any great infrastructure, relying upon natural formations, such as the divine tree of Xiangmen. When the Diviner passed, his children were content to live stagnant lives, performing the rituals of their ancestors without innovation and living lives heavily influenced by spirits. It was during this period that the tribes of the Emerald Seas received the name 'Weilu' from their neighbors, after their height and the prominent horns that they inherited from their spirit ancestors.

There was some change to this paradigm in the millennia leading up to the emergence of the Sage Emperor. Contact, both violent and otherwise, from the growing realms of the Bai and Zheng clans spurred development among the Weilu. Some among them began to build cities of stone and expand their fields beyond the simple affairs laid down by their illustrious ancestor. This resulted in an internal schism among the Weilu, which came to a head with the death of the current patriarch, whose sons were members of the opposing factions.

The exact details of the matter are murky; in the aftermath, the Weilu descended further into isolation and xenophobia, and the cities that had been built were cast down and reseeded. The conflict had greatly damaged them and so, when the Sage Emperor came, with the Bai and the Zheng at his back, the Weilu simply surrendered after brief conflict in return for a promise of autonomy, sending forth hostages from their most prominent families to ensure good behavior.

In the aftermath, the Weilu began to fragment further. The 'pure' bloodlines maintained the Weilu name, but as their branches spread and flourished, mingling with the hill peoples of what is now the southern reaches of the province, new names began to emerge. These new clans remained loyal to the overall tribal confederacy, if only tacitly. However, the pure clans were by this time dabbling more and more in the realm of spirits and growing ever more disconnected from their vassals, and without a firm hand to guide them, of course their people fell to squabbling.

What came next is yet another frustrating gap in historical knowledge. During the Strife of the Twin Emperors, the pure Weilu clans simply vanished amid the flames of the conflict. There were no records of violence, and what few contemporary records survived the zeal of the false Emperor Shang only indicate that their vassal tribes discovered their dream palaces empty and already fading one after

another. More material redoubts took longer to penetrate, and it seems that there were a bare handful of Weilu still about, but their fate seems to have been a violent one.

In the wake of this disappearance, the Emerald Seas fell into civil strife, even as the rest of the empire was drawing its own period of instability to a close. The Emerald Seas civil wars were indecisive and bloody affairs, but without the Weilu and with the decay of their spirit pacts, superior methods of imperial organization and building finally began to take root: first in the form of fortresses and roads, and then in growing towns and cities. One century after the strife of the Twin Emperors ended and the last holdouts of the usurpers were exterminated, Emperor Yu of the second dynasty finally interceded, throwing support behind the Xi clan, raising them over their rivals the Hui, Gong, and Meng.

While this did quell the majority of open warfare, and spare the beleaguered people of the Emerald Seas further strife, the rule of the Xi was always somewhat weak. They did not hold true supremacy over their vassals, depending on imperial patronage. The Xi were a savage clan, and did poorly at the task of building the cohesion of their province. Aside from imperial patronage, they maintained their supremacy through the conquest of the barbaric hill people of the south, whose blood had mingled with the Weilu's to form the successor clans.

These campaigns served to spread Xi influence by parceling out land to favored supporters and seeding branch clans to support them, in addition to simply co-opting a number of hill tribes who surrendered or joined with the Imperial dukes to assault their rivals. However, Xi diplomacy was always a lacking affair, and so these bonds swiftly deteriorated and new clans and subjugated tribes began to line up with other factions.

It was the aftermath of the Awakening of the Purifying Sun which finished them. Many of the mightiest Xi warriors had answered the Imperial muster and died in the cataclysm, and their numbers had never recovered. With the imperial seat reeling from these troubles the assassination of the Xi Patriarch marked the end of the clan. The Xi were hunted and exterminated to the last warrior, and those who remained were absorbed into other clans.

The following conflict was bloody indeed, but this time a proper victor emerged. The Hui clan rose to dominate their rivals through measures of great cunning. Many were the plays written of the masterful subterfuge by which the Matriarch Hui and her sons played their rivals against each other, allowing them to destroy themselves and rise to the top over their feuding bones.

It was a policy which they continued as dukes; the courts of the Hui were said to be the most treacherous in the Empire, drawing disdain even from the Bai, who often receive similar recriminations from outsiders. In the wake of the cataclysm and the decline of the second dynasty, there was no will among the imperial court to replace them.

Over time, the Hui grew decadent indeed, ensconcing themselves within the divine tree of Xiangmen and rarely venturing out, forcing their vassals to come to them to pay obeisance. However, by the time that Hui decadence had reached its peak, the chaos they had wrought with their spies and silver tongues was self-sustaining: tomes full of blood oaths and grudges existed between the clans of Emerald Seas.

As such, when the Barbarians of the Wall united under the Great Khan Ogodei, the clans were swept aside one by one. It was only the heroism of southern survivors, united with the forces of the Meng,

Luo, and Diao clans, aided by then Prince An, which saw the Khan off. In the centuries that followed, resentment boiled toward the Hui who had not sent a single warrior to contest the barbarian who had ravaged half of their province. To add insult to injury, beyond the land seized in punishment by the emperor to seed the Great Sects, the Hui maintained their claims upon all the southern lands of exterminated clans, refusing to redistribute it.

Thus, raids in the south remained a terrible problem, and even the valor of the Great Sects could not wholly stem the tide. Many other small clans who had survived Ogodei, many heroes of the resistance or their children, began to die, and anger continued to grow.

It was at this time that the remarkable Cai Shenhua emerged. A second generation cultivator, born from a man who had risen to nobility through the Sect system, through some means, she achieved the peak of cultivation at the incredible age of fifty, and rose to challenge the Hui. As a cultivator of the Eighth Realm, she proved impossible to confront or eliminate for the ailing ducal clan. The Hui could do little save raise chaos in her ranks as she gathered support, and their complaints to the Imperial Court fell upon deaf ears, for the now-Emperor An regarded the Hui with contempt, having fought alongside the resistance forces in the south.

When the Hui were at last isolated in Xiangmen, and the Emperor released a decree, naming Cai Shenhua as Duchess of Emerald Seas, they could only die.

It remains to be seen what the new Duchess will do with the province, if she will at last be the one to break the fractious nature of Emerald Seas, but if so, it shall be a long and arduous journey.

Writing of an Alabaster Sands scholar, on the political situation in the Emerald Seas.

# **Chapter 113 - Connections 1**

Han Jian seemed exhausted when Ling Qi finally tracked him down on the road that led to the town at the base of the mountain. Surprisingly, he was without his cousin's presence today and with only Heijin to keep him company. The tiger cub had grown, now standing as high as Han Jian's knees as he prowled along beside him.

Despite his downcast expression and air of distraction, Han Jian didn't miss her approach. Ling Qi had made no effort to hide herself.

"Han Jian!" she called, raising her hand in greeting as she crossed the road to meet him. She spared only an absent glance to check on the position of the heavily laden wagon trundling along the center.

The boy stopped, his light armor clanking slightly at the change in momentum. Heijin stopped as well, although he didn't look at her as his attention was rather focused on the horse drawing the cart she had just passed. She was surprised at first that the tiger cub's presence didn't panic the other animals on the road, but when she focused, she couldn't actually read the cub's cultivation or feel his spirit. Well, tigers were ambush predators, she supposed.

"Ling Qi." Han Jian's greeting pulled her attention back to him as she came to a stop a polite distance away. "You made it through the latest mess unscathed I see," he said politely, although his smile seemed more forced compared to usual.

"Mostly," Ling Qi admitted. Her ring finger was still sore, and her side a little tender. "It looks like you didn't suffer too much yourself?" she asked tentatively. After she had finished receiving Elder Jiao's guidance on developing Argent Mirror more, she had reviewed the book and picked out the real contracts. Once she had torn those particular pages in half and stuffed them back between the covers, she had delivered the book and an explanation to Cai.

The heiress hadn't wasted any time in grandstanding in the main plaza and denouncing Yan Renshu, which had kicked off another round of frenzied conflict. Han Jian had been the one keeping order on the boys' side since Gan Guangli had lead the more offensive efforts against the other factions.

"Personally, maybe," Han Jian said wryly. "Things got rough once Sun Liling came out of hiding."

"I heard about that," Ling Qi said slowly, folding her arms as she often saw Meizhen do. "Nothing clear though. Did everything go alright?" She had been rather focused on surreptitiously keeping an eye on Su Ling and Li Suyin to make sure nothing untoward happened.

"Depends on your definition of alright," Han Jian said with a tired shrug. "Kang Zihao showed up to denounce us as villains and steal some of Renshu's people. I could handle him, but it looks like Chu Song's group and some of the other older disciples have fallen in with him too." Ling Qi was impressed that Han Jian had gotten that confident. She supposed he had reached Late Yellow though. "Ji Rong broke Fang's jaw," he added with a scowl.

Ling Qi winced; that sounded rough. "I'm sure he'll get him next time," she said encouragingly. "He's in the Medicine Hall then?"

"Growing in new teeth takes a little while," Han Jian said agreeably, his tone at odds with the air of weariness about him.

Silence fell as Han Jian watched the slow flow of traffic and Ling Qi considered what to say. "... Do you know if Xiulan is alright?"

"Does she look alright?" he asked tightly.

"She *looks* fine," Ling Qi replied, stressing the middle word. She could already tell that her friend hated the scars on her face.

"That isn't what I meant, and you know it," Han Jian snapped. "One of my oldest friends almost got herself killed. People who are alright don't do things like that to themselves!" Heijin let out a low growl at his feet, moving to lay down and close his eyes. The haughty cub was oddly reticent

Ling Qi stared at him. "You know what started her acting like that, right?" The trial she had shared with Gu Xiulan was a blow, but it was only the last straw. Ling Qi's own growth had exacerbated things, but in the end, she knew well enough where the root of the issue lay.

Ling Qi saw a flicker of genuine anger on Han Jian's face as he turned to her fully. "I couldn't let her keep believing there could be anything between us. I am not going to be that kind of feckless person anymore," he said in a low tone. "I was as kind as I could be about it."

Ling Qi grimaced. "I'm sorry. That was unfair," she apologized. Shifting her stance uncomfortably, Ling Qi considered the best way to change the subject. "Seeing her like that just..."

"I get it," Han Jian cut her off with a tired sigh, scrubbing his hand through his short hair. "I am going to go on like things are normal. Xiulan doesn't want pity, especially from me."

"That's probably for the best," Ling Qi agreed. "Are you going to start doing group exercises again then?"

"It has been a while, hasn't it?" he mused. "Yeah, I think I will. You still up for it?" Han Jian's tone was more upbeat, but it still seemed forced.

"Probably. I can make some time," Ling Qi said. "Has Xiulan showed you the art we got from our trial yet?"

Han Jian raised an eyebrow at her. "No. She ran off right away after it."

"Ah." Ling Qi winced. "Well, after we found it... This is the second Argent Art I've gotten from a trial, and they seem like they might be a set," she said slowly, watching his expression. "I have Argent Current and Argent Mirror. Do you happen to have a different one?"

The boy regarded her neutrally but then nodded. "Argent Storm," he said shortly. "Wind and thunder. It's a pretty good match for Fang and I," he continued. "I think I can guess what you're thinking."

"Current is a melee art, and Mirror is perception," she said agreeably. "What does Storm do?"

"It's a body reinforcement art," Han Jian answered. "I won't trade for Current. I would rather speak with Xiulan about that, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Ling Qi replied. "You aren't opposed though?"

"Not necessarily," Han Jian said. "We're competition, but I don't mind things that benefit us both."

"I'll have to think about it as well," Ling Qi said. "I just wanted to see if you would consider the idea."

"Fair enough," he said, stirring from stillness to stride past her, resuming his journey back to the mountain. "We'll be meeting at the same field next week, if you want to come along."

"Thanks. I'll try to make it." Ling Qi watched his back for a moment before heading towards town herself. She was going to meet up with Su Ling there before they went to the vent. Ling Qi was glad things hadn't gotten too distant with Han Jian, despite their increasingly diverging schedules.

Ling Qi remained on guard during the next few days, as the aftershocks of the most recent upset died down. Yan Renshu had gone to ground, disappearing entirely, along with a couple of other disciples as far as anyone could tell. It was worrying, and she was certainly going to look into better protections for her home just in case, but for the moment, the issue was resolved.

On the other hand, Sun Liling wasn't hiding any longer, having set up a veritable fortress built into the cliffs above the treeline on the mountain. Ling Qi had no idea how she had missed that kind of construction going on. It was basically a declaration of war, as if daring Cai Renxiang to come and get her.

Something like that *had* to be a trap. Happily, Cai Renxiang seemed to be of a similar mind on the matter, since her current efforts did not include assaulting the place. Ling Qi knew things would boil over again soon enough though.

Ling Qi was going to slap the next person she heard whine about Cai's rule reducing conflict and making people soft.

Such concerns were above her head for the moment. Ling Qi's training schedule remained exhaustive. She spent mornings training with Meizhen. The sparring was unpleasant but necessary because the best way to cultivate Thousand Ring Fortress was to let her friend pound on her defenses relentlessly. Meizhen's control of her flying sword had progressed massively, and Ling Qi could now barely keep track of the silvery blur in spars.

In the afternoons, she cultivated with her friends at the vent, clearing the remaining spiritual detritus from her new meridian and helping Su Ling practice with her new sword art. The fox girl had picked out an earth and mountain technique of all things. It was too immobile for Ling Qi's tastes, but she supposed it was her friend's choice. Li Suyin was around less often, stopping by when she had free time to study the strange book from the shaman's bags and chat with Ling Qi. Without sustained focus, they didn't make much progress on deciphering it, but the time together was still pleasant.

Evenings were consumed by lessons with Elder Jiao. Because she had asked for further help with Argent Mirror and the art of investigation, the Elder had responded by locking her in some kind of dream state which she could only escape by solving the logic puzzles by figuring out the clues in the scenarios presented to her. The longer she took to solve them, the greater the migraine.

Ling Qi had nearly been in tears from the pain on a few occasions, but as much as she despised him in the moment, she could feel her mastery of Argent Mirror growing, and her ability to immediately pick out details from her surroundings improved apace.

Ling Qi's other goal for the week proved a little more difficult. She had wanted to discuss Zhengui's growth with Xuan Shi, but the boy was pretty hard to find when he wasn't working on major projects, or at least when he was busy with less obvious matters than warding the council pavilion.

Zhengui was growing again, often falling asleep either in his kiln or while dematerialized. His physique was going to reach Late Gold any day now, and his spiritual growth was only barely lagging. That just made her more determined to hunt down the cryptic boy because the books she had found in the Archives hadn't detailed much in regards to a snake-tortoise's breakthrough hibernation.

It wasn't until nearly halfway through the week that she managed to track him down, using rumor and sightings from other disciples to follow him down into the lowlands near the mountain. Surprisingly, he wasn't at a hidden training ground or cultivation site as she had suspected. He wasn't even cultivating, as far as she could tell.

Xuan Shi sat at the top of a hill, leaned back against the trunk of a large tree, his ring staff laid across his lap. He had a thin book in his hand, although he was already lowering it, having detected her presence by the time she caught a glimpse of him. She had figured startling him would probably be bad for everyone so she hadn't bothered to stealth.

"Brother Xuan," she called in greeting from the bottom of the hill, stopping now that she had his attention. "Sorry to interrupt."

Ling Qi thought she saw his eyes flick back to the book in his hand before they closed. He let out a sigh and began to stand up. "Your apology is without cause. What storm lashes the Outer Sect this day?"

"Nothing like that," Ling Qi hurried to say. "Everything is still settled."

He frowned behind his high collar, pausing in brushing off the back of his robe. "I see," he said slowly. "What ill wind carries you then to break my respite?"

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes, trying to work out if there was an insult there. "I just wanted to talk to you," she huffed, giving him a reproachful look. "Is that a problem?" She planted her hands on her hips as she looked up at the boy on the hill.

Xuan Shi tapped the butt of his staff on the ground, sending the rings jingling as he looked briefly uncomfortable. "It is not. Forgive my manner, for the days past have worn it thin," he said evenly, meeting her eyes. "Speak then, Sect Sister, and I will listen."

Ling Qi nodded, satisfied with the apology, such as it was. "And I am sorry for interrupting your free time. I know it can be hard to find a quiet moment around here," she said, beginning to ascend the hill to stand on his level. "What were you reading anyway?" she asked, trying to be friendly.

"Nothing of import," the stocky boy answered roughly. "Merely an idle fancy to calm the nerves."

She hummed thoughtfully. "Is that so? Something like those books you were reading in the archive? I thought it was a little strange for something like that to be in there."

"The Voyages flowed from the pen of a late Elder, and few were ever copied," the boy said, a hint of defensiveness coloring his tone. "Their place is earned."

"Really?" Ling Qi asked in surprise. An Elder took the time to write out a fiction series? Maybe there was a hidden art in it or something like that. That would explain why Xuan Shi had spent so much time in the Archives on it. "Well, anyway, I don't want to assume... but you're familiar with 'xuan wu', right?"

"A tale or two may have reached me, I think," Xuan Shi replied in a perfectly deadpan tone.

"There's no need for that. I guess you're aware of Zhengui?" she asked as she reached the top of the hill, feeling the little spirit stir within her, roused by his name.

Xuan Shi's expression grew incredulous. "You..." He stared at her before shaking his head. "Wordplay is an art all its own, it is true, but..."

"There is nothing wrong with Zhengui's name," Ling Qi asserted crossly in a tone that dared him to disagree.

"As you say, Sister Ling," he said, holding up a hand in apology. "His spirit called to mine, and from there, that knowledge flew north to our kin."

Ling Qi felt herself tense. "You told your family about Zhengui already?" she asked, alarm clear in her voice.

He frowned at her as he crouched down to pick up his hat. "Have no fear. We will not covet our kin like rabble lusting for treasures," he reassured. "But I cannot say that Sister Ling has not drawn many eyes."

She wasn't sure she liked that. Ling Qi had come as far as she had in part by avoiding attention, but it seemed more and more like that was no longer possible. "Right. Of course. I meant no insult with my words," she said, regaining her composure.

"True honor requires the polish of millenia. Few have it in this age," Xuan Shi said simply. "Such caution does not speak ill of you. May I meet the child?"

Ling Qi hesitated but nodded. It was what she had come here for; there was no sense getting cold feet now. She called to Zhengui, who was still dozing inside her dantian, and he quickly materialized in her arms. Bright green eyes blinked sleepily up at her while red ones regarded Xuan Shi warily.

Xuan Shi's eyebrows rose as he studied the little spirit, leaning closer as he did so. Zhen flicked his tongue at the boy in response, ash leaking from the sides of his mouth. "My senses were not fooled," the boy mused. "Destruction and growth. You are a unique one, little brother."

"Smelly salt thing is not my brother," Zhen hissed haughtily, and Ling Qi was certain she saw Xuan Shi flinch.

"Zhengui, be nice," Ling Qi said quickly. "I'm sorry. He's still young."

"Do not trouble yourself, Sister Ling," Xuan Shi replied, waving off her concern.

"Big Sister, is it time for dinner yet?" Gui chirped, ignoring the byplay between Xuan Shi and his other head entirely. "I want rabbit today!"

"Soon," she soothed, patting him on the head. Zhen shot her a pitiful look, but she simply gave him a stern one in return. He hadn't apologized, so no head pats for him. "I was hoping you could give me some advice on how to help him express his abilities," she said, turning a sheepish smile toward Xuan Shi.

Ling Qi thought she saw a flicker of some emotion in his neutral regard of Zhengui, but she couldn't quite identify it. "I suppose I do not mind."

The boy was hard to read, even more so than usual given the way he seemed to clam up after their conversation. Still, she was pretty sure that he was surprised at her tactics and bemused at Zhengui's digging and ambush strategies.

He did have some useful advice though, even if it seemed that Zhengui's unique combination of elements stumped him a little. With some effort, Zhen was able to breathe out a short-lived tongue of red-orange flame that stuck and furiously consumed whatever it touched, and Gui was able to repurpose an exercise for taking in earth qi to draw from wood qi, which made his shell glow bright green but seemed to do little else aside from somewhat expanding his awareness.

In regard to Zhengui's hibernation period, Xuan Shi confirmed that Zhengui himself would know instinctively what he needed. What she would need to provide would be protection around the nest site.

All in all, Xuan Shi was pretty helpful, even if the boy seemed distracted for most of the afternoon. She met up with the boy once more during the week, after Zhengui had emerged from his kiln having grown once more. His shell wasn't quite a meter long yet, but it was beginning to get close. Xuan Shi seemed confident that she still had a few weeks before the snake-tortoise fell into torpor.

Matters with Elder Jiao were a little more difficult. Once the stressful cultivation of Argent Mirror was done, they moved swiftly on to the second half of her requested lesson plans. It was rather less childish than the last exercise. Elder Jiao simply sent her to a heavily locked and trapped room which steadily sapped her qi, forcing her to try and escape before the drain knocked her unconscious.

It gave her a new appreciation for the many, many options she had because of her ability to fit through spaces too small for her body, but it also taught her that her abilities were not failproof. She couldn't exactly disable snares located in spaces too small for her to materialize in after all.

Ling Qi could feel her understanding of Sable Crescent Step growing by the hour as she worked through the ever-changing gauntlet. She was nearing mastery of the next stage and the technique therein.

But her lessons with the Elder would be coming to an end soon. She would have to carefully consider carefully what she wished to spend them on in her last week of tutoring from Elder Jiao.

#### Interlude - Gu Xiulan

"Who gave you permission to touch me?!" Gu Xiulan snarled, slapping Fan Yu's hand away from hers. She ignored the throb of agony that traveled up her blessed arm with a mere grimace and clenching of her teeth.

Fan Yu cringed, and she hated him all the more for it. "Xiulan, I am sorry for forgetting myself," the weak-willed fool apologized. "I only wanted to assure you that no matter what, I will stand by your side..."

She felt her hair moving, heat rising from her skin in response to her growing temper. The secondary displays of her qi had always been prominent, and her recent trials had only increased the tendency. The fool continued to babble on, as if he could offer her anything. He was weak, and his insinuations that she needed protection, like the sort of fragile simpering dolls that the Fan family called daughters, was infuriating.

"If you have time for such declarations, perhaps you should dedicate yourself more fully to cultivation," Xiulan snapped, tiring of his words. She turned on her heel, her new crimson red veil fluttering with the motion. "I have training to do. Cease wasting my time."

The stout boy's defeated expression as she stalked away from him only deepened her contempt. Han Jian would not stand for her speaking to him that way. *He* was a proper man and a proper lord. Where was the pride of Fan Yu?! He blustered and shouted in front of the weak but had no spine for his peers.

She would leave him behind soon enough, so it didn't matter. Her scars throbbed as she stomped away, heading toward the training fields. She stopped and took a shuddering breath, forcing herself to calm. Her temper had been burning much hotter since she had come down from the mountain peak, and it would not do to start lighting the grass on fire by accident, like a child just accessing their dantian.

When she resumed walking, it was at a more sedate and ladylike pace, and her fierce scowl had been smoothed away, replaced by a bland and peaceful expression. Embers still flickered in her hair though, and wisps of smoke escaped the binding on her arm.

The featherlight feeling of her spirit Linhuo offering comfort in her thoughts helped. Although she did not speak, the fairy had been her only companion when Xiulan had lain broken and sobbing on that mountaintop. The spirit's encouragement had been what stoked the flames of her will high enough to offer herself to the tribulation of lightning for the final time.

"You and Ling Qi," she murmured quietly, raising her hand to her chest. To have a close bond with one's spirit was nothing unusual, but she still found it strange that she had become so close to another girl.

The plain, bumbling peasant she had thought to groom as a handmaiden in a fit of fancy hardly existed any longer. Xiulan *should* hate her. That immense talent that had left her far behind should have been more than enough of a reason, especially now that she had sacrificed her beauty, the one advantage she had retained over Ling Qi.

Her lips twisted into a scowl at the thought. She was an ugly thing now, scarred and broken. That would take some mental adjustment on her part and particularly... particularly in regards to her Mother. She could already picture the horror on Mother's face when she next presented herself. Her sisters were rivals, obstacles on her way to ascendancy in the family, and to escaping Fan Yu, but Mother...

Her shoulders drooped slightly before she regained her poise. At least Father would be proud. She was strong now. Everything came to her more easily. She had broken through on several of her arts in the process of regaining control of her qi. She would be strong, and although she had no doubt that Ling Qi would beat her to it, she no longer doubted that she could reach the third realm within a year. She would not fall behind Yanmei.

Again, her arm throbbed, interrupting her thoughts and forcing a hiss of pain from her lips as the constant low level agony flared higher. She closed her eyes, refusing to let the tears prickling at the corner of her eyes fall.

It hurt so much.

She had half expected to die up there, at the peak of the mountain where it was said that Sect Head Yuan had met and bonded his spirit beast, where the heavenly qi lay as thick as the shed alabaster scales. After the first bolt of lightning had struck her upraised arm, she had screamed. By the tenth, she had wished for death. Only Linhuo's encouragement had let her raise her destroyed limb again after that.

Gu Xiulan shuddered at the memory. Compared to that, what was a little ache? She was being weak again, and that thought was enough to make her shove the feeling down and resume walking.

The ranged combat training ground she had been using since her return was once again pristine, the targets unburnt and the ground unmarked by the pockmarks left by stray lightning. With a thought, Linhuo drifted free of her, emerging from her back like a pair of brightly colored wings formed of raw electricity before her fiery body emerged as well. The tribulation had changed her spirit as well, Linhuo's wispy form more defined and humanoid. Xiulan watched the newly grown fairy, now a bit more than thirty centimeters tall, flutter off to play with the lanterns lighting the area.

Xiulan then turned to face the target range instead, focusing on the roiling qi that filled her channels now. Flames licked at the wrappings around her arm as she focused, pushing away other thoughts, and a bolt of blue leapt from her fingertips, incinerating the nearest target... and the one next to it as well.

Gu Xiulan grit her teeth. Her control was still lacking, the thunder and lightning that pounded in her veins demanding greater shows of might and passion.

Instead of firing again, she instead sat down cross-legged and closed her eyes. Meditation and control exercises first then.

... It was just so hard to concentrate. Oh, the complex weaves of fire that made up the Wildflowers' exercises came with relative ease, flames flowing from her fingertips like ink from a pen. But the infusion of lightning unsettled her and made it hard to follow the rigid patterns the exercises demanded.

Xiulan felt the urge to create new images instead of weaving patterns. Han Jian's face smiled down at her from the flames, warm and accepting the way he had been when they were younger. Red flames

twisted into the shape of a girl with a flute, standing at her side as they faced a powerful foe, whose features shifted by the moment.

She was dimly aware that the grass was on fire and Linhuo was fluttering in a circle, containing the flames from spreading. Gu Xiulan shut her eyes and breathed out harshly, snuffing the flames and all the images woven from them.

She didn't know what she wanted anymore, and that stung. She had sacrificed so much for power... but for what end?

Han Jian did not want her. She should have known better than to put stock in childish promises. She had ruined herself for court, and even with all this sacrifice, she knew that she would still be chasing the shadow of her sister and Ling Qi.

She wanted though. She wanted more, even if she did not know what that looked like. She wanted Father to never again lament his lack of sons. She wanted Mother to approve of her. She wanted to stand above her sisters, one and all, to shine so brightly that even Grandfather would rise from seclusion to acknowledge her as heir. And one day, she wanted to return the Gu to their rightful place at the top of Golden Fields.

She just wondered how much she would need to feed to the flames to achieve that.

# **Chapter 114 - Connections 2**

Ling Qi's slightly warped reflection stared back at her from the pink tinted metal of her new knife before disappearing under the oiling cloth in her hand. It had been an impulsive and expensive purchase, but Ling Qi couldn't really regret buying the set. The knives were rather pretty and better than her old, increasingly broken set.

Of course, then she had ended up buying a new bow as well. Ling Qi was not used to having the money to simply buy things she wanted without much thought. It was a strange feeling, and it made some part of her uncomfortable like she had done something wrong. At the same time, she had worked hard, hadn't she? She deserved to buy something nice every once in awhile. A little frivolous spending was a fair reward for what she had accomplished.

... Was this how Xiulan felt when she bought a new dress solely because she liked the cut? Ling Qi thought it might be. She brushed her finger over the polished metal of the wavy blade and smiled before slipping it into the hidden sheath on her wrist. Just this once, she would try not to overthink things.

As she picked up the next knife in the set that lay in a gleaming line across her desk though, she caught a faint movement in the air by her window and looked up in caution. She blinked in surprise as a paper doll bearing the seal of the Ministry of Communications fluttered through her window. It was the size of her hand and folded to look vaguely like a bird. It circled her twice before landing on her desk and promptly unfolding. A moment later, the paper disintegrated with a weak flash, leaving behind a letter.

Ling Qi turned her attention to the letter. The plain wax seal gave way easily, and Ling Qi unfolded the letter.

Ling Qi,

I am proud to know you are doing so well, despite everything. I cannot help but feel worry in my heart though. I will not speak against the friends you have made of course, and the doings of immortals are beyond my limited understanding, but all the same... Be cautious in entering the dealings of nobles. It is so very easy to make mistakes or to give offense and suffer for it. I fear that your straightforward nature might be ill-suited to such dealings.

Forgive an old woman for her worries, but please be careful.

I can offer little but bewilderment in regards to the next subject of your letter. How did you come into contact with one of the Guardians of the North? It is a very large improvement over the frogs and lizards which you used to hide under your bed. I trust that you are making every effort to take good care of him. I do not precisely understand the implications. Is your stewardship a sign of favor from your Sect?

In regards to myself, I find myself somewhat overwhelmed, if I am to be honest. It is still somewhat difficult for me to accept the circumstances I now live with. I have focused upon caring for Biyu. She is a curious little thing and is at that age where children grow willful. It is rather terrible for my heart. She has no sense of caution, much like her elder sister.

*I suppose that trait must be a fault of mine then.* 

I have had the time to compose and play again in the evenings. I am glad I was at least able to give you an appreciation for music. Perhaps now that matters are not so dire, I can find the time to compose something again.

Ling Qi smiled slightly. The letter felt more personal this time; she was glad Mother was easing up on the apologies and self-deprecations. The warm shape under her desk that had been keeping her feet cozy shifted then and gave a hungry little cry. She would write back to Mother soon, but for now, she had a hungry child to take care of, a meeting to attend, and then a lot of cultivation to do. It was going to be a busy week.

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"Miss Ling!" Gan Guangli's booming voice greeted her as she approached the pavilion. "I would congratulate you on your part in bringing down the foul miscreant, Yan Renshu." The broad-shouldered boy bowed his head to her, his metal clad hand clasped over his heart.

Ling Qi felt a little awkward at the loud and sincere declaration. "It was hardly any trouble. I could hardly just let him carry on with a scam like that, right?" she replied, dismissing the praise.

The tall boy nodded seriously as he straightened up. "Indeed. It is our duty as Immortals to be sure that no such corruption can take root," he said gravely. "Still, fine work deserves praise," he added, expression lightening.

"Well, thanks," she replied, a little lamely. "Er, am I early for the meeting, or ...?"

"Ah, my apologies," Gan Guangli said, stepping aside. "Lady Cai will receive you now, Miss Ling."

The council pavilion's furniture had been rearranged to accommodate smaller meetings, and Cai Renxiang waited for her at the top of the steps, seated much as she was the last time the two of them had met one-on-one. Her presence seemed greater now, even with the harsh light that backlit the heiress at low ebb, barely a halo around her dark hair. The fabric of her white and gold gown seemed to ripple like a thing alive, and Ling Qi could feel the attention of the spirit in the cloth. The wings of the 'butterfly' splayed across Cai's chest felt more like eyes than ever.

Also, unlike their last private meeting, another girl stood by, head down as she served out tea to the two places set at the table. It looked like her stock had risen since then. Ling Qi stopped at the top of the pavilion steps and gave her best proper bow. Best to be polite. "Lady Cai, thank you very much for agreeing to meet me on such short notice."

"It is a small enough thing for you to request," the heiress said evenly. "Please, sit and avail yourself of the tea. It is a fine blend, if I may be trusted as a judge of such things."

"Thank you," Ling Qi replied, keeping her head bowed for a moment longer before straightening up and taking a seat. She took a polite sip from the steaming cup in front of her. It wasn't bad; there was a bit of spice to it that she didn't recognize, but then again, tea mostly tasted the same to her. "I did not have the chance to follow the aftermath as closely as I might have liked. How was the response to the revelation?"

"Many of those held in unjust and false bondage were furious of course," Cai Renxiang answered, appearing satisfied as she lifted her own cup. "And, with proof so solid, none could gainsay my words openly. Obviously, those who truly oppose me were unmoved, merely denouncing the villain themselves and claiming ignorance of his dealings."

That was about what she had expected. "I am guessing Sun Liling was among them?" Ling Qi asked carefully, briefly glancing at the girl who had served the tea as she bowed and left.

"Princess Sun was among the loudest in announcing her opposition," Cai Renxiang agreed a touch sourly. "She made it quite clear that such villainy should not be an excuse for my 'tyranny' to spread. She was among the fastest to gather up Yan Renshu's stray followers."

"We still got the majority though, right?" Ling Qi asked, before wincing at her own lack of decorum. "I mean, we were still able to prevent most of his victims from being further taken advantage of?"

Ling Qi caught a touch of a smile on the heiress' lips before it was hidden by the teacup.

"Of course. The Princess Sun's efforts aside, few saw reason to refuse my protection. Enough about that trouble for the moment. That will be the focus of next week's council meeting. I believe you had a proposal?"

Ling Qi nodded, taking a moment to go over her request in her head again as she did. The tea made a good cover for the pause. "I recently acquired a large asset, and I was hoping you could aid me in making the most of it."

"Oh? Would this be related to the pill furnace which vanished from Yan Renshu's holdings?" Cai Renxiang inquired, putting down her cup and leaning back in her seat. "The boy in charge of that facility was quite distraught," she added, meeting Ling Qi's gaze evenly.

Ling Qi smiled sheepishly. "That's the one," she replied a bit nervously. "Please do not hold that against me. At the time, it was enemy property."

"I am not so poor as to demand that my agents take no spoils of their own," Cai Renxiang said without heat. "I am not the avaricious tyrant that our enemies speak of."

"Of course not," Ling Qi hurried to reply. "I was just unsure of the protocol."

"Understandable. Such things vary widely." Cai didn't sound like that pleased her. "Know that I have no intention of being the sort of leader which demands such tribute."

"I am glad for your generosity," Ling Qi said slowly, studying the other girl's serious expression. She didn't think the heiress was lying. In any case, it meant she could go ahead. "I propose to offer it to our production students to use at a markdown from the Production Hall's fees. In return for your help in protecting it and enforcing the fees, I would offer you a fair portion of the fees involved."

"Oh? Would it not be better for our faction to allow its use freely? I would be able to compensate you fairly," Cai Renxiang questioned. Ling Qi felt something odd in her words. It wasn't dishonesty, but... more like it was a leading question?

"I have friends who are pillmakers and who have earned a personal furnace," Ling Qi explained. "I do not want to undercut their livelihoods and hard work that way. I imagine they aren't alone in their position either." She didn't necessarily care about people in the marketplace who might have their own furnaces, but there was no reason to piss them off. "By making it free to use, it would disrupt things at the market a lot too."

"Acceptable reasoning," Cai Renxiang said. "I would have you speak with my subordinates in charge of finances regarding the exact details, but I find your proposal to be reasonable."

"Thank you, Lady Cai." Ling Qi had to fight down a grin. She was sure she would not have to worry about spirit stones for the rest of the year now!

"You are welcome," the other girl said with a tiny nod. "Would you, in turn, answer me a question?"

Ling Qi blinked. "Ah, of course, what did you need?"

"What do you intend to do in the future?" the heiress asked simply.

Ling Qi hadn't really thought about it. She knew she had years of army service ahead; it seemed pointless to plan beyond that. Although she would receive an Imperial writ, she had no idea what that really meant in practical terms. "I'm still considering it," she replied after a moment. "After all, I don't know what opportunities I'll have yet."

"Allow me to offer one then," Cai Renxiang said warmly, meeting her eyes unflinchingly. "Join me. I have no doubt that you will achieve the third realm in a matter of weeks or months. Your talent is obvious, and your recent escapades have cemented the truth of your ability in my mind."

"I am already a member of your council," Ling Qi pointed out dubiously.

"A temporary and impersonal relationship," Cai Renxiang acknowledged, the ever-present light behind her building in brightness. "I would instead offer you a place as a direct vassal of the Cai clan, a position similar to that which Guangli will enjoy, pending his breakthrough."

Ling Qi fell silent, trying to figure out where the catch was and why the heiress would be offering this. "I am flattered, of course," she said to buy herself time. "But I am unsure as to why you would trust me with such a position. Wouldn't the Lady Duchess need to approve such offers?"

Cai Renxiang's gown rippled slightly, shimmers of gold moving through the white. "My purpose in this Sect is twofold: to gain experience with authority, and to build my own base of power," the heiress replied frankly. "To that end, the Duchess has granted me certain privileges, including the ability to offer direct vassalship. As for trust…" Cai Renxiang said, a considering tone entering her voice. "Bai Meizhen speaks well of you."

Ling Qi felt a spike of irritation. "Is that so?" There was no way they were that close.

The glowing girl across from her furrowed her brows, studying her face. "You misunderstand. It is not her good word, so much as the insight those words give me, along with my own observations. I am aware that you feel little to no personal loyalty toward me at the moment." Cai Renxiang spoke confidently and without doubt... and seemed unbothered by her words.

"Why then?" Ling Qi asked warily, hands resting on the table, her tea forgotten. There wasn't much point in denying it when the other girl so clearly believed it.

"Because what loyalty you have is beyond reproach," Cai Renxiang said without hesitation. "That is a trait which is difficult to find in retainers, your other abilities aside," she continued, leaning forward. "I am capable of earning such loyalty with time, if you would grant me the opportunity." Cai Renxiang spoke with absolute conviction.

Now, Ling Qi just felt uncomfortable. "I have to think about this."

"I do not expect an answer right now," Cai Renxiang agreed, the light behind her dimming. "Please consider it for the future. I shall ask again when you achieve the third realm."

Ling Qi made her excuses soon after that, departing the meeting place to hash out the details of the pill furnace agreement with the production disciples who would actually oversee it. She got a pretty good deal, considering that she was offloading pretty much all of the work involved. Ling Qi would receive forty percent of the profits and retain full ownership of the furnace, meaning she could take it back at any time, although she would have to give a week's notice before doing so. She also had the right to blacklist users, just in case someone decided to piss her off.

Despite the success, she still felt uncomfortable. She didn't really like the Cai heiress very much. She was stiff and unyielding, and to be frank, Cai Renxiang unnerved her a little bit. All the same, the offer from the Cai heiress wasn't one she could easily discard. She wondered just what the girl thought would be involved in 'earning' her loyalty. It was a bit bizarre to be praised for something like that when all she did was stick by her first friend.

Ling Qi found herself unable to get very far in her meditations that night, distracted by thoughts of a future that she had never even considered.

# **Chapter 115 - Blizzard**

Thoughts of the future continued to niggle at her as she went on to meet up with Gu Xiulan and the others from Golden Fields. Today was the first day the group would be back together for training again.

It was... more than a little awkward. Gu Xiulan practically radiated defiance and pride while Fan Yu and Heijin were subdued at best. Han Jian put on an upbeat front, but she could tell that he could feel the tension too. Han Fang was as inscrutable as ever, though he had picked up a few faint scars over his lips.

Nevertheless, after Han Jian lead them through a bit of practice to ensure that they could still work together, they set off to explore the eastern foothills.

Ling Qi got quite a bit of practice with her Fleeting Zephyr successor arte, bolstering everyone's agility with the wind and speeding their steps. Doing it for so many people at once really helped her cultivate her control of the art. Of course, the exceedingly potent medicinal energy burning in her dantian was quite the distraction, but even that helped her hone her focus. Her core stretched and pulsed, growing with each rotation of energy.

The exploration itself had mixed results. They didn't find much of interest, but her share of the cores gained from hunting would go a long way toward keeping Zhengui fed this week. The travel was good for the little spirit as well. Although he tired out quickly, letting him out when they stopped to clean their kills or poke around an area more closely gave him some time to stretch his legs.

The hunt was stressful. Xiulan snapped easily at Fan Yu and Han Fang, which put both boys in a bad mood. Even Heijin was hesitant to approach her. Ling Qi left feeling rather more weary than the physical exertion would account for.

Luckily, she had time for some actual relaxation before the evening session with the prickly Elder Jiao.

"So, what's this one mean? I didn't see it on your sheet." Ling Qi tapped her finger against a clump of characters in the pale white tome. She was seated next to Suyin. It was a little uncomfortable to be brushing shoulders like this, but it was the only way to effectively hold the book between them.

Li Suyin frowned at the same section, biting her lower lip as she glanced at the long, unrolled scroll of language notes lying open in front of them. "I think... circulation? This section is discussing the energy flow in the basic animating array."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows, looking up at Suyin's translation notes while silently mouthing the sounds, committing them to memory. Suyin had spent the last week putting together a primer on the ancient Hill tribe language. Ling Qi wondered how a Cloud Tribe shaman had found it. With a primer, studying was going faster, but it was still difficult. "I should have been able to figure that out," she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "Do you want to take a break?"

"I don't mind," Li Suyin replied, taking the book from Ling Qi. She was looking healthier now that she had broken through to Silver. She still had her scars, but the slightly pale and sickly cast Ling Qi had

noticed her developing had gone away, and she seemed more energetic. "This is just so interesting though. I cannot wait to try out the arrays!" Li Suyin declared, jarring her from her thoughts.

"Yeah, it's still pretty simple, but I can see some uses for it," Ling Qi mused. They had worked out the details to the first array depicted in the book, which would create a scout out of the bones of something small like a mouse or a frog. It wouldn't be of much use in combat, but Ling Qi could understand the value of a disposable set of eyes. "Expensive though."

"Well, I can understand the need for a pure conductor," Li Suyin said, a bit of her cheer deflated. "Spirit stone powder is expensive, but the alternative..." Li Suyin looked unsettled as she glanced down at the book.

"I don't like the idea of using 'freshly drawn human heart blood' either," Ling Qi agreed with a grimace. "Sorry, Li Suyin. The guy I took this from was kind of a scumbag."

"No, it's fine," her friend said dismissively. "As Imperial cultivators, it is our duty to turn such things to better and more civilized use."

"Yeah," Ling Qi replied, glad that she was taking it well. "Congratulations again on breaking through by the way," she added, bumping her shoulder against the other girl's.

"It was nothing." Suyin turned her face away shyly. "Really, I should be ashamed of taking as long as I did. I just wanted it to be as perfect as possible... Senior Sister Bao finally told me to stop stalling."

Ling Qi gave her a sympathetic look. "Well, breakthroughs can be rough... Did you remember to have a bucket nearby?"

Li Suyin wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Yes, but it was still disgusting. I cannot believe that... sludge was part of me." She grasped her knees in distress.

"It's part of everyone," Ling Qi pointed out dryly. "I looked like someone had covered me in a bucket of tar." A small giggle escaped her friend's lips, and Ling Qi smiled.

"I wasn't any better," Suyin admitted, leaning back against the cliff face they were seated against. "It still feels like it isn't enough."

Ling Qi closed her eyes, a vision of Gu Xiulan's charred arm flashing through her mind. "You don't need to be quick about it. As long as you keep moving forward, isn't it fine?" Ling Qi asked, her voice low. She didn't need more of her friends half killing themselves.

Li Suyin gave her a concerned look and nodded quickly. "Of course. I know I am being silly." After a beat of silence, she said, "I wanted to ask something of you actually."

"Oh? Need me to rough someone up for you?" Ling Qi joked, trying to dismiss her own somber mood.

"Nothing like that," Li Suyin assured her. "Senior Sister Bao has given me directions to the place where she acquired her own spirit," Suyin continued in a rush, "and I was hoping you would come with me."

Ling Qi cocked her head to the side curiously. "I don't mind, but I might be busy. Is it that dangerous?"

"It's fine if you are not able to accompany me immediately," Li Suyin said, toying with her sleeves. "I intend to perform a ritual supplication toward the elder spirit of the nest, and Senior Sister indicated that I might be... somewhat incapacitated after."

That was weird. But she had heard of some rituals that required alcohol or drugs, so it wasn't the weirdest result. "That sounds fine. Are you inviting Su Ling too?"

"Ah," Li Suyin sighed. "Su Ling is... not very fond of spiders. I didn't want to impose..."

"Oh." Ling Qi was reminded that a nest of gigantic spiders lay in the forest at the base of the mountain. "Oh. I can see how you might not want to..." She trailed off awkwardly. She knew some people were weirdly afraid of bugs and spiders, but she hadn't guessed Su Ling would be one of them. "That's fine," she finished.

"I'm glad," Li Suyin said, relieved. "In any case, shall we resume? Now that we know the base components, deciphering the more complex arrays should be easier. I think we might be able to decipher the Vault Warrior array with just a little more work."

Upon Suyin's agreement, Ling Qi shifted closer, looking over Suyin's shoulder as the girl traced a finger under the foreign text. It really was nice to relax now and then.

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"You know," Ling Qi began as she raised her hand to shield her face from the hard, biting wind. "Something you said a while ago confused me," she said as the snow and ice littering the path crunched under her feet.

"What might that have been?" Zeqing asked absently. Unlike Ling Qi, the spirit floated easily ahead of her, drifting like a leaf on the wind while Ling Qi carefully made her way up the nearly vertical iceslicked path. "You have not had trouble with the melody."

"No, it's just-" Ling Qi paused. She was somewhat wary of raising the subject; she didn't want to find out what skidding down the mountain on her rear would feel like. "You said that Hanyi was spending time with her father, right? But, uh, you also said you devoured him. So... Did you remarry or something?"

The ice spirit's blood red lips turned down in a slight frown, and a few flakes of snow fell, penetrating the cocoon of clear weather that surrounded them. "Ah. That must have seemed strange to a young mortal. Sadly, I have not found another appropriate suitor." Zeqing sighed, gazing wistfully off into the blizzard that surrounded them.

"Then how...?" Ling Qi questioned, hauling herself up over a ledge while the spirit floated on unimpeded.

"It was brought to my attention that a child does best with both parents," Zeqing explained, turning her blank white gaze to Ling Qi's face. "I expressed the remaining fragments of his spirit into an ice revenant. It is a bit tiring, but Hanyi seems to enjoy playing with it."

"Is that... safe?" Ling Qi asked uncertainly. That didn't sound safe. Or healthy. At all.

"I hardly kept the more objectionable pieces of him undigested," Zeqing replied archly before drifting higher toward the top of the rise they were climbing. "I believe we have arrived."

"Where are we going anyway?" LIng Qi asked, setting aside the somewhat disturbing conversation. She blinked as she reached the top as well and found herself looking out at a wide field of untouched white snow curving away into the distance, hugging the sheer cliffs that lead closer to the peak. They were very high up at this point with the clouds seeming barely out of reach.

All told, it was a beautiful sight, and in that moment, Ling Qi felt a thrill of happiness that she now had the strength to see such a place with her own eyes. The sting of frigid cold at her extremities was a minor cost to pay for such a sight.

"You near mastery of that man's melody," Zeqing began, her silver hair rippling in the wind as Ling Qi passed her, peering into the distance where falling snow rendered the horizon an opaque white. "But you are still lacking. I thought a change of venue might push your understanding forward."

Ling Qi took a deep breath of frozen air, feeling the way the wind qi played against her extended senses. It was a powerful thing, and the qi of water and mountain was strong as well, but this site hardly seemed better than the black pool. "Is there something special about this place that I'm missing?" Ling Qi asked, turning back to face the ice spirit.

The wind kicked up, sending the spirit's empty gown and hair fluttering with increasing intensity. "You misunderstand," the spirit explained gently, and the snow began to fall, her power no longer holding back the blizzard that raged around them. "You have mastered the notes and the melody, but the truth of it - the feeling - yet escapes you."

Ling Qi felt a thrill of dread as the snowfall grew greater and her teacher's form began to fade into the blizzard. She was suddenly and unpleasantly reminded that she was alone with a fourth grade spirit with few, if any, compunctions against murder.

"Lady Zeqing?" she asked, reverting to a more polite form of address. "Please tell me what you are doing?!" Her flute materialized in one hand and a knife fell into her other. She might not have a fighting chance, but surely she could escape if things went bad.

A shrieking gale blasted her, shredding her paltry attempt at control and sending her tumbling end over end into the snow. The dizziness as she was carried spinning through the air destroyed any sense of place or direction. Her knife was torn from her hands, tumbling off to vanish into the storm.

"Music is an exquisite art. It is the spirit expressed through sound." Zeqing's voice reached her, seeming to come from every direction. "Such pitiful mortal understanding is only the beginning of mastery. Sound is neither wind nor thunder. Such things cannot truly bear the weight of a soul's expression."

"What does any of that have to do with this!" Ling Qi screamed into the blinding blizzard, snow already crusting her hair and gown. It stung her eyes and burned on her skin, far colder than before.

"It is the only weapon available to you," Zeqing replied, not unkindly, her voice echoing on the screaming of the wind. "And your only salvation. I shall await you at the exit."

Ling Qi grit her teeth, tears stinging in her eyes as she tried to look for any sign of where she was. No matter where she looked though, there was only snow. Even with her enhanced senses, she could not see more than a few centimeters in front of her face, nor feel anything beyond an overwhelming torrent of darkness, wind, and water mixed with something else, a light qi that merged with the rest, barely detectable.

It was a test. Of course it was a test. Every single Elder and Spirit seemed to just *love* their tests!

She began to stir the cool and smooth dark qi to activate Crescent's Grace, which would allow her to more easily move through the driving winds. But nothing happened. The qi flowing through her channels seemed frozen and unresponsive, refusing to move at her command. True alarm bloomed.

As if in response to the attempt, Ling Qi felt something slice across her cheek. She flinched as she felt the skin part, warm blood flowing down her face, and her skin prickled as the snow driven against it took on a harder cast like needles of ice.

She tried Thousand Ring Fortress next, and that, too, failed, the lively qi of wood just as frozen and dead as the other channels. Another sharp needle of ice stung, this time drawing a pinprick of blood on her hand. Ling Qi still had no idea how the spirit had sealed her other arts, but she could only assume Zeqing was being serious about using music to escape the blizzard. She raised her flute to her frozen lips and began to play.

The mist she called was immediately torn away, the flow from her flute far outstripped by the driving wind, but it was all she could do. She began to trudge forward, playing the familiar melody even as its sound was drowned out by the storm.

She didn't know how long she trudged, seeking any sort of landmark or indication of where she was. All she knew was that she could certainly feel the cold now. She could feel it creeping into her bones, numbing her fingers, and stinging her eyes. She did her best not to falter in her playing, no matter how futile it seemed, while she desperately wracked her mind for some part of the melody she had not understood. Something that would let her counteract the cold. Something to keep her stiffening limbs moving.

She lost count of the tiny cuts that sliced her exposed skin. She barely recognized her braid tearing loose, leaving her long hair to flap in the wind, just one more thing dragging her back.

She remembered her first winter after running away, shivering alone in an alley. She had come the closest to breaking then, to running back to her mother in tears, ready to sacrifice her freedom for a warm hearth and the safety of her mother's arms.

She remembered the kind old man whose blankets she had stolen, and in turn, the beating she had received when an older, stronger boy had taken them from her weeks later. She remembered sobbing alone as she clutched her broken arm while uncaring passersby ignored the huddled lump on the street corner.

She remembered loneliness and abandonment, the cruelty of the uncaring wilderness, unchanged by its urban nature. The mist flowing from her flute thickened, resisting the wind as it flowed down like

water, engulfing her feet and legs. It wasn't warm, it wasn't comforting, but it was hers, and it rejected the external cold and driving shards of ice.

It wasn't enough. Her notes were torn away the moment they left her flute, lost to the howling of the blizzard. She felt her understanding of the melody growing as the mist expanded, engulfing her figure and granting her a tiny, precious meter of sight, but she was still barely making progress. The power of the storm was simply too great to contest.

Zeqing had said something, something about music being spirit and soul. She had said mere sound was insufficient to express it in full. That didn't make sense! How could she have music without sound?! It sounded like part of some stupid koan.

But Ling Qi was not a mortal anymore. It seemed strange that she had to keep reminding herself, but it was so easy to forget when she was always surrounded by other cultivators. She could jump higher, hit harder, and think more clearly, but it was all so gradual that it was hard to notice before it just became her new normal.

A cultivator *wasn't* normal. *She* wasn't normal. She could flow through a space smaller than her own head as a ribbon of darkness and fly with a magical gown! She could summon mist to confound her foes and sap their will or fill her friends with the vitality and toughness of an ancient oak!

Why then should her melody be unheard just because of the wind?

Something thrummed deep inside of her like the plucked string of a guqin, and she felt her qi change. The rumbling thunder that had filled her as she further mastered her melody faded and became lighter like the notes of a song drifting through the evening sky.

Her melody was no longer drowned out. Instead, it **rang** out through the storm, carried on pure qi. Although her ears could not hear it, her soul could. The music was as clear as if played on a calm summer's day. Her mist exploded outward, doubling and then quadrupling in volume, utterly unaffected by the wind. Her fingers danced across the apertures of her flute, faster and more dexterous than any mortal musician could match.

As her mist roiled around her, the storm slackened. In front of her, Zeqing hovered peacefully only a short distance away in the now gently falling snow. Meanwhile, behind her, Ling Qi could see her own tracks going in a wide circle. She must have tramped through her own trail a dozen times or more and not noticed at all. She lowered her flute slowly and glared at Zeqing as she trudged toward the spirit, feeling angry and hurt.

"Why?" she demanded, stopping just out of arm's length. "Why the hell didn't you warn me first?"

Zeqing cocked her head to the side, something like earnest confusion on her pale face. "There was no need. You met my expectations admirably."

"And if I hadn't?" Ling Qi asked flatly.

"You may have died," Zeqing admitted, looking bemused. "How could you expect a true understanding from anything less?"

Ling Qi took a deep breath. "It wouldn't bother you at all if I had died, would it?"

Zeqing frowned, her gown fluttering less as the wind died down. "It would have been a disappointment," she said thoughtfully. "Do you truly think yourself so unskilled?"

"That's not...!" Ling Qi said in frustration. "That's not the point. I don't like being thrown into that kind of situation against my will!"

"I see," the spirit replied, still seeming lost at Ling Qi's anger. "I will keep that in mind?" she added questioningly.

Ling Qi closed her eyes for a moment. "Sure... I'm heading down the mountain now. I need a break."

"Very well," Zeqing said slowly. "I shall see you next time then?"

"Yeah," Ling Qi replied without feeling as she stalked past the spirit. Her gown flared out, allowing her to begin the flight down, since she still couldn't feel her toes. She wasn't sure she would be coming back.

### **Chapter 116 - Elder Jiao**

Still frustrated, Ling Qi threw herself further into training, determined to take full advantage of the mass of medicinal energy still burning in her meridians. She took breaks only to study with Suyin and to venture out on explorations with Han Jian and his group.

After her surprise tribulation from Zeqing, Ling Qi found the bite of her phantoms more real and the propagation of the entrapping darkness qi of no longer required the use of a separate technique, the effect having merged with Mist of the Vale. With a twist of the tune, she could narrow the drain of the Starlight Elegy technique to focus on a single target, trapping them in the Despair of the Lost as Zeqing did to her.

On the other hand, the first breath of the art she had stolen from Yan Renshu's base, Abyssal Exhalation, came grudgingly. Although she was well practiced with dark qi by now, the cloying mix that rose from the meeting of darkness and earth did not come naturally. The hungering, corrosive violet mist of the Breath of Stygian Depth had certain things in common with her Mist of the Vale, but channeling and patterning her exhaled qi into the slimy forms of tomb worms was less pleasant. It was, however, quite potent.

Meizhen found her new art somewhat distasteful, but she could not argue with the efficacy of it. However, the girl was remarkably quick to annihilate the slimy constructs Ling Qi summoned before they could touch her. Ling Qi considered taking the time to talk with her friend about Cai's offer and her other troubles, but the girl was busy with her own cultivation. Besides, Ling Qi wanted to get her thoughts in order before presenting them to her friend.

As the week wore on, Ling Qi continued to work hard. Still brimming with energy, she saw no reason to refuse a request from Gu Xiulan to help the girl with her own training. They hadn't exactly had time for heart-to-hearts while out with the others after all.

Ling Qi winced as she gazed at the wreckage of the training field and the merrily burning, bright blue fires scattered around the target area. They were, even now, greedily devouring the grass and leaving behind patches of suspiciously shiny dirt. She watched Xiulan's spirit happily frolic in a steadily shrinking patch, streaks of blue traveling up its wispy limbs as it drank in the fire.

To her right was Zhengui, who she had let out to play while they trained, and well...

"Big Sis, look!" the little tortoise chirped from the nearest patch of fire as he puffed out his cheeks and breathed out a cloud of sparkling, multi-colored ash, apparently fueled by the unusual nature of the fires.

"How pretty," she complimented him with a slightly stiff expression. "Thank you for helping put out the fires, Zhengui." She was answered with a happy chirp and a hiss as he went back to 'work'. That done, she turned back to Xiulan.

The other girl sat cross legged on a patch of dirt, her chest rising and falling with a careful breathing exercise. Her cloth of gold veil fluttered with each breath, concealing the scowl Ling Qi could tell she wore underneath due to her scrunched up brows and narrowed eyes.

"It should not be this difficult to extinguish fires," her friend hissed, frustrated. "It is a child's exercise!"

"A child can't make fires that do that," Ling Qi pointed out dryly, indicating a patch of literally melted sand in the target range and the curls of flame burning in place without apparent fuel. "I think you can be excused for needing to work at it a little."

Gu Xiulan gave her a dirty look but didn't immediately reply, instead glaring at the nearest pile of burning kindling that was once a reinforced target. The flames flickered in time with her breathing. They dimmed, but a moment later, they flared back to life, actinic sparks erupting.

"It makes no sense," she growled. "They are extensions of my qi! They shouldn't have a life of their own like this." This time, she closed her eyes, and heat distortions appeared in the air around her. The flames Xiulan was focusing on collapsed, crushed before they could spark further.

"See, you can still do it," Ling Qi encouraged, walking over to sit down beside her. "And you can't say that it isn't worth it. I can't really afford to try and block your attacks as it is."

Xiulan huffed as she opened her eyes, focusing on the next fire. "As enjoyable as it is to revel in the power, I doubt the Sect will be pleased with having a training ground burnt down every other day."

"I doubt they'll care," Ling Qi responded. "What's a little landscaping compared to a powerful disciple?" That seemed to mollify Xiulan.

"I suppose," she replied, and Ling Qi saw her fingers clench on her knees as she glared at the fire, forcing it to shrink bit by bit. "Hmph. You must think me lazy, to complain about work like this."

"The clean up is never the fun part," Ling Qi said wryly. "My arts aren't the kind to leave a mess, but if they were, I doubt I'd have much fun with that step."

"Big Sis, I found a pretty!" She looked down to find a proud looking Zhengui trundling over, a clump of warped sand that glittered in the late afternoon light. He dropped it at her feet, his serpent head looking away even as his little green eyes gleamed up at her, excited for her approval.

"How lovely," Xiulan said, a touch of amusement entering her voice despite her strained expression.

Ling Qi merely glanced at her before picking up the bead and examining it with a serious expression. It was pretty in a rough way, especially with the spark of azure fire that still glittered at its core.

"Thank you, Zhengui," she replied with dignity, patting the little reptile on the head. "It's very pretty. I love it." Practically radiating pleasure, he trundled off again, Zhen wagging behind him.

"Such a devoted child," Gu Xiulan said. "You should be proud."

Ling Qi huffed at the touch of sarcasm in her voice. "He is," she said. "There's nothing wrong with being a little childish."

"I suppose not," Xiulan mused. "You would not find many cultivators willing to spend so much time on a spirit without even beginning combat training though."

"I can worry about that when he hits reaches second realm," Ling Qi replied. "There's nothing wrong with letting him play for now."

"What a strange attitude," Xiulan said, her stress seeming to ease as she leaned back. The last of the fires was under control now, being consumed by Linghuo. "I would have thought you would drive him as hard as you drive yourself."

"That's different," Ling Qi said absently, watching Zhen bristle as her spirit confronted Xiulan's spirit over the last sparks. "Anyway, what do you say - want to head to the market? I think we both deserve a treat for working hard since our little gluttons have already had theirs."

"Of all the things you could learn from me, you pick up my sweet tooth," Xiulan laughed, moving to stand. "Fine. Let's be off."

Ling QI was glad her friend had worked out her tension for the moment. If offering Xiulan a time to relax herself was all she could do, she would do it gladly.

Such diversions could not last long though, and soon, Ling Qi had to return to training. The last several days spent in Elder Jiao's company had been stressful as she continued stubbornly cultivating Sable Crescent Step. Locked in a dream state, she found herself forced to solve more and more complex puzzles of three-dimensional movement and manual dexterity with ever harsher requirements of time and precision.

It was enough to push her understanding to the next step and reach the state of being 'one with shadow' for a short time. In that state, she could move from shadow to shadow as if she had no body, hidden in the darkness cast by a person or object. Having mastered it, she was able to further understand the Sable Crescent Step art, and she was sure that no one could track her through mundane means anymore. What she had in her jade slip was a fragment- or more precisely, it was only the beginning of a chain. One step lay beyond her in the slip still, but even that was only the completion of the first true stage of mastery.

It was with that thought in mind that she left the dream, trembling with mental exhaustion. As sensation returned to her real body, she found her head lying on something soft, rather than the floor, as was usual when awakening. Ling Qi dragged her eyes open, staring upward blearily and found a face swimming into focus above her own.

Xin was above her, silver painted lips curved up in an easy smile as she hummed to herself, and Ling Qi felt the spirit's cold fingers brushing through her hair. She stiffened immediately, discomfort flooding her thoughts, made all the worse by Zeqing's actions earlier this week. If she had been helpless before a grade four spirit, how much weaker was she in the face of a prism?

"Awake already? How impressive," Xin said lightly, peering down at her. "Ah, I see. You've completed the lesson then?"

"I - Uh - I have," Ling Qi replied nervously, her skin prickling at the feeling of the hands on her scalp. The inability to even feel Xin's qi was hardly a comfort. "Could you... Can I get up please?"

"Ah, of course," Xin replied, sounding disappointed as Ling Qi hurriedly sat up. "My apologies. I did not know it would bother you so."

"It's not your fault," Ling Qi replied quickly even as she hurried to arrange herself into a properly seated position across from Xin. A glance around the room revealed no sign of Elder Jiao.

Xin hummed, and her eyes flickered silver. In that moment, Ling Qi felt as if Xin was looking through her, rather than at her. "I see. You had been thinking of us as if we were humans."

Ling Qi recoiled. Had the spirit just looked straight into her mind or something?! She forced herself to relax. "You act like it," she accused. "Then she goes and tosses me into a lethal blizzard. I thought..."

"She wasn't being deliberately cruel," Xin said kindly, resting her hands in her lap, "though [Winter's Muse/Songstress of Endings/\*\*\*\*\%\^] has a cruel nature at heart."

Ling Qi shuddered. Although her eyes told her that Xin had only said Zeqing's name by the movement of her lips, what she heard and felt was different. It was meaning, impressed directly into her thoughts, even if most of it remained incomprehensible.

"To face the slow specter of death by cold, alone and without recourse, is the greatest of inspirations in her eyes. How could she deny you the opportunity?"

"It... was," Ling Qi admitted. She found herself saying, "If she had offered, I probably would have done it anyway." It was foolish, but she knew herself well enough. "She should have asked."

"And that is your nature, that hatred for a lack of choices," Xin mused. "Well, I will not tell you what to do, but I think you should talk to her. That woman is a lonely one."

"I thought you said I shouldn't treat you like humans," Ling Qi sulked, crossing her arms.

"You should not," Xin said sternly. "You should simply understand where spirits differ. Beasts are easier, for they share your drives. Spirits..." She leaned back, an amused smile on her lips. "Until my Jiao shared his essence with me, I knew not hunger, touch, fear, happiness, or even true desire. I was a mere fragment of the Moon, seeking secrets for their own sake. That woman had so much less time and opportunity to take on human traits."

Ling Qi felt uncomfortable with the older woman's happy, nostalgic tone and ecstatic expression.

"There is no need to discuss such things with a mere disciple." Ling Qi startled as Elder Jiao appeared behind his wife, frowning down at her.

"Oh?" Xin asked playfully, turning her head and resting her cheek in her hand. "You do not want the girl to know how you stained an innocent fairy with your essence and wrought her into your ideal spouse?"

Ling Qi choked. "Honored Elder, I have completed your lesson," she said hurriedly, cutting off anything else Xin might say.

Elder Jiao's expression was flat and stony as he ignored his giggling wife. "So you have. What will you do with your final few days of training then?"

"I was hoping," Ling Qi began, even as she glanced uncomfortably at Xin. "I was hoping you could instruct me on the nature of spirits... and how to further my understanding of Eight Phase Ceremony."

Elder Jiao sighed, even as Xin grinned. "Of course you do," the man grumbled. "Fine."

The ensuing lessons were much less stressful thankfully and were overseen as often by Xin as by the Elder himself, granting her insights into the way spirits behaved even as she refined her ability to take in qi from the night sky. Soon enough, they came to an end, and the prickly Elder bade her goodbye for the last time.

She had made a... mostly good impression. Maybe?

# **Chapter 117 - Troubles**

"I know you can do it. Just a little more!" Ling Qi encouraged from her place at the edge of the clearing.

At the center of the gap in the small forest copse, Zhengui trembled, his shell glowing a bright emerald green. The grass at his feet was lit as well in a distorted circle around the young spirit. On advice from Xuan Shi, she had decided to explore Zhengui's wood affinity more. It seemed that 'normal' xuan wu usually had some ability to manipulate their environment, such as altering currents, creating small sinkholes, or at the higher end, outright manipulating the weather, causing earthquakes, and sinking or raising islands.

In Zhengui's case, he seemed to mainly affect plants. They hadn't exactly figured out the limits of what he could do yet, but he could apparently repair nicks and damage to his shell. Ling Qi refused to test that any further. With focus, his wood affinity also extended his awareness, allowing him to feel things from further away. This awareness had a greater range if there were trees nearby.

Now they were seeing if he could actually manipulate plants. Ling Qi watched Zhengui carefully as the young spirit shook in place, paying close attention to the feeling of his qi so she could stop him if it seemed like he was overexerting himself.

The grass around him glowed and twisted as if caught in a breeze, and the snake-tortoise's glowing shell briefly flared, a rippling circle of green qi flowing out in a rough circle. When it faded, Zhengui lay on the ground, his serpentine tail twitching as Zhen peered down at his other half, who lay on the grass, stubby legs splayed out. The grass in the circle was several centimeters longer than it was everywhere else.

"Good job!" Ling Qi praised as she quickly crossed the clearing, her feet barely disturbing the still rustling grass, even as it grasped weakly at her feet. She crouched at his side and scooped him up. Zhengui was getting big enough that it was a little awkward, but she smiled nonetheless." I bet you'll be able to do all sorts of fun things soon."

Gui blinked tiredly up at her. That had taken a fair bit of his energy. "... Catch... everything," he chirped, nuzzling his head into the crook of her arm.

"I was better," Zhen insisted, looking up at her with gleaming red eyes. "I did good too. Right, Big Sister?"

"Of course you did," Ling Qi soothed, eyeing the black scaled snake with amusement. She had told him so when he had managed to sustain his fire breath long enough to actually do more than scorch the bark of the target tree. She had to dive in to save him from having the sapling fall on him, but that was fine. "Now, why don't I let you both take a break? I have some treats for you," she offered slyly.

Gui perked up, immediately casting off his exhaustion as he wriggled in her arms. "Yay! Treats from Big Sis!"

She laughed as she sat down and withdrew the 'treats'. Since she had started getting stones from the pill furnace deal, she had spent some of them on some grade two cores from wood and fire beasts.

There was no reason to be excessive, but she could afford to treat her little spirit when he was doing well. He needed a break before they started trying to work with his ash, which was more difficult since it required both of his halves to work together. She continued to smile as Gui happily nibbled on the core in her palm, and Zhen coiled himself around her other arm, resting comfortably as he swallowed down the cherry red core she had offered him.

Her smile dimmed a little as she thought back to the council meeting she had left just a short time ago. She still felt wrong-footed around the heiress, and the meeting, for all that it had mostly been boring, despite the good news, had left her with a feeling of gnawing worry.

Things seemed to be going too well for Cai's faction. Resistance to Cai's efforts were dying down among the older students, and some second or third years had even been inducted into the ranks of their enforcers. Disciples older than that were mostly not a concern since 'permanent' outer disciples were usually full-time workers for the Sect.

Yet Sun Liling remained at large, and it seemed she wasn't rushing out to attack anymore. Instead, she was offering herself as a rallying point for anyone who refused to kowtow to Cai, promising protection and supplies in open defiance. Three enforcer pairs had already been trounced and hung up from the trees around the market in naught but their underclothes.

Fu Xiang had painted a picture of quite a tough nut to crack. Chu Song had definitely sided with Sun, along with a fair number of relatively strong second realms and several lesser players. Kang Zihao was in seclusion, which probably meant he was trying to break through to the third realm.

The fortress itself sat on a high cliff and was, Ling Qi noted sourly, surrounded by some kind of formation that left it constantly as bright as a high summer day. It looked like she had gained a reputation after the destruction of Yan Renshu's faction. For the moment, they didn't have much more information beyond the basic external plan, but Fu Xiang was trying to persuade the production students in the market supplying Sun's faction to desist and turn to Cai Renxiang.

"Big Sis?" She jerked at the feeling of Zhen hissing in her ear, his forked tongue tickling her cheek. "No worrying," the snake declared. "Will bite anyone who bothers Big Sis."

Ling Qi blinked then let out a short laugh, reaching up to stroke Zhen's smooth, warm scales. "Is that so? I'll be counting on you in the future then," she grinned. "You'll have to work hard and become strong."

She could feel the determination radiating off the young serpent as he turned to heckle his 'brother' for taking so long to eat his core. Zhen was a little more taciturn and definitely more reckless than Gui, but it gave her a warm feeling to know that her spirit cared for her as much as she did him. She was sure he would keep his promise once he had some more practice.

Even with copious amounts of food, Zhengui was still quite young so he tired himself out well before noon, leaving her with time to pursue her other tasks. Meizhen had agreed to train with her that

evening, but since she had little else in the way of obligations today, she wanted to start on a batch of scouting constructs.

Although the formations in the pale tome had been altered, it was still unpleasant work. No matter that she was decent at it, Ling Qi wasn't a big fan of breaking down her kills, and the smell left over from boiling the mice bones clean was hardly pleasant either. Etching the formations into the tiny bones made her fingers cramped and sore.

Happily, the formation effects drew the pieces back together in functioning order, and soon, she had three mouse skeletons curled up in a pouch on her belt, ready to be deployed. A bit of testing showed that they could follow simple instructions like 'go here and come back in ten minutes.'

With that done, she turned her attention to her second project, one which had been gathering dust in the hidden space under her bed for a few weeks. The last of the shaman's pouches had better protection than the others and would take a lot of work to unlock safely.

Picking out the characters stitched into the pouch with a needle took several hours and quite a few close calls that left her fingers tingling with the dangerous qi of the safeguards built into the pouch. Eventually though, the last of the protections fizzled and died, allowing her to safely open the drawstrings.

Her finds were quite disappointing at first. The pouch seemed like it was full of junk. There was a clay jar full of polished and painted bone dice, a torn headband worked with elaborate embroidery and beads, the broken halves of an unusably tiny bow, and other such things. They were all burnt or bloodstained too. Ling Qi couldn't imagine why trash like this would be so well protected. As far as she could tell, they weren't even broken talismans. It was almost like...

No, he had been pretty unhinged. They were probably some kind of creepy trophy from his victims.

Ling Qi continued to dig through the contents, discarding scraps in her search for something useful. Finally, near the bottom, she found two vials.

The vials, one a bright azure and the other milky white, were obviously potent medicines; she could tell from the moment she unwrapped the little roll of hide they were hidden in. It took significantly more effort to recall what the effects were. When she did, Ling Qi couldn't help but grin.

Medicines that affected breakthroughs were rare and extremely expensive, so much so that Elder Su had only briefly mentioned how to recognize them. She had to hide these and keep quiet about it. There was no way she wanted anyone knowing she had these.

... Well, of those who might want them right now, only Ji Rong and Kang Zihao were likely dangerous. But there was no point in being incautious. The vials went into her storage ring, and she stuffed the rest of the junk back into the shaman bag. She'd dispose of it later.

It was already growing late by that time, so Ling Qi elected to spend the remaining time taking a breather. She had been working hard lately, and a meal at a nice restaurant in the market was a good reward for that. She hadn't eaten anything since her treat run with Xiulan several days ago.

She was back by sundown to spar with Meizhen in the garden of course, and it was as rewarding - and difficult - as always. Her friend's defenses were nigh unbreakable, and her senses sharp, making Ling Qi work hard for any opening she could find. Ling Qi frequently found herself on the defensive when Meizhen quickly turned the tables on her, punishing failed attacks. Meizhen was also, Ling Qi found to her chagrin, more than capable of still dispelling her mist. Whatever earth art Meizhen used to drain away the Melody's hostile qi into the ground was pretty potent.

For Ling Qi, it also served as practice for actively taking in the lunar and stellar qi drifting down from the night sky. The next phase of Eight Phase Ceremony demanded a more active mastery, and trying to absorb it even during a trying battle was pretty good practice.

After the spars, the two of them sat on the porch overlooking the garden, sipping tea and relaxing. They rarely had time to do that anymore, but Meizhen was pensive. Ling Qi suspected that she knew of Cai's offer.

Still, she was a little reluctant to break the tranquil silence between them, so she simply sat for a time, leaning back and watching the stars. She idly swirled the dark tea in her cup as she considered how to approach things. As usual, she decided that it was best to just be direct.

"I'm going to guess you know what I got offered the other day?" Ling Qi asked, looking at her friend's pale face out of the corner of her eye.

Meizhen inclined her head slightly, a few locks of her white hair falling down from her shoulder as she did. "Cai Renxiang offered you a position as her retainer," she said before turning golden eyes her way. "Congratulations. It seems your talent has been recognized."

Ling Qi hummed noncommittally. "I guess. I'm not sure what it really means. So I'm not certain what to think."

"It is a rather distinguished honor," Meizhen explained, as elegant as ever. "A young lady in your position would not normally begin receiving such offers until you had some history of service behind you."

"That's not what Xiulan says," Ling Qi said. "Apparently I should be beating off suitors with a stick." Ling Qi would have missed it if she didn't know the girl so well, but she saw her friend's eyes narrow slightly.

"Such might be the usual tactics of low noble rabble," Meizhen acknowledged. "Happily, between your talent and associations, you have avoided being embroiled in the schemes of such trash."

"That doesn't really answer the question."

"It is not the same thing," Meizhen replied simply. "Cai Renxiang's offer acknowledges your ability, potential, and character." The other girl turned her head to look her fully in the eye. "You may in time reach the heights of fourth realm at an early age, but even then, you would not directly answer to the heir of a province."

"I get that," Ling Qi said, trying to work out how to state her reservations. "It just feels really fast. I don't even really know all my options yet. I understand that I'm gonna be a noble, but I don't really

know what that means or how her offer is different. I don't know if it would be better than staying in the Sect, or..." She trailed off in frustration.

"I suppose you might find it fulfilling to remain in the Sect." Meizhen frowned slightly. "It is not a dishonourable position, but..."

Ling Qi gave her a curious look. "What's wrong with the Sect?"

Meizhen remained silent for several long moments. "The Great Sects are somewhat new as a part of the Empire's governance. Sects have always existed, of course, as centers of learning and competition for noble youth, but the power they hold now worries some. It may be wise to consider that such a position may be... unstable."

Ling Qi felt like she had missed some subtext in her friend's words, but she could also tell that Meizhen wouldn't say more on the subject. "So, what would it be like then, being her retainer?" Ling Qi asked, changing the subject.

"You would likely be given a fief near the capital of Emerald Seas - or wherever the Duchess elects to send her heir if she chooses not to keep her at court." Meizhen relaxed fractionally at the change. "You would be expected to perform tasks for your lord and attend her in official capacities, as you would in any other noble position," the other girl continued. "However, you would receive rather more significant resources toward the building of your house. Cai Renxiang has every reason to desire vassals who are more than the fodder new houses often become."

"... Why have you never asked me to join you like that?" The words slipped out before she could really think about it.

Meizhen stiffened beside her, a trace of an unhappy expression marring her ethereal features. "Please do not ask me such things, Ling Qi."

Ling Qi was unhappy herself for bringing the atmosphere down. "I don't think I would mind so much if it were you," she continued regardless. "I don't really know her. How am I supposed to trust someone who never stops playing to the crowd? Someone who I know is trying to manipulate me into liking her now?"

Meizhen lowered her head. "I would enjoy showing you the Thousand Lakes, but you would not enjoy being under my family," she said quietly. "And while I am a member of the main family, I do not have the authority to make such offers on a personal level." Ling Qi caught a flicker of something in her faintly glowing eyes. There was a 'but' there, left unspoken. "Cai Renxiang is a straightforward person. Service under her would suit you well... and I think her good as well, for what that is worth."

Ling Qi looked at her friend, and after a moment's hesitation, she reached over to rest her hand on top of Meizhen's, looking away uncomfortably as she did so. "I'll give it some thought then," she promised. "But Meizhen, you know I'll stay in contact no matter what, right?"

"... Of course you will." She couldn't see her friend's face, but she could feel the warmth of her hand. "Thank you, Qi."

# **Chapter 118 - Heist**

The next day, Ling Qi set out to get a better idea of how to approach Sun Liling's fortress and discover the disposition of its occupants. The fortress itself was a pretty grand sight for something constructed in secret over a matter of weeks. It occupied one of the mountain's many cliffs, a bit too low to fall within Zeqing's snow-shrouded territory but high enough that there was very little plant growth. If she were to approach on foot, she'd lack any cover taller than a tree stump or a mid-sized rock.

Ten meter walls of stone rose in a curtain around a trio of squat square roofed buildings of dark red stone. As Fu Xiang had reported, at each corner and halfway down the length of each of the four walls, a globe of brilliant, blinding light stood atop a bronze stand or hanging from a similar sconce. Shadows were reduced to ragged scraps in its vicinity, not nearly large enough to take advantage of. It had to be a special property of the lights to do so since otherwise, the overlap should have left some spots where the shadows were long.

She felt oddly tingly when she approached; channelling dark qi was more difficult the closer she got to the fortress. It felt like trying to lift a limb held down by a great weight. She could do it, but it would tire her out faster.

For now, she was satisfied with letting her scouts check around the perimeter while she discreetly followed those who left the fortress to learn their patterns. Her shadowing was fairly fruitful; she found a couple equipment stashes for the ones on ambush duty. She would either raid them herself or report their locations to Cai later. She wasn't sure yet.

Checking back on her scouts revealed that the disciples on duty on the walls were unpleasantly disciplined in the regularity of their patrols and attention to their surroundings. Her scouts had seen several birds get shot down just for flying within a few hundred meters of the walls.

Although she herself could not approach, her scouts proved useful in this as well, allowing her to observe the interactions at the gate closely enough to pick up the system of pass questions they were using with returning disciples. She might be able to disguise herself well enough to get in, but her skills at subterfuge hadn't advanced the way her stealth had.

Ling Qi considered the fortress for some time, warring with herself over what she should do. Some part of her thought risking herself was pointless. She could lose a lot and would probably gain little. She had already picked up a few useful tidbits of information from the outgoing groups, so why risk herself in a place that seemed prepared as a deliberate trap for her? Even the gaps in guard coverage, the handful of seconds where there would be no eyes on certain parts of the walls, was probably a trap. Sun Liling had probably planned it that way. Better to use her scouts; she would only be out a few red stones if they got destroyed.

It didn't sit well with her though. She had never had a problem with acting "cowardly"; she would never have survived long if she had. But the thought of turning away and leaving this place with so little twinged the tiny shred of pride Ling Qi had begun to cultivate in her heart. She had broken through everything Yan Renshu could throw at her and come out victorious. Surely she could at least scout around the courtyard.

While she didn't doubt that these outer countermeasures were aimed at keeping her out, she had improved greatly in the last couple weeks, and once past the outer, she doubted the inner would be as well guarded against her specifically. Wasn't she being a little conceited to think Sun Liling would spend so much effort to target her?

Besides, no matter who her great-grandfather was, Sun Liling was still a girl her age, not some all-knowing sage. Keeping a watch on every inch of the wall all day was impossible. Ling Qi didn't know the exact number of her supporters, but she was pretty sure Sun didn't have more than a few dozen people, and they, too, were disciples. Even if they had better senses than her usual targets, they weren't career guards or soldiers. Even if they had been drilled, there was a limit to how effective that could be in such a short time.

She could do this, as long as she prepared well.

Ling Qi did not rush in immediately. This wasn't like Yan Renshu's bases, where she had to fool only formations and could hide in the dark corners of a cave. A stop by the market got her a soft gray and green cloak that would cover the more colorful parts of her gown and break up her profile. Once she returned, she carefully checked herself over for anything that might make noise and stored it away.

With all that done, she stole across the open field like a shadow, zigzagging from one piece of minimal cover to the next during the brief windows where movement was safe. When guards passed by, she lay flat on her belly behind stones or stumps as utterly still as she could manage. It was nerve-wracking... and exciting.

Ling Qi soon made it to the base of the wall, and she squinted at the bright light of the orb hanging overhead. Though it cast no shadow, it did provide concealment by blocking line of sight from the guards. She studied it, eyeing the formations worked into the bronze sconce. The orb itself, a ball of thin glass, seemed fragile. She considered simply breaking it, but she restrained herself. It would probably alert the guards.

After a moment, she carefully climbed up and set one of her scouts atop the sconce with the command to look closely at every part it could reach. She could study the formations later to figure out if there were any tricks.

Her next step required patience. There would soon be a gap in the patrol on the wall. It would only last a handful of seconds, but that would be enough for her to get up and over. It wasn't like ten meters straight up was very tall for her any more.

Up close, the wall was rough and crude, more like a cliff face than cut stone. It was easy to get a grip on, and she hung below the orb sconce while she waited.

Her moment came. Ling Qi grit her teeth as she forced her suppressed dark qi to flow and flung herself upward, rapidly scaling toward the top of the wall. Vaulting over the rough battlements, she immediately crouched low, taking in the interior in a glance before leaping off the edge into the shadow of a stack of heavy wooden crates that sat beside the interior of the wall.

Her cloak and gown fluttered, but an application of qi slowed her fall, preventing any noisy flapping. As she settled on the ground, Ling Qi breathed out a quiet sigh of relief. She had felt several layers of

alarms as she fell, but she had been able to suppress her qi well enough to slip by them. The first step was over. Even now, she could hear the sound of the next patrol making the turn that would have put her infiltration point in plain sight.

Now relatively safe behind the crates, Ling Qi studied her surroundings more closely. The interior of the fortress was a field of packed dirt around the three small blocky buildings, two of which faced each other with the last squatting at the rear end of the fort. There was a small area full of targets and practice gear roped off but little else of note. Pairs of disciples stood at the entrance to each building while a handful of others went about their business, chatting or practicing. A rather harried-looking boy with a stack of papers and a quill was inspecting stacks of crates, so she probably shouldn't linger long at her current location.

Carefully, she lifted the lid of the crate next to her, peering inside. It was full of wrapped bundles of arrows with what seemed like color-coded fletching in orange, white, and blue. Some kind of special ammunition, maybe? Ling Qi glanced around furtively, then slipped her hand inside, pulling one bundle into her ring. For intelligence gathering purposes, of course. One missing bundle could be attributed to an error.

Sadly, the omnipresent lighting extended into the courtyard as well, so she could not yet slip into the shadows entirely, forcing her to rely on her more mundane stealth ability to slip from her hiding place to the next. This time, she found herself behind a stack of training equipment sitting near the roped off yard. The stack was nothing worth investigating, just training weapons and gear and straw targets for archery. The gray tarp thrown over the targets presented an opportunity, and Ling Qi squeezed under it with hardly a rustle.

Now, she just had to figure out how to get into the buildings. There were no windows on any of them, and each building had only a single door, which was actively guarded. She would have to somehow get the guards to leave their position...

Ling Qi paused in her considerations as one of the doors opened, and a person she recognized emerged. It had been quite some time since she had last seen Ji Rong, but his scar was still hard to miss. Unlike some of the other boys, he hadn't taken to wearing any kind of armor, instead sticking to a simple combination of baggy pants and a loose hanging, sleeveless shirt. Her eyes lingered longer on the bandages wrapped around his forearms and hands; there were formation scripts on them.

He was also fully late second realm, which was irritating. He was keeping up with her cultivation progress, despite the setbacks he had suffered. The boy had a certain cocky swagger to his step these days too.

When he turned his head to look behind him, Ling Qi followed his gaze to find another figure she hadn't seen in a long time. Sun Liling's second, Lu something or another, hadn't changed much in appearance. He was still a tall, fine-featured boy with obnoxiously pretty hair that reached the middle of his back. He, too, forgoed any armor, although he wore metal-studded armored boots, tighter trousers, and a long red sash around his waist that glittered ominously. Ling Qi thought the sash was likely some kind of weapon.

Ling Qi held her breath and suppressed her qi as much as possible. They were heading her way, and she needed to remain undetected. Luckily, it seemed to work, since the two boys continued conversing without pause.

- "... does she want us to squat here?" Ji Rong's words reached her as the guard closed the door behind them.
- "As long as we need to," Liling's pretty boy responded. "I don't see what the hurry is. It's not as if we lack anything here."
- "You're too easy-going," the scarred boy said irritably. "We're bottled up in here like rats! I still haven't gotten a chance to deck that stuck-up bitch, and I can't get Sect Points like this either, Lu Feng. Some of us can't send home to Daddy for treats."
- "And you are, as always, taking this far too seriously." Lu Fengrolled his eyes, a long-suffering expression on his face. "Wenji and the others will finish establishing supplies soon. You can get your points then. Until then, just enjoy the wargame."
- "It's not a game," Ji Rong growled as the two entered the roped off area. "You think I'm gonna be satisfied with what we've done so far? Do you think Sun Liling will be? Neither of us is gonna be satisfied with getting looked down on."
- "On the contrary, a game is exactly what this is," Lu Feng said smoothly as the boys took up positions across from each other in the training field. Were they going to spar? "But I will not bother arguing this again."
- ... Wait. Why was Ji Rong taking his shirt off? That was unnecessary. Didn't they have self-repairing clothing? Why wouldn't that be the first thing any serious cultivator got?!
- "... why she keeps you around. It's like you don't have any pride." Ji Rong's words penetrated her distraction as he tossed his shirt onto a fence post and took up a fighting stance.

Glittering lines drifted from Lu Feng's gloved hands as he took up a loose stance as well. His physical cultivation lagged Ji Rong's somewhat, but he didn't appear worried. "And that is why a dumb brute like you will never catch the Princess' eye. Although why you would want such a-"

He vanished, blurring to the side as Ji Rong's sparking fist passed through the space where his head had been. That first attack flowed into a flurry of exchanged blows between the two boys, which Ling Qi watched intently. It would be useful to gather intelligence on notable enemies' fighting styles.

- "You shut your damn mouth about that." Ji Rong grunted, eyes narrow as he slapped aside curling coils of wire. "I ain't stupid, and I'm not some puppy dog following her around."
- "Is that so. Well, you are far too ugly to be a good puppy, so I suppose that's a good thing. Your base lust is as obvious as it is amusing however," he mocked, even as he twisted and dodged to avoid Ji Rong's increasing tempo of attacks.
- "There's nothing," Ji Rong replied, leaping backward to avoid glittering wire that shot up from the ground, "wrong with looking!" He rushed back in, refusing to give the other boy space. "Least I'm not a limp dandy like you!"

"Hmph. As expected of a brute," Lu Feng said as he caught a punch on his forearm, only to grin viciously as wire coiled up the other boy's arm, allowing him to fling Ji Rong bodily into one of the fence posts. "You truly have a one track mind."

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably. She had learned that Sun still had people on the outside doing work to supply her people with Sect points, but as interesting as this was to watch, the two weren't really using new techniques. She needed to get into the buildings. Forcing some of her attention away from the spar, she studied them for a weakness which she could use to approach.

Ling Qi was not certain what gave her away, but her instincts, sharpened by years spent fearing the consequences of being caught, twinged. Ling Qi was suddenly glad that she had not fully taken her eyes off the roughhousing boys because she caught the slight shift in Ji Rong's stance the instant before he rocketed toward the tarp she was hiding under in a spray of lightning.

Dark qi flowed, pushing through the suppression, and she vanished just as the boy's booted foot came down, cratering the ground. She caught Ji Rong's narrowed eyes as she rose into the air, buoyed by the power of her gown. There was no surprise in his expression, only a sort of grim determination tinged with wary respect.

As she floated in midair, her cheap cloak billowing and her hood thrown off, Lu Feng started to say something, but Ling Qi had no interest in banter. She knew she was in a bad situation, and before the first words could fully leave his lips, she rocketed upward.

In the wake of her escapades in Yan Renshu's lair, Ling Qi had been bothered by how easy it was to escape the boy despite being at a cultivation disadvantage and on enemy ground. In discussing the matter with Meizhen, she had learned the true worth of her Cai-gifted gown.

Flight, true flight without some unwieldy transportation talisman or mount, was largely unheard of below the Cyan realm among Imperial cultivators. As such, few made preparations for it in the Outer Sect. Ling Qi had no doubt that the Sun supporters had though. She sliced an incoming arrow out of mid-air and spun, cloak flapping wildly as she avoided two others.

Her suspicion was born out as the next arrow exploded in a blue-white flash, replaced suddenly by a wide net with weighted stones tied in strategic places. She yelped as it entangled her, and the weight on her grew immense as if each stone weighed a hundred kilograms or more. She grit her teeth and forced more qi through her channels. She dissolved, becoming, for a brief moment, little more than a black mist that seeped through the gaps in the net and continued up.

Her troubles didn't end there. A bright light from below, brighter than the omnipresent glow, caught her eye. She looked down to see Ji Rong, crouched in the middle of the training field, his cupped hands extended upward toward her.

A rippling ball of bright yellow plasma the size of her torso screamed through the air faster than an arrow from his hands. Ling Qi jerked to the side, dodging desperately, and held back a scream as it grazed across her side, scalding her flesh right through the gown.

As painful as it was, it didn't stop her. She discarded her cloak, now on fire, and she flew away from the fortress with every ounce of speed she could manage.

### **Chapter 119 - Friends 1**

This made for the second time that she had crash-landed in the garden, Ling Qi mused. She wasn't particularly fond of it. Her infiltration attempt had been a bit of a wash. It was a bit galling to have only gotten a bundle of trick arrows out for her efforts, and the scout left on the orb was a loss as well, albeit a minor one. But she had gotten a name for one of Sun Liling's suppliers, uncovered some of their strikers' routes, and at least, Cai's faction would now be aware that Sun's faction was stockpiling said trick arrows.

Ling Qi wondered if she could figure out where Liling had the arrows commissioned from, but it was no great heist like her last one against Yan Renshu's faction. Feeling rather dissatisfied as well as mildly sore after applying a salve to her burn, Ling Qi took the time to write down her observations and deliver them to Cai's home before heading down the mountain to meet with Han Jian.

She snuck her way down, of course. No reason to make herself a target on the trip. Spending time with Han Jian and the others continued to be awkward due to the tensions between them, but they pressed on regardless, continuing to comb the surroundings for useful sites and resources between training sessions.

Over the course of the next few days, Ling Qi finally mastered the next technique of the Thousand Ring Fortress art, One Hundred Ring Armament, allowing her to layer powerful defensive qi over herself and her allies. It was costly, short in duration, and at her current level, could not be used reactively, but while the technique was active, she could outright ignore anything less than a technique used by a peer. Even then, most anything that her friends could throw at it, excluding a few of Xiulan's attacks and a single one of Han Jian's sword arts, were greatly reduced in effect.

She also got a demonstration of Argent Storm from Han Jian. Argent Storm was a wind and thunder elemental art forming the basis of the Sect's physical enhancement and movement arts. Inspired by the great seasonal squalls which beat down upon the Wall every year, its Rumbling Squall technique wrapped the body in a layer of obscuring wind and its Thunderous Retort technique produced loud thunderclaps to deflect enemy blows and enhance your own.

In turn, Ling Qi demonstrated the less visually impressive Argent Mirror, using it to defend herself from the effects of Han Jian's aura of command when he summoned his banner as he had done at the intra-council battle.

They showed each other the beginning exercises of each art, enough to practice the first few levels. They would need to show each other later exercises to push beyond because the jade slips were protected from being copied.

Luck was still against them when it came to finding useful sites though. There was profit to be had in the beast cores and herbs to be turned in, but nothing of true note otherwise.

With a night of calming meditation under her belt, Ling Qi recovered from her effort in the fortress, and she met Suyin early in the morning to help the girl with her request. Cool mist still hung over the forest at the base of the mountain as the two of them walked, Li Suyin in the lead.

"You have to wonder why there are so many nests like this out here," Ling Qi said idly as she stepped over a jutting tree root. It had been confirmed, thankfully, that their destination was not the nest she had stolen silk from.

"Once the Ahui clan conquered the Forest of Murk and their leader bound its guardian spirit, spiders became a popular spirit companion in the Emerald Seas," Li Suyin explained . "Since they were an offshoot and pillar of the ducal Hui clan, it only makes sense for others to have copied them."

"What happened to them then?" Clearly, the Ahui clan weren't keeping the spiders under control anymore.

Li Suyin didn't respond at first, peering into the mist ahead as she fidgeted with her sleeves. She was on edge about the coming binding it seemed. "They were destroyed during the invasion of the Cloud Tribes, along with many others. The Hui clan never properly recovered from the loss of so many loyal vassals, and combined with the Imperial condemnation of their failure to properly coordinate their armies..."

Ling Qi nodded absently. Sometimes, she felt like she could ask just about anything and Suyin would have some kind of answer.

"We're here," she said, interrupting her friend. "Or is that some other giant spider nest?" She had thought the looming shadow was a hill at first, but no, it was a massive pile of webbing that rose in a low, sloping cone until it met the crumbled remains of a squat stone tower. The tower was sheared off at the height of the taller trees and served as an anchor for the nest.

Li Suyin swallowed nervously as she squinted into the mist to make out the details. "No. That is ... That is it," she said.

"Do you need some time?" Ling Qi asked. The man-sized tunnel halfway up the 'hill' probably looked even less inviting if you couldn't see into the dark. Knobbly, wriggling sacks studded the inner walls and ceiling. She didn't know if they were eggs or prey.

"No. I can do this." Suyin took a deep breath and drew herself up as she continued to walk forward. Ling Qi followed her, eyeing the nest warily as she expressed her flute. Now that they were close, the atmosphere grew more oppressive with every step, and the mist seemed to thicken, swirling around their ankles as they began to ascend toward the tunnel.

"You do have a plan, right?" Ling Qi asked as the sounds of chitinous legs skittering in the distance filled her ears. It was galling to walk right into a situation like this. They were surrounded, above and below. She could just barely make out the moving shapes on the trees which poked out of the nest.

"I do," Li Suyin said, stopping at the tunnel entrance. She straightened her back and then bowed, hands pressed together in front of her. "Great Matriarch, this humble one brings offerings! This one brings delights wrought by the hands of man for your pleasure and amusement. Please grant an audience that this petitioner might offer them to your august personage."

Ling Qi glanced around warily, even as she made the proper bows as well. It was a little hard to tell with the way her eyes worked now, but this area was unnaturally dark. The sun should be high in the sky and shining down, but it was still misty and dark.

As Li Suyin's words echoed down the tunnel, Li Suyin's expression began to grow nervous at the lack of response, but then a thick cable of thread, woven in along the ceiling of the tunnel, slowly lit up with a pale blue glow. It made no difference to Ling Qi for purposes of vision, but it was apparently the sign Li Suyin was hoping for. She shared a brief look with the other girl as they straightened up and headed in.

Li Suyin motioned for her to keep silent as they did, so the trip down the winding, narrow tunnel was made without any further chatter. The glowing cable lead them through multiple splits in the tunnels, always heading toward the center of the nest at the base of the ruined tower. Eventually, they found their feet once more on solid stone, only lightly covered in debris. The ceiling rose sharply overhead, creating a large entryway, and ahead lay a crumbling arch, over which a curtain of diaphanous white silk hung.

Two massive spiders with thick, almost rocky carapaces stood guard, one lurking above the arch and the other on the floor. Each of their legs looked as large and sharp as a sword, and sixteen black eyes regarded her and Suyin with cold intelligence. They were both third realm, and Ling Qi could feel a greater presence still beyond the curtain, comparable to Zeqing.

She remained silent, allowing Li Suyin to continue taking the lead. "Honored guardians," Suyin greeted, making a shallower bow than she had at the entrance. "May I pass?"

"You alone, petitioner," the spider on the floor hissed, its voice sounding like a raspy old man as its fangs twitched. Its blade-like limbs made a sound like metal being dragged over stone as it moved.

Ling Qi glanced at her friend in alarm, but Li Suyin merely nodded in acceptance. "It is fine," she reassured. "Please be patient, Ling Qi. I will be out soon."

"... Right. See you soon," Ling Qi replied. She didn't like it, but there was little she could do to help her friend in a confrontation with a fourth grade beast. She would have to trust that Li Suyin knew what she was doing.

Nonetheless, watching Suyin's back as she passed beyond the curtain was difficult. Her friend looked so small compared to the nearly horse-sized spiders. She glowered at the massive guardians, her fingers itching for a knife.

Those thoughts did not make the wait after her friend passed through the curtain any less interminable. There was no way to properly track time in the nest, and the spiders showed no interest in conversing with her. She considered meditating, but she knew her nerves would make such an exercise fruitless.

It felt like hours before the curtains shifted and a figure emerged from the milky layers of hanging silk. Li Suyin looked terrible as she staggered out, a sickly pallor on her face. Her steps were unsteady, and she nearly fell as she emerged, only catching herself on the doorway at the last moment. A small patch of blood stained the chest of her soft grey gown, although it didn't seem to be spreading.

Ling Qi crossed the entryway in the blink of an eye, ignoring the threatening hiss of the guards as she caught Li Suyin before she could trip on the uneven flagstones in front of the door

"I... did it," Li Suyin muttered, her voice muffled by Ling Qi's shoulder. Her voice was slurred, and her friend's weak attempts to push away from her and stand on her own proved fruitless and clumsy.

Ling Qi opened her mouth to reply, only to blink as she felt an odd pinch on her hand on Li Suyin's back. Glancing over her friend's shoulder, her eyebrows rose as she saw a ball of pink fuzz and chitin the size of a child's fist. The relatively tiny spider was trying and failing to bite her hand, its fangs unable to penetrate her skin. It let out an affronted chitter and waved its furry little pedipalps threateningly at her anyway.

"I'm guessing the one on your back is yours?" Ling Qi asked, continuing to ignore the agitation of the larger spider beside her.

"Oh.... Oh, um..." Li Suyin blinked and let out an uncharacteristic giggle. "Yes, she is. All mine... Zhenli, be good. This is my friend."

The little spider still regarded her suspiciously, but at least it stopped trying to chew her finger off. Ling Qi sighed, moving away briefly to watch her friend sway on her feet. Li Suyin looked and acted incredibly drunk, if she were being honest.

"Well, ask her to climb up on your front. I'm going to carry you, alright?"

"Tha... Thank you, Ling Qi," Li Suyin said, stumbling on her words. "Zhenli..." She made a face of almost comical concentration, and a moment later, the spider clambered onto her shoulder.

Ling Qi sighed and scooped the smaller girl up into a bridal carry. It was a little awkward, but Li Suyin was short enough that she could manage it. The girl fell asleep with her head resting on Ling Qi's shoulder before they had gone a dozen meters. This close, Ling Qi could smell the pungent scent of strong liquor on Suyin's breath. Just what had the girl been doing in there?

She supposed she would have to ask another time.

### Chapter 120 - Friends 2

"She was still wishing herself dead last time I saw her." Su Ling gave a wry grin. "I can't say a drinking ceremony with a giant spider was what I was expecting from that."

It was the next day, and Ling Qi had met Su Ling early in the morning to get some practice in. She was trying to further master Argent Mirror, and the fox girl's illusions were the best practice she could safely find.

"Yeah, when she said she would need help getting back..." Ling Qi trailed off as she leaned back against the tree she was resting near. Training had gone pretty well, but she was feeling more than a bit mentally exhausted from practicing the perception art for so long.

Su Ling sat across from her, wiping an oiled rag along the length of her sword. Ling Qi had noticed her using blade cleaning and care as a meditative exercise lately. "I saw her putting a bunch of those big clay jars into her ring, but I didn't really think about it. It's just a hangover though. I'm surprised that she can't just fix that," Ling Qi admitted.

"Ehh... Liquor meant for cultivators is as full of weird shit as medicines," Su Ling said easily. "Hao, the guy I sell my stuff to, does business with a couple of brewers. You have to use some pretty potent stuff to affect a cultivator."

Ling Qi hummed to herself. She supposed that made sense. "Do you think you have some free time still?"

"Sure? I don't have anything I gotta do till later."

Ling Qi knew it was a little silly to hesitate now after she had already asked, but she still felt awkward about asking. "I've been doing some composing. Do you think you would mind listening for awhile?"

The fox girl's ears twitched, and she looked at Ling Qi oddly, pausing in her work on polishing her blade. "Huh, you picked up another art then? Figured you'd be full up."

She frowned at her friend. "No, just normal music. Not everything I do is cultivation."

Su Ling gave her a singularly unimpressed look.

"... I'm trying to do some normal stuff," Ling Qi muttered. "If you don't want to..."

"I don't mind," Su Ling replied over her. "I'm just kinda surprised. Hope you're not expectin' me to know one note from another though."

"I don't need you to," Ling Qi said, sitting up. "Just tell me how you feel about the piece when I'm done. That's more important than the technical stuff." At the risk of sounding arrogant, she was beyond flubbing notes at this point.

She played without end for the rest of the morning, allowing her tension and nerves to flow away into the melody she wove with her flute. It was nice. It was everything she liked about doing things with Su Ling. There were none of the undercurrents of awkwardness that remained with Meizhen, the tension

with Xiulan, or even the feeling of needing to live up to some impossible image that Li Suyin sometimes gave her.

Su Ling was hard to read. She complimented the music easily enough, but she was vague on her thoughts about it. The girl seemed sad, if anything, which was strange, as the melody she was working on was a lighter one. She didn't seem inclined to talk about it though, so Ling Qi did not push... yet.

For now, Ling Qi would just enjoy some relaxation before she got back to work.

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Ling Qi crouched over the glittering red and yellow growths at the edge of the vent, a length of sturdy cord dangling from her fingers. She still retained one of her scouts from last week's actions at Sun Liling's fortress, and she had found herself at a bit of a loss as to what to do with the thing. She didn't want to waste its remaining operation time, but she wasn't going to need it for much this week.

In the end, her thoughts had gone to the vent and the seemingly bottomless crevice she had rescued Zhengui from. Ling Qi was wary of getting caught in a space too small for her body though. Such occurrences had been... messy in Elder Jiao's simulations, not to mention painful. That has inspired her to just resort to a more mundane solution. It cost her no more than a trip to the supply house in the girl's residences.

"Are you done screwing around with that?" Su Ling asked impatiently, breaking her out of her thoughts as she felt the bundle of bones at the end of the cord come to rest on something solid.

"Yeah," Ling Qi replied absently, giving the spool she had staked to the ground beside the vent a little twist to ensure it could turn properly. "I didn't know you were that eager for another concert," she added lightly as she stood and turned, dusting off the front of her gown.

Su Ling, seated on the ground with her sword across her lap, looked discomfited by the comment, scratching her cheek sheepishly. "It's a good focus for meditation. The third stage of the Insurmountable Crag art is kinda…"

Ling Qi nodded her understanding as she settled herself on the flat stone that was her customary seat. Mountain qi didn't really come naturally to the other girl, so as much as Su Ling liked practicing her sword art, it was an uphill struggle. In the case of Argent Mirror, the difficulty had been offset by how easily she took to Lake qi, but she didn't have that advantage with her sword art.

"It's not like I mind," Ling Qi said, idly running her fingers along the polished length of her flute and wondering what she should play.

"Yeah, I guess I'm glad you asked," Su Ling said as she closed her eyes. "I never would have thought you could do songs that don't make people's hair stand on end."

Ling Qi made an affronted sound, shooting her friend a dirty look. She knew the rough girl's jibe was friendly though, so she wasn't offended. "It's hardly my fault that the mountain seems to explode every other month," she huffed, raising her flute to her lips. She hadn't really made any proper songs yet, so she would just play what she felt.

The next couple hours passed in peace as she played and her friend meditated, ripples of dull grey Mountain qi occasionally surfacing on the mirror-polished blade of her sword. Eventually, the drift of the sun ended their relaxation though.

As Ling Qi opened her eyes and lowered her flute, she felt the tingling of a new meridian slowly forming down her arm, and felt a thrill of satisfaction at her progress. Elder Su had made clearing meridians sound hard, but while it was time consuming, she had never really found it difficult beyond the first few.

Su Ling's breathing was even, and her furry ears drooped low. Her friend almost looked asleep, although Ling Qi could tell that she wasn't. Her expression was melancholy though, and it made Ling Qi wonder. She mulled over her options and as usual, elected to take the direct path.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she offered as she dismissed her flute back into storage.

Su Ling opened her eyes, giving Ling Qi a confused look. "About what?"

"Whatever has you down," Ling Qi replied simply. "Sad wasn't what I was going for with that piece."

Su Ling looked at her for a moment and scoffed. "Since when are you all touchy-feely. 'S more Suyin's thing isn't it?"

"We're supposed to be friends, right?" Ling Qi asked dryly. "Of course I'd ask."

"I left you be when you came to the Medicine Hall with frostbite and a look like someone had pissed in your rice," Su Ling retorted, crossing her arms.

Ling Qi hadn't even noticed Su Ling was there when she went in to get treated. "Yeah, well, maybe I'd have liked it if you said something," she shot back, feeling defensive.

Su Ling looked away, uncomfortable. "You have other people for that."

Ling Qi frowned. She... didn't, really. She loved Meizhen as a friend, but she had no desire to bare any part of her past to the highborn girl. The thought of doing so made her deeply uncomfortable, and the thought of burdening Xiulan or Suyin with her complaints didn't exactly fill her with joy either.

"... It's nothing important." Ling Qi found Su Ling looking at her with a sort of unhappy realization on her face. "It's just, ah, what's the word -" Su Ling drummed her fingers on her knee, "- it's just nostalgia."

Ling Qi toyed with the end of her braid. "It seems like every time I start to trust someone more powerful than me, they pull something shitty." The vulgarity passed her lips without thought, rare as that was for her these days. She could remember the unreasoning panic which had seized her thoughts in the aftermath of the incident with Meizhen. She had only been able to push it aside because Meizhen was her friend.

Then Zeqing had come along and flung her into a deadly blizzard, shattering the comfort that she had started to take in her presence. She could recognize that she had started to latch onto the snow woman; her mastery of Argent Mirror wouldn't let her ignore that.

"I can get that," Su Ling said quietly. "Not quite like you do, but fuck, nobody is the same when it comes to that kind of thing."

"Guess so," Ling Qi mused. She supposed it all came back to Mother and the ugly argument that had led to her fleeing to the streets. It seemed foolish of her looking back. Those memories took on a different cast when looked at with the eyes of an adult. She had a few reasons to pay Tonghou City a visit, it seemed.

"That's a scary look," Su Ling said, drawing her from her thoughts. "Got someone you're gonna kill?"

"Maybe," Ling Qi said slowly. "How about you?"

"Sure," Su Ling replied, meeting her eyes dead on. "Got a list, ending with that murderous furry bitch."

"Guess that's something we have in common," Ling Qi said, remembering her friends words about her spirit mother. "Let me know if you need a hand."

Su Ling stood up, dusting off her pants. "I might at that. Should probably get going though. Got a lot of work yet."

"The same," Ling Qi sighed, copying her friend. "Until next time."

### **Bonus Chapter - Mid Year Conference**

"This is all increasingly farcical," Sima Jiao said irritably. Strands of shadow curled around his fingers as they drummed on the polished surface of the meeting table. "Are we truly to allow matters in the Outer Sect to continue like this?"

Across from him, Hua Su had the good form to grimace briefly. Though there was no sign of stress on the seemingly middle-aged woman's face, nor a single hair out of place in her severe bun, Sima Jiao could see the little burrs in the flow of her qi: irritation, unhappiness, dissatisfaction. "I must concur. While I have received a larger than usual crop of disciples interested in the medical arts, the reasoning is somewhat..."

"Has it really gotten so bad?"

Sima Jiao shot the speaker a scowl, but Zhuge Gen merely returned it with a jolly smile. Of middling height with a bald head, a cheerful mein, and a fat belly, the man was hardly the image of a soldier. His pretensions at being a monk and red cassock only irritated Sima Jiao further. Nonetheless, Elder Zhuge was Zhao's adjutant, here to represent him while Guan Zhao personally supervised the pacification of the Rushing Wing Cloud Tribe.

Tch. Perhaps he should call upon a little more power. Let's see how the welp grinned then. That musclebrained ox Guan Zhao had his faults, but at least he was not quite so self-absorbed as this twit who had not even passed his fourth century nor stepped into the Sixth Realm. Sima Jiao should have been done with this kind of idiocy.

"Brother Jiao is correct," Shi Ying said quietly, her hands clasped in front of her face. Her tiny, plump, and grandmotherly form was at odds with the feeling of looming weight that hung around her. Jiao was, of course, unaffected, but the poor lad in the corner taking minutes looked about ready to soil his robes. "The Outer Sect is a proving ground, meant to test for entry, but this... 'war' is excessive. The degree to which certain disciples are being allowed to bend the rules is *excessive*."

"It is beginning to damage our reputation," Hua Su said, looking to the head of the table. "There are those saying that the Argent Sect has grown lax and undisciplined."

Sima Jiao felt his lip curl as he turned to look as well. Unlike the others, he did not lower his head before Yuan He.

The Sect Head was an old man with a healthy head of snow white hair and a spry sort of energy despite the deep wrinkles on his face. In his grey eyes still churned the fury of a storm, and the thunder of his cane striking wood still silenced the room. Despite their disagreements, of all the people in this room, Yuan He was a man who Sima Jiao still respected. In the lightning that crackled in his eyes, in the set of his shoulders, and in the churn of his spirit, there remained a shadow of the man who had led the shattered remnants of the South Emerald Seas for decades as those Hui degenerates drank and danced. The man who had struck the final blow against Ogodei from atop a mountain of his comrades' corpses was still there.

It was just too bad that Jiao was all too familiar with the sight of a man who had thought to change the world and bent in the doing.

"I am aware of the troubles regarding the new rules," Yuan He said sternly. "However, until this year's end, they remain necessary."

Funding The words he would speak regarding the benign neglect of the Southern Sects would likely earn him an Imperial censure, Sima Jiao thought sourly. To see His Highness' plans, so carefully crafted, already beginning to show wear around the edges...

But Emperor An had ascended, and now, it was the Empress' will. Not for the first time, Jiao felt a grinding pain in his spirit like the broken edges of a rib shifting.

"Duchess Cai's aid has been invaluable in maintaining our programs and core cultivation," Hua Su began carefully. "But surely, this chaos is not her intent."

"Oh, I do not know about that," Zhuge Gen mused. "We *are* seeing an unusually large group of prospective third realms emerging."

"And how many careers have been quashed and Ways bent?" Shi Ying asked darkly. "That Yan child, he had potential before we allowed his Path to devolve as it has. And he is only a prominent example among others."

"Let us not be blind here. In a year where a scion of the Bai, the child of the Tyrant of Radiance, and the Butcher King's great-granddaughter were present, there was never going to be a shortage of third realms," Sima Jiao scoffed. "And that is not even getting into the convergence of other prestigious families."

"Not many people dare speak the name the Hui gave to our Lady Duchess anymore," Zhuge Gen said with a nervous chuckle. "Aren't you being a little irreverent, Senior Brother Jiao?"

"Only because most people are cowards." Sima Jiao flicked his sleeve dismissively at the younger man. "The woman never banned it. Indeed, she finds it quite amusing as far as I can tell."

"Enough," Yuan He said, his voice booming with an undercurrent of finality. "Your concerns have been heard, but the matter is closed. Unless you can convince all of your colleagues to halve their cultivation salaries...?"

And that was the rub. The Argent Sect had a frankly absurd concentration of power. Two active Seventh realms - himself and the Sect Head - more than ten sixth realms, and many more of the fifth. Supporting such cultivation was beyond the means of any polity smaller than a county. That was not even considering the standing military the Sect maintained. The lands gifted to the Great Sects were rich - but not that rich.

Yuan He regarded them all in silence until one by one, the others lowered their heads. "We will resume the more stringent rule structure in the following year, as per the agreement with the Duchess. Turn your attention to the matter at hand."

Hua Su frowned, and another burr of dissatisfaction formed somewhere in her channels. Hopefully, it would not turn into a full-fledged heart demon. The woman's father was half in the grave already, and

the Medicine Department required a firm hand. "The tournament. It is going to be troublesome this year."

"That is understating matters," Shi Ying said grimly. "The Duchess, a King's simulacrum, a delegation from the White Serpent Caste of the Bai, the Admirals of the Savage Seas..."

"I understand that the Han will be bringing a guest from the Guo as well," Sima Jiao smirked bitterly. "And even the Zheng have expressed an interest in attending."

Zhuge Gen grimaced. "... Only the Jin and the Imperial House are not attending. Six of the eight ducal houses. By the Conquering Sun, what are we going to do?"

"We will prepare the campgrounds and stadium and demonstrate an organized administration. No matter how great our guests' status, they are just that. Guests." Yuan He stated calmly. "Remember the purpose of the Great Sects. We must at least present ourselves as a neutral ground.

And wasn't that easier said than done, Sima Jiao thought with a scoff. This year just kept getting longer.

### Chapter 121 - Friends 3

Zhengui was demanding an ever greater share of her attention what with his appetite growing at a ferocious rate. The little fellow practically inhaled cores, and the less said of the massacre of the fruit platter she purchased for him, the better. One of the flower beds in their garden had also met its demise at Zhengui's maw. The little turtle-snake had chomped and shredded the plants into a carpet and rapidly dug out a hollow for himself.

Ling Qi was glad that she had both studied herself and asked Xuan Shi for help, or she might have been much more worried. Zhengui was preparing to breakthrough to the second realm. Still, it was hard not to fret when Zhengui was acting as if he were in a trance or a fugue, barely responding to her when she spoke.

However, she knew that she could only support him while he broke through. Heedless of the cost, she quickly set about purchasing a great deal of high quality wood, straw, and other plant-based kindling to line his growing nest with. She burned further spirit stones providing materials for security formations around the garden, well aware that Zhengui would be helpless in his hibernation.

After a few days, Zhengui buried himself under a mound of dirt and shredded plant matter, and the feel of his thoughts grew muted and indistinct. A short time later, the kindling began burning, flames shot through with lines of emerald green greedily consuming the offerings in the pit that had once been a flowerbed.

With Zhengui settled in, Ling Qi finally forced herself to leave the garden. She would not do Zhengui any good by stalling her own growth. She had been invited to train and explore with the Golden Fields group, and she planned to take advantage. Having been more than a month since she had picked up the jade slip for Argent Current, it was high time that she actually put it into practice.

It was surprisingly easy to pick up Argent Current during the training sessions between rounds of careful exploration with Han Jian and the others. Argent Current focused on striking a single point again and again until it shattered, like a river breaking through a dam. It rewarded working together with other users of the technique as she found when working with Xiulan. If both of them used the Pressure Crack technique, the qi they poured into it reinforced itself, building off both of their efforts to greater results.

Their efforts at exploration also finally bore some fruit this week as they discovered a set of caverns behind a small waterfall rich in Earth and Water qi. The caverns were littered with bones, not all of which looked animal. The sun was already setting by that time though, so Han Jian decided that it would be better to come back when they were fresh.

In her spare time at the Argent vent, Ling Qi continued to pursue her whim, dangling one of the new Ossuary Scouts she had made down into the crevice at the end of a cord. While the little bone construct mostly got caught in cracks or otherwise got stuck, eventually, after many false starts and failures, her scout finally found the bottom of the vent. It was nothing grand, simply a small chamber slightly over a meter across filled with a bubbling pool of what looked like liquid silver. It was the source of the mist which rose from the vent. Ling Qi collected a few vials full of the stuff via her scout, noting with

concern that the construct's bones seemed to be petrifying with exposure to the liquid. The fourth time she sent it down, it came back up as a fossilized sculpture.

Ling Qi made sure not to directly touch the stuff. It did feel like it was full of incredibly potent qi though, so she left it to Su Ling and Li Suyin to see if they could make anything of it. Her curiosity satisfied, she returned to cultivation.

However, Ling Qi found it hard to concentrate. Between events with Zeqing and the introspection of her cultivation. Ling Qi found her thoughts turning back to her Mother again and again, even as she contemplated meeting Zeqing again. She felt that her communication with Mother was going well, that they were reconnecting, and that made her happy, but all the same...

She remembered the night she had run away from her home. It was a memory that she had long suppressed, which had grown ever more clouded with emotion and self justification.

She remembered the feeling of betrayal, fright, and panic that had consumed her younger self's thoughts. Mother had been all she had, and she was supposed to protect her. Now that she thought about it, her first lessons on how to stay quiet and out of sight and notice had come from her Mother. It hadn't been enough to avoid notice from customers, not back then.

She remembered how much it had hurt to listen to Mother talk about her like some piece of meat or fatted calf at market, to have Mother smile and titter at the big leering oaf whose disgusting eyes had fallen on her, and to have Mother act like the only problem with the oaf's proposition was Ling Qi not being 'ready'.

Looking back with older eyes, she could remember the bruises on Mother's neck the next morning and the hitch in her step. She could recognize the vapid flirtations as a distraction and the way her Mother had snapped at her in the morning exhaustion. Su Ling had accused her of missing things before, and she wasn't wrong; Ling Qi knew she had a bad habit of tunnel vision ever since she was a child.

It had been years since she had thought about that night, and she had never really questioned or examined her apparent reasoning for leaving. She had a good excuse, of course; the streets offered little time for introspection... or maybe until now, she hadn't wanted to acknowledge that the basis of so much of her hardship was a wrong assumption.

She was a stubborn girl. She knew that well enough.

... Ling Qi couldn't regret her decision though. Even if she no longer blamed her Mother, the fact was that she would never have been truly safe with her either, especially as she grew. She could acknowledge now that Mother had been barely more than a girl herself at the time. Even now, Mother should only be a bit over thirty. Could Ling Qi have avoided ending up the virtual property of some overstuffed merchant or petty mortal official if she had stayed?

It was with those thoughts in mind that she put her brush to the page.

#### Mother,

Your concern makes me happy, and I will keep your advice in mind. While I won't claim to have not made any mistakes, I have learned to step a little more lightly. Bai Meizhen, my friend, and I have had

some difficulties, but I think we have reached an understanding of each other, although I sometimes exasperate her.

Also, you are not so old, Mother, so none of that.

As for the situation which lead me to my spirit companion... It is a bit of a long story. Suffice to say, I made a good impression on his father, who asked me to care for Zhengui on his behalf.

Turning from lighter things, Mother, is there something wrong? Is there someone giving you trouble? I can recognize when you are avoiding a subject. I know you likely do not want to trouble me, but I would appreciate it if we could be candid with each other.

If there are problems, I am not helpless to confront them, even here. I cannot include the details in this letter, but I have earned a few favors from my peers. Even if it was cut short, you did raise and care for me. I will not forget my obligations as a daughter.

As for me, I have been greatly improving as a musician. I have become pretty skilled at the technical aspects, but I'm afraid my repertoire is still limited. My composition skills lack the refinement of use, and I have been advised to work on creating my own pieces if I wish to continue mastering the musical arts. I would be very happy if you might offer some advice on the matter.

Your daughter, Ling Qi

Gazing down at the drying ink of the third draft or so, Ling Qi pursed her lips. Letters were very limiting, especially when she suspected that they weren't entirely private.

Tonghou still hung heavily in her thoughts.

# **Chapter 122 - Crimson Princess 1**

The path up the mountain was winding and steep. She could reach Zeqing's frozen territory much faster with flight, but the trip was more pleasant if she slowed down to think and take in the crisp air and beauty of the cliffs.

With her newest letter to her Mother sent from the Ministry office in town, her thoughts had turned back to the trouble with Zeqing. She was still angry at the snow spirit, but it was tempered. But the fact was, Zeqing was much stronger than her, so much so that Ling Qi had no way to defend herself if Zeqing decided to turn on her. It was difficult to forget that, knowing that the spirit might throw her into a lethal situation again without even feeling remorse.

At the same time, Zeqing wasn't malicious, at least not toward Ling Qi. Xin had said that spirits thought differently, but surely if she spoke her concerns clearly, Zeqing would understand. She just...

As she reached the top of the path and arrived at the small, snow-dusted clearing at its top, she stopped dead. At the far end of the stony clearing, perched atop a boulder, was Sun Liling. The red-haired princess wore a plain scarlet silk shirt that stretched tightly over her chest and baggy black pants of similar material worked with silver embroidery. Her spear, a demonic-looking thing that seemed like it was forged from twisted vines of red metal, rested easily on her shoulder.

"Yo." The girl raised her free hand in greeting, even as she rose to her feet with predatory liquid grace. "You really pissed off Yan Renshu. The money grubber didn't even charge me for trackin' your movements."

Ling Qi regarded the princess silently, the fingers of her right hand twitching as she restrained the urge to draw her flute right away. This was bad. How was the girl hiding her qi? If Sun Liling wasn't standing in front of her, Ling Qi would hardly know she was there. Even now, she could just barely feel a faint pulse, but no more.

"You aren't the only one who can sneak," Sun Liling replied dryly to her unspoken question, idly twirling her spear. "Dad 'n Gramps used to take me hunting all the time. You can't spook the game, ya know?" Sun Liling spoke as if this were no more than a friendly conversation.

"What do you want?" Ling Qi asked flatly.

"I figured I'd come have a chat," the red-haired girl said casually, tapping the butt of her spear against the stone. "I gotta admit, I really screwed up that first day, didn't I?"

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes. "If you know that, then you know that there isn't much point to chatting," she replied, even as she reviewed her options. The path further up the mountain was behind Sun Liling, but she could easily bound up the cliffs and cut around her. She was a long way from the black pool though. Similarly, she could simply take a dive off the cliff and head back toward her allies, but she doubted that the Sun Princess had not put together something to slow her down, and flight still drained her terribly.

"True," Sun Liling admitted, not sounding particularly regretful. "You're the loyal type. Man, it woulda been *so* easy to be more friendly than the snake." She laughed, shaking her head. "Ah well, no use cryin' over might-have-beens." Her expression grew serious as she leveled the barbed tip of her spear at Ling Qi. "Draw your weapon, flute girl. We're gonna have us a little duel."

Ling Qi scowled. "Isn't it supposed to be shameful to punch down like this?" Sun Liling had a realm advantage on her, as well as a battle-ready spirit. "Then again, I've learned just how much stock most people on this mountain put by all those kinds of rules." She expressed her flute, clutching it tightly.

"You're gettin' it," Sun Liling said lightly. "Honor isn't built to favor the weak - but you got one thing wrong."

"What's that?" Ling Qi asked, tensing as her thoughts raced on what best to do.

"Even the most hidebound noble in Celestial Peaks wouldn't frown at this," the Crimson Princess drawled. "You're too good for that, and you might as well have spat in my face with that lil' stunt at my fort. You're a pain in the ass, but with that pretty dress o' yours, you're a menace. So take your first shot, run, or whatever. I want to get this started."

"You know, one thing's always bothered me," Ling Qi said slowly.

"What's that?" the arrogant girl responded indulgently, apparently willing to let her talk a little before the duel.

"You keep going on about the Bai being traitors... but no matter how I look at it, doesn't that match your family better?" Ling Qi asked blithely. Even if it cost her initially, riling Sun Liling up was better than letting the girl keep a cool head. "Though I guess it doesn't count since you got rewarded for it."

Sun Liling's easy-going expression darkened, her lips drawing up into a sneer. "We won the greatest victory the Empire has seen since the first dynasty. We did the job that cowardly trash shoulda done ten thousand years or more ago. Ain't nothing traitorous about that, or are you second guessing the Emperor?" she asked coldly before shaking her head. "I don't even care. Take your attack, or I'm putting you down now."

Well, that didn't last as long as she would have liked. Still, Ling Qi had a line of retreat planned now. Ling Qi raised her flute to her lips and began her melody, mist pouring from her flute in a rapidly expanding circle. It engulfed Sun Liling and the entire clearing they stood in within moments, but Ling Qi couldn't help but grimace as the qi washed over Sun Liling without taking hold, a slight hazy aura around her head and a flare of bright yellow in the depths of her pupils showing her resistance.

Then Ling Qi had other things to worry about. The ugly spear screamed through the air toward her, and it took everything she had to avoid being impaled. It carved through the winds protecting her body, barely offset, but the fraction of a second it took to tear through them allowed her to activate her most used defensive art and twist away, liquid darkness trailing from her limbs.

It still wasn't enough. Despite being half-shadow, red hot pain lanced up her spine as the spear tore a bloody gauge out of her side. She felt it scrape against her ribs, and despite herself, a sob of pain interrupted her song. Thankfully, the important part was the cover the mist initially granted her. She wasn't going to continue playing when she could hide.

Her senses warped as she merged with the shadow of the cliff ahead, color washing out and proportions subtly changing in her vision as she fled as fast as she could, the burning, bleeding wound in her side urging her on. She heard Sun Liling shout something behind her, but she was too focused on running to care, slipping from one shadow to the next as she escaped through a cleft in the cliff side. She flowed over the rocky ground as fast as she could manage, activating her Formless Shadow technique to slip through paths too narrow for her human body to take. She did everything she could to throw the girl behind her off the trail.

She knew this area well enough. If she could just gain some distance, she could lose the princess in the maze of ravines ahead. Or perhaps, she could even lead the Sun Princess through the territories of some beasts to slow her down long enough for Ling Qi to flee into Zeqing's territory.

And as the world blurred around her, it almost seemed like it would work.

A muffled boom from above was her only warning before a scarlet bolt struck down in front of her. Ling Qi had a moment to take in her opponent, now clothed in glistening scarlet armor. Sun Liling's narrowed eyes glared at her from inside the snarling demonic maw of her helmet, and two additional armored limbs clutched cruel, jagged blades. Bloody mist leaked from vents in the elbows and calves of the armor, making a trail to the sky above.

Then the monster moved, and all thought vanished. Ling Qi drew vital qi outward, desperately layering herself in the Hundred Rings Armament even as she dodged frantically through the three-pronged storm of blades that drove her back against the wall. She pushed herself further than she had thought possible, weaving through dozens of strikes, but she simply wasn't fast enough.

Cuts appeared on her arms and face, rips formed in her gown, and the shell of qi she had enveloped herself in flared, drawing deeply from her dantian as it turned fight-ending blows into scratches. So sharp and fast was the drop in her qi that it felt like she was being punched in the gut, but even so, it was better than the alternative.

Ling Qi could see the surprise and frustration in her opponent's eyes, and that was what gave her the strength to keep going. When the attacks slowed, she kicked a spray of dirt and snow into the girl's face and fled into a crack in the wall of the ravine Sun Liling had cornered her in.

It was a gamble. She had no idea where the hole led, but it was her only chance. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she bled freely from dozens of small wounds and one large one, droplets of blood dissolving into black smoke as she rushed through the narrow tunnel, straining to maintain her near incorporeality..

She emerged into a snowy field, and the moment she had the freedom of space to assume her normal body, she expressed a Wellspring Pill and crushed it between her teeth, hungrily drinking in the restorative qi. Then she bounded forward into the small copse of pine trees that marked the entrance to the ravine maze that would take her toward the black pool.

She could feel the Crimson Princess behind her. Whatever technique the girl had used to conceal her qi was not holding up under the pressure of the girl's effort. Sun Liling's qi was a bloodthirsty miasma of

wood, water, and wind, mingled with a thread of something else which she couldn't identify but reminded her unsettlingly of the run through the jungle in Elder Jiao's test.

Ling Qi grit her teeth and flared her qi, pulling on the passive net of wind she constantly wove around herself, guiding it to speed her movements rather than deflect and guide. She bounced from the shadow of one tree to the next and rushed into the ravine to her right, but she could feel Sun Liling gaining on her.

"Having some trouble, Miss Ling?" Ling Qi flinched violently as a male voice sounded in her thoughts, glancing around wildly as she ran. Recognition dawned on her. It was Fu Xiang, or someone who felt and sounded like him.

"I thought it would be prudent to check on our council members given the ruckus down here, and it seems I was right to. Do you have a plan, or are you merely fleeing into the wilderness at random?"

Yeah, he was still pretty slimy-sounding, but she would take what help she could get. "I have a destination in mind. Can you actually do anything to help?" she thought at him. The boy had basically dropped off the face of the mountain for a while and hadn't seemed to be accomplishing much. "Do you know how she's tracking me?" Her qi was suppressed, and she left no sign of her passage, but the Sun Princess was still unerringly following her.

"Your heartbeat and the flow of your blood, I imagine," Fu Xiang responded dryly in her thoughts. "While I may not be capable of your flavor of direct intervention, I am not entirely without resources." His 'voice' trailed off, and Ling Qi felt an odd twinge in the air and qi around her. A harsh buzzing filled her ears and the qi she could feel was scrambled weirdly. "Ugh, the drain at this distance... I do hope you appreciate this."

"I'll owe you a favor," Ling Qi said tersely. She could feel the Crimson Princess hesitating behind her, as if suddenly unsure of the trail. That was enough for her. She took a sharp right at the next split and bounded up the cliff face at the dead end, her partially corporeal feet running up the side of the cliff as easily as she would a field.

"Well, how could I refuse that?" he asked, sounding slightly sarcastic. "Will you be safe at your destination for an hour or so?"

"I should be," Ling Qi replied, mulling over what to tell him. In the end, she elected to keep quiet about Zeqing. "Why? And why didn't you do this kind of contact the last time she attacked?"

"I hadn't broken through then," the boy said irritably. "It is not as if real time, two-way communication is simple."

Ling Qi felt sheepish. Of course. If something like that was easy, everyone would do it. The Ministry of Communications probably wouldn't exist if it was that easy and cheap. "Sorry."

"Hmph. I suppose I'll forgive you." And now she didn't feel sorry anymore. "We will be coordinating an attack since I have confirmation that the Princess is off chasing shadows."

That brought a grin to her lips. "I'll be safe for an hour if I can make it." She reached the top of the cliff and flew over a long gap in the crumbling path that wound around the peak. Sun Liling had resumed

chasing her, and there was another presence with her now, a thing that felt like blood-soaked earth shot through with a multitude of hungry roots. That must be Sun Liling's spirit she had seen at the intracouncil fight. They were gaining on her again.

"... I have a bolthole in that region." Fu Xiang's voice was contemplative. "It has a single use transportation formation no more than half a kilometer in range, but that should serve your purposes."

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why the sudden generosity?"

"Someone set the bar rather high for usefulness," he said archly. "Use it or don't. I will need to end this call if I am to have any qi left for other things today."

Ling Qi was reluctant to trust the boy - his demeanor pushed all sorts of alarms in her mind - but she didn't really have a choice. She didn't have enough distance on her pursuers to be sure of her escape.

"Thanks." She did her best to ignore the smug edge to the boy's tone as he gave her hasty directions to his apparent 'bolthole'. It wasn't a bad idea to set up retreat points scattered around the mountain. Maybe she should consider spending some of her pill furnace income doing the same.

In any case, she needed to hurry. She was burning qi quickly to keep all of her techniques active, to remain hidden and half material in the shadow. She didn't dare take flight for fear of giving away her position. It made her more appreciative of what monstrous reserves an Elder like Jiao must have to keep such things going on a near permanent basis.

Putting idle thoughts aside, Ling Qi swooped down from the ledge, diving back into the shadowed ravine below to continue her escape, speeding her movements with every patch of shadow. The snowfall helped, dimming the daylight even further.

Once or twice, she felt a surge of dread when she glimpsed a flash of red in the snow far behind her, but she poured on further speed, sprinting until her lungs burned with exertion as they hadn't done in months. Ling Qi only slowed down when she reached her goal, an innocuous snow-covered boulder sitting at the bottom of a steep drop-off. A quick inspection revealed nothing that resembled a trap, but to her Mirror-enhanced senses, the boulder was illusory. She passed through it, ghosting down the narrow tunnel into the rock wall behind it.

There were no traps within, though there were bones and other detritus scattered around, probably to make it look like a beast's lair. The transport formation was at the rear of the tunnel, scratched subtly into the stone. All too aware of Sun Liling's approaching presence, she quickly smeared blood over the activation symbols in the appropriate order as she had been instructed, holding in her mind the image of a high windblown cliff near the black pool. The formation crackled to life, and Ling Qi was swept away.

### **Chapter 123 - Crimson Princess 2**

When her vision returned, Ling Qi breathed a sigh of relief. Fu Xiang had been honest with her; nothing strange had happened. She couldn't sense Sun Liling any longer, but that didn't mean she was safe yet. She took off at a run the moment she got her bearings, heading for her meeting point with the powerful ice spirit, Zeqing.

As she expected, Zeqing waited for her at the black pool, floating at its edge and gazing into its depths. She turned around as Ling Qi arrived, looking curious as Ling Qi collapsed to her knees in front of her, breathing heavily as her techniques finally lapsed.

"Lady Zeqing," she gasped out. "I'm sorry for being late. An enemy waylaid me on the path." She ignored the pain of her wounds. The first thing she needed to do was to spin this in such a way that the spirit would be inclined to ward off her enemy. It was the biggest gamble of her choice frankly. She thought the spirit liked her, but she didn't know how far that went.

"I see that," Zeqing replied, floating closer to her on a gust of frigid air. Blank white eyes peered down at her with a touch of maternal concern, or at least Ling Qi liked to imagine so. "You had trouble prevailing over your foe?"

"I escaped with some help," Ling Qi said carefully, considering her next words with as much precision as her tired, fear-frazzled thoughts would allow. "They would not take no for an answer, and after our last session, I did not want to miss speaking with you." She wasn't lying, but she was certainly bending things. "I was hoping... that you might keep them away from here while we speak? I do not wish for my troubles to affect you."

The snow spirit regarded her thoughtfully. Time seemed to crawl as Ling Qi held her breath, praying to the Grinning Moon that the spirit would accept her request. Then Zeqing's silver hair billowed briefly in the wind, and the screaming howl of the storm outside the ravine grew louder. Ling Qi sagged with relief.

"Ling Qi." She looked up to see Zeqing crouched in front of her, and Ling Qi could not help but note that the way the gown bent with the motion was subtly wrong. The spirit's tone was serious though, and some of her earlier nervousness returned.

She shivered slightly as Zeqing reached out, a quickly forming hand of clear crystalline ice cupping her cheek. Her skin burned at the contact, and the little cuts only made it worse.

"I apologize for my presumption and misjudgement," the spirit said kindly, "but I still think my actions were for the best."

"I understand, and I apologize for my overreaction," Ling Qi replied quickly, meeting her blank eyes. "You were only trying to help. But please do not do something like that without asking again." She didn't know if pressing this point was a good idea, but she *wanted* to keep coming up here to play music with Zeqing, and she couldn't do that without assurance.

Zeqing inclined her head slightly. "That is agreeable," she replied easily. "But..." Her next words were sharper, albeit still not unkind. "I am not your shield. You are not Hanyi. You are not [Mine]," she chided. Her final word reverberated strangely in Ling Qi's ears. "There are compacts with the Sect which I must follow, and I do not appreciate being made to skirt them."

"I'm sorry," Ling Qi apologized. "I couldn't think of anything else. My friends were too far, and she - my enemy - would have been expecting me to run downward. You were the only hope I could think of, and I still needed help just to get here."

Ling Qi had started to think herself strong, but that had been foolish. When Sun Liling had been able to force a direct confrontation with her, she had been crushed. Bare luck had saved her from being beaten bloody in a matter of seconds. The emotions held in check by adrenaline bubbled to the surface, and Ling Qi clenched her fists in the snow at the memory of cutting, whirling red blades and fleeing like a frightened rabbit from a hunter.

She wasn't strong. She was still just a sneak who could only run away and steal. She had allowed her success to make her arrogant.

Her skin prickled as as she felt an icy finger brush away the tears that had begun to leak from her eyes. Zeqing was looking down at her with narrowed eyes, and for a moment, she felt a thrill of fear. Had her show of weakness set the spirit off? The moment passed though, and the dark cloud on the spirit's expression passed as well as she allowed her hand to dissolve and stood up, turning away.

"Do not trouble yourself. I will wait for you to regain your comportment, and then we may both relax without interruption."

"Thank you," Ling Qi replied, wiping her face. That had been embarrassing; she should have controlled herself better. It was just so frustrating to have her illusions broken so easily yet again, particularly with her recent reflections. "Hanyi is lucky. I wish I had someone like you to rely on." The words were a thoughtless musing, slipping out without intent.

The temperature dropped in the wake of her words, and she looked up in alarm at Zeqing's back.

"Be cautious with your words, mortal child. I do not think you have considered them carefully," Zeqing said stiffly, not turning around. "It is best not to offer such enticements."

Ling Qi hastily nodded, but some tiny part of her wondered what would happen if she reaffirmed her statement. The thought would niggle at her throughout their session and even after she left, escorted from the edge of Zeqing's territory by Meizhen and a handful of enforcers.

Sure enough, an assault had been mounted on Sun Liling's fortress while the girl had been absent. Even with Bai Meizhen personally chasing after the Sun Princess on the mountain, the assault had done heavy damage. For whatever reason, Cai Renxiang didn't press the attack to the point of destroying Sun's faction, but the Sun thugs had lost people and supplies.

Ling Qi hoped the red-haired bitch regretted haring off after her now.

# **Chapter 124 - Crimson Princess 3**

Ling Qi breathed deeply, following the exercises held in her jade slip. She knew that she had overreacted. She knew that the stress of being chased by Sun Liling had cracked her emotional control. She knew that objectively, she was quite strong and that there were very few people on the Outer Sect mountain who could push her into a corner like Sun Liling did.

So why did she still feel so weak? It was ridiculous. There would always be someone stronger than her. But remembering the snarling visage of Sun Liling's helmet makes her feel like a frightened girl cowering under a pile of trash again.

Her hands clenched on her knees. She forced herself to maintain her breathing exercise and push down that corner of her mind still consumed by gibbering panic and the desire to flee and hide. She just had to -

"How commendable of you, Miss Ling!" Her introspection was shattered by the sound of Gan Guangli's booming voice. She grimaced sheepishly. She had been waiting for him to finish drilling a group of new enforcers, and she had gotten carried away.

She opened her eyes, looking up at the tall boy from her seat on the bench at the edge of the field.

"Excuse me?" she asked, a little confused. Had she missed some context?

"Your devotion to cultivation," the golden-haired young man explained with a grave nod. "Few can find the focus to cultivate even in such a short period."

"Ah." Ling Qi felt awkward. What *else* was one to do while waiting? This place was as safe as could be given how many of Cai's people were around, and sitting around doing nothing was wasteful. "It's nothing praiseworthy."

Gan Guangli shook his head. "I think you are mistaken, but I will not press the matter. Regardless, you wished to speak with me, Miss Ling? Do you require aid in some endeavor? Have you uncovered another villain to smite?"

Ling Qi shook her head, smiling just a touch. It was hard to get all broody with that kind of attitude staring her in the face. Gan Guangli was at the peak of second, brimming with Mountain and Heaven qi woven through with threads of Metal. He had already been late second realm over two months earlier. Was he having breakthrough difficulties? Or perhaps he was still building his foundation for the attempt?

"Nothing like that. Even I can only uncover one major villain a month," she joked.

"Of course. My apologies," he replied, moving to sit on the bench across from her rather than continuing to loom. The tiny characters carved into the wood flared as the seat creaked under his weight. "My excitement at the possibility of further glory surpassed my sensibility."

Well, at least someone had gotten to enjoy yesterday, Ling Qi thought. The thread of bitterness didn't last.

"I was actually hoping to ask you about that," she said, glancing around. There were still enforcers practicing in the field, but they were keeping a respectful distance. "What actually happened when you attacked the fortress? Why didn't Lady Cai finish them?"

Gan Guangli crossed his arms over his brawny chest. Ling Qi tried to casually look away; he had worked up a sweat. "A good question. I admit, retreating galled me somewhat," he rumbled unhappily. "I tore their gates asunder, and those foul contraptions failed to absorb Lady Cai's light as our men sacrificed themselves in destroying them. We could have crushed the rebels in detail!" His voice rose, and she saw a few enforcers glance their way.

"So why didn't you? Did the Princess make it back?" Ling Qi leaned forward. Then his words registered with her, and suddenly feeling wary, she asked, "Wait - what do you mean by 'sacrifices'?"

"She did not. Miss Bai prevented that. Those infernal orbs around the fortress absorbed the qi of light and the heavens, but even destroying them was a trap for they returned the attack which shattered them twofold," Gan Guangli explained, waving his oversized hand bombastically. "Several brave enforcers volunteered to do the deed and received commendations and rewards commensurate with their valor."

Ling Qi was glad she hadn't decided to try shooting one. "... They really volunteered for that?" she asked incredulously.

Gan Guangli chuckled. "Of course! To earn the personal praise of Lady Cai is no small thing!" Ling Qi did her best to hide the dubious expression on her face. Then again, guys could be kind of dumb like that. "Alas, total victory remained beyond us."

"Why?" Ling Qi raised an eyebrow curiously.

Gan Guangli leaned forward, his seat creaking ominously. "In truth, Lady Cai wished for Princess Sun to be occupied with reconstruction. She feels it is a poor idea to push her entirely into a corner." He spoke in what was, to him a conspiratorial whisper, so it was essentially a normal person's speaking voice. "In addition, she was somewhat concerned that the Elders may have stepped in if she captured and imprisoned so many promising disciples. The rules of this wargame vex me at times." He added the last with a grumble.

Those were actually pretty good reasons, Ling Qi supposed. "We did get some benefits though, right? Don't tell me I got hunted through the upper peak for nothing."

Gan Guangli shook his head firmly. "Not for nothing. We captured several key members of their supply chain and demoralized them greatly, along with the material damage. Chu Song retreated in disgust in the aftermath, taking even more of their supplies. We have split the resistance in twain! While we received few converts, many have simply abandoned the effort," he explained. "Those of low virtue are rarely willing to openly fight the hand of justice once its strength is shown." A sneer of disdain briefly crossed his expression.

At least the Sun bitch was paying for coming after her. "I'm glad," she breathed, closing her eyes for a moment. "Do you mind if I ask you something else?"

"By all means, Miss Ling. You have more than earned whatever answers you might ask," he replied, his boisterous tone returning.

"Why do you follow Lady Cai?" she asked. "You're... probably aware of what she asked of me, right?"

Gan Guangli nodded, a proud expression on his face. "Indeed. In deference to your pending choice, I shall not express my congratulations aloud," he said. "My reasoning is simple. Lady Cai is Justice."

Ling Qi stared at him. "... Do you mind explaining a little?"

He grinned, and she narrowed her eyes. Had Gan Guangli actually just messed with her? "Disorder is the root of evil," he continued, his tone more serious. "Lady Cai wishes to bring order to our province and to purge the rot that sinks as deep as its very foundations. I follow her because I believe wholeheartedly in her cause," he said with absolute conviction.

"So she's just that benevolent, huh?" Ling Qi's irreverent words slipped out before she could fully think them through.

"You doubt, and that is fine," Gan Guangli responded seriously. "You have seen hardship so trust does not come easily to you."

She glanced at him, startled. That wasn't the kind of statement she expected from a boy like Gan Guangli. "Oh? I guess you guys have gone sniffing around my background."

"Lady Cai most assuredly has," he agreed. "I am no noble. My Father was a soldier of no great talent but considerable valor." Gan Guangli's expression grew thunderous. "When he was crippled defending our town, he was thrown away like so much trash."

Ling Qi frowned. "Why are you so devoted to Lady Cai then? Most people would blame her, since her Mother runs everything."

Gan Guangli frowned deeply, and for a moment, Ling Qi worried that she had given offense. "Miss Ling, I do not wish to speak of my own personal story here and now."

"I understand," Ling Qi replied, glancing around the practice field. She wouldn't want to air her own past around this many people either. Still, it irked her; she was no closer to understanding his devotion to Cai than before. She began to stand.

However, Gan Guangli raised a hand to halt her. "That does not mean I will not speak on the matter. How much do you know of our Emerald Seas history?"

"Very little," Ling Qi admitted. "I did not have time for those kinds of lessons."

"I understand," the boy replied, and Ling Qi found herself believing him. "Know then that the history of Emerald Seas is one of strife. Since the days when our founding clan vanished beyond mortal ken, the clans of Emerald Seas have fought with one another. When the emperors of the second dynasty raised the Xi clan and commanded our civil wars to halt, it ended only the largest and most obvious conflicts."

"I thought the previous ducal clan was the Hui," Ling Qi said. Li Suyin had mentioned that once.

"Indeed," Gan Guangli boomed. "The Xi did not last. The moment their Imperial backing faltered, their vassals tore them apart and resumed feuding. The Hui rose to the top of that chaos. Do you know what their solution was?"

"I imagine it wasn't a good one," Ling Qi replied dryly.

"I would barely call it a solution at all," he spat. "The Hui cared only to be acknowledged as the strongest and receive their petty tithe. So long as that was done, the clans could do as they willed and the Hui would remain in their palaces and endless revels. As one would expect, the clans took their cues from their 'ruler' and acted much the same. Each clan behaved as if they were petty kings and violently resisted any attempt to curtail their power or impose responsibility. It took Ogodei to change that."

Ling Qi shivered despite herself, the image of a vast funnel of wind consuming an entire city playing through her mind's eye. "... So you think the Cai are good for imposing law in comparison to what came before?"

"Hmm, that is not incorrect, but it is perhaps a bit too simple," Gan Guangli said. "I believe in Lady Cai because I believe she is *right*. I believe in her because she and her Mother have made things better. However, some complain of their trampled rights and seized titles, and others who have finally been punished for their crimes, corruption, and irresponsibility toward their people whine."

"Things are hardly great in the present," Ling Qi commented with a bitter twist, remembering the filthy slums that clung to Tonghou's outer walls and the things that happened out there.

Gan Guangli dipped his head in agreement. "Indeed so, Miss Ling. You must understand, we speak of nigh on ten thousand years of rot and chaos. Even the mighty Duchess Cai cannot fix such things in a mere century or two. So it is that I support her daughter in her efforts, that she might one day build upon her mother's foundation. We must seek to leave the world better than we found it, else there is no point to all of this. Power is worthless if it does not improve people's lives."

Gan Guangli was surprisingly naive, Ling Qi thought. It was hard not to be infected at least a little with optimism by his words though. He had that sort of presence.

"Thank you for explaining," Ling Qi said politely, standing at last. "I understand better now why you act as you do." She had to wonder what the real story was though. She had no trouble believing that the local nobility and government were corrupt, but she had to wonder what the Cai family was actually after.

"It is no trouble, Miss Ling. If you would like to speak again, I am not a difficult man to find," Gan Guangli laughed, turning back to his 'soldiers'. However, there was something in his expression that told her that she had worn her thoughts on her face.

The pity she had glimpsed there was her imagination obviously.

### **Chapter 125 - Sabotage**

This was incredibly frustrating.

Ling Qi had set aside time for a Sect mission for the first time in months with an eye toward purchasing a tutor's services. Her advancement with the bow had stagnated recently, so she thought to help it along as she had her music. So, having looked over the job board, Ling Qi had signed up to capture storm spirits that spawned after the recent spate of bad weather that had struck the area around the sect. It should have been a simple enough mission.

She was slowed by her need to hide her route. Sun Liling was still on the mountain and presumably, also still angry at her. Running around openly wasn't a great idea. But in addition to being supplied with the clay capture jars, she had been given clear directions to the locations with the heaviest concentrations of storm spirits. As she visited each location though, no spirits were found.

Ling Qi frowned as she crouched at the side of a stream. This clearing was another location marked as high concentration, but as usual, the spirits were nowhere to be found. Ling Qi studied the clearing with narrow eyes and tried to grasp at the area's qi. Standing up, she stalked through the ankle-high grass in the small clearing to identify clues as to their whereabouts.

The air still tingled with heavy water and heavenly qi, so the storm spirits had been in the clearing not long ago. But humps of dirt were churned up across the clearing as if something long and thin had passed just beneath the surface. And there at the edge of the stream were the charred shards of a capture pot. Ling Qi moved closer to examine them, but she stopped dead, still three paces away. There was something disturbing the earth and water qi at the waterside...

Ling Qi darted backward, cloak flaring like wings as dark qi flowed through her limbs. The earth beneath her erupted as a dark shape emerged, and she just barely avoided flashing metal claws.

It was a mannequin of metal and wood, mud and clumps of grass still clinging to its smooth and polished hide. Its eyeless head swivelled towards her, and Ling Qi was baffled to see what looked like a bird's beak affixed to its head. She drew her bow, the slim length of the weapon shimmering as it emerged from her ring.

Before the string was even half drawn back, the mannequin's beak opened and a horrific ringing *noise* rang out. It cut into her ears like a knife, high-pitched, echoing, and deafeningly loud. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the trees swaying as birds rose from the forest in great flocks, confused and frightened by the sound. The thing leaped at her then, but she had finished pulling back the string of her bow.

Lightning crackled, and three arrows flew in rapid succession. The first blew off an arm, the second blasted a fist-sized hole through its torso, and the third destroyed that horrible screeching head. As the fragments crashed down beside her, she had only a moment to feel relieved as the noise stopped before she heard a faint click.

Ling Qi flung herself away, but it was not enough. The puppets' remains dissolved, rotting away and releasing a great cloud of virulent green mist. It stank terribly and made her eyes water, but other than

that, it did no more than prickle wetly on her skin. As she landed on a tree branch, thoroughly bewildered, she scrubbed at her face with her sleeve.

Then, ears still ringing from the screeching caught the sound of wings and angry birdsong. She looked up and felt the attention of the scores of winged spirit beasts riled from their nests. The hair on her neck rose as a deep throaty roar of agitation rose from the forest behind her and was swiftly joined by a dozen more beastly voices.

Ling Qi swore under her breath and fled.

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#### Yan Renshu.

Yan Renshu had sabotaged her mission. There was no one else with both the motive and the resources to set up such a trap. Thanks to Yan Renshu, her mission had failed. She hadn't accomplished anything but waste her time.

She didn't even manage to train her arts effectively that afternoon because she was forced to burn through her qi to flee the angry beasts. There had been third realms among them! It was lucky that she hadn't gotten hurt.

She knew she had made an enemy that day with the book, but this was the first time he had personally rigged something for her. Previously, he had aided Sun Liling with information on her whereabouts, allowing the Sun Princess to ambush her, but it seemed that the puppet user no longer deemed that sufficient. It was yet another knife aimed at her back. She would have to be on her guard at all times when alone.

For the moment, there was little she could do save nurse a new grudge from atop the moonlit cliff she had settled onto like a grumpy crow. At least the smell from the mannequin had come off in the bath. As she closed her eyes, she forced her anger and irritation from her mind and focused on the moon above and the stellar qi filtering down through its light. Letting her emotions stew on the surface, she focused inward on her increasingly dense dantian.

Between the Argent Soul art, the Sable Light Pills gifted by the moon, and the stellar qi she absorbed every night, her foundation was growing increasingly potent, but as this afternoon showed, it was not yet enough. Flight still drained her terribly so she continued to practice the refinement of stellar qi. She had been growing more skilled at this exercise, just recently reaching the fourth phase of the Eight Phase Ceremony cultivation art. She could feel that this phase consolidated the benefits from the Grinning Moon quest; even if she changed to another cultivation art in the future, she would be able to gain some benefit from trickery.

It was the highest phase she would be able to achieve without breaking through to the third realm. Until then, she simply lacked the refinement of spirit to perform the fifth phase's exercises and would be unable to comprehend the higher mysteries of the moon phases.

Completing the fourth phase had revealed something interesting though. When she looked ahead at the prerequisites for the remaining phases, she didn't recognize the names of the cultivation stages

mentioned in the slip. She had assumed that each cultivation realm had the same three stages as Red and Yellow, but some research showed that she was wrong.

The third realm contained *eight* discrete stages. They were: Early; Appraisal; Foundation; Threshold; Framing; Formation; Fortification; and Completion. While she could not find much literature on the third realm in the Outer Sect archive, what little she did find indicated that there were many bottlenecks and obstacles to rising through those stages. The Path was longer than she could have ever imagined. No wonder so many cultivators remained in the third realm for life; it was longer than the previous two realms combined.

She would just have to work even harder to not become one of them.

### Chapter 126 - Guardians 1

Ling Qi idly kicked her legs as she watched Li Suyin grind the mixture in her mortar into a fine paste from her seat on an empty work table. Her friend had been hard at work since she recovered from the ceremony at the ruined tower, and this morning was no exception. So Ling Qi patiently waited while Suyin finished, examining the work room that the two girls had set up in their home.

Su Ling's pill furnace rested on the opposite side of the room, the clay and bronze construction releasing a slow simmer of sweet smelling medicinal mist as whatever lay within bubbled quietly. Shelves lined every spare bit of wall, themselves covered in jars and vials, and above, a hammock of white spider silk held still more containers.

Li Suyin herself kneeled on a straw mat at the far end of the room in front of a low workbench cluttered with bones and herbs. Ling Qi eyed her friend curiously as she worked, studying the flows of qi that were now visible to her senses. Li Suyin's aura was jumbled; Ling Qi wondered if that was what she appeared to others' senses as well. Li Suyin had a strong base of wood and earth, but there were other bits of various elements scattered about like water, lake, and even a bit of fire and heaven.

There was also a tiny vein of some element or aspect which she couldn't identify. It made her feel vaguely uneasy, and her skin tingled whenever she focused on it. Her eyes flicked away from Suyin instead of trying to decipher that again.

The little pink fuzzball that was Li Suyin's familiar crouched on the table, skittering in place beside her mortar, pedipalps wriggling excitedly over the mixture. She could feel something happening there as the tiny earth spider continued her vaguely ritualistic looking shuffling, but Ling Qi wasn't familiar enough with medicine production to say what though.

The quiet sound of grinding came to a stop, and Ling Qi saw the tension leave Li Suyin's shoulders as she scraped the light blue paste left behind by her work into a small clay container and affixed a seal onto the container.

"My apologies for making you wait," Li Suyin said as she stood up smoothly. Ling Qi didn't miss the easy and natural way that Suyin allowed her companion to scamper up her hand and cling to her sleeve.

"It was no trouble," Ling Qi dismissed. "I'm the one who came calling early," she added as she hopped down from the table, taking a few steps to meet her friend in the middle of the room. "What were you working on anyway?"

Zhenli, the spider, had made it up onto Li Suyin's shoulder by that point and puffed herself up as if to make herself appear bigger and more threatening. Ling Qi supposed it was kind of cute, if a little concerning, that Li Suyin's companion seemed like she wasn't fond of other people.

"Ah, I was just finishing a batch for the Medicine Hall," Li Suyin explained, pulling her attention away from the spider. "Senior Sister Bao has been grumbling about how needy this year's disciples are. I had heard that you came to the Hall with severe wounds. Then again for lesser injuries yesterday. Are you-"

"I'm fine, just some hunting damage," Ling Qi replied a hair too quickly, leaving a brief awkward silence to hang between them. "... The first one was a run-in with Sun Liling. She wasn't exactly playing nice," Ling Qi expanded reluctantly. "I was able to take care of it myself - mostly." She probably could have gotten her treatment paid for by Cai, but she had money now, as strange as that was. It felt good not to have to rely on charity.

Li Suyin peered up at her worriedly, and Ling Qi belatedly noticed that she had replaced her eyepatch. It was no longer a simple piece of gray cloth, but an embroidered patch of white silk with an eyecatching geometric pattern, which seemed to shift from moment to moment. A new talisman?

"Here," Li Suyin said firmly, thrusting the clay container she had just filled into her hand. "This isn't for sale outside of the Medicine Hall, but I would feel better if you took it."

Ling Qi blinked, looking at the container. "I don't want you to get in trouble. Didn't you say you were making this for their stocks?"

"I was able to make more than expected, thanks to Zhenli," Suyin said, reaching up to pat the little arachnid, who wriggled under her hand but somehow managed to look satisfied all the same. "Please."

"Alright," Ling Qi replied, feeling awkward. If the Medicine Hall was keeping this stuff to itself, it had to be valuable. Now that she thought about it, it looked like the stuff they had put on her spear wound. That stuff - Heavenly Bliss Salve or something - had cost nearly her whole week's income from the pill furnace. "Heh, you've gotten kinda pushy, haven't you, Li Suyin?" She covered up her discomfort with a joke.

She would have to be careful with this salve - she had felt weird and clumsy for quite awhile after it had been applied - but it had dealt effectively with the stubborn wounds that Sun Liling's brand of attacks dealt. Left alone, they bled freely and did not clot or scab. She had only noticed later that the wounds had frozen over in Zeqing's presence, allowing her to ignore them for a time. She hadn't even been able to cultivate properly in the recovery ward due to her fuzzy thoughts.

Not privy to her thoughts, Li Suyin averted her one-eyed gaze, twiddling her fingers. "Ah... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound like that."

Ling Qi smiled faintly. "I was just teasing you," she reassured her friend, ignoring the way that Zhenli waggled her fangs at her. She hoped the little spider didn't get in trouble with that overprotective instinct. "Anyway, any progress on that vault warrior formation?" she asked as she headed to the door, Li Suyin falling into step behind her.

"Well, it had to be reworked significantly." Li Suyin grimaced as they entered the hallway. "Using human remains is unacceptable of course, but the arrays need significant alteration to work on the bones of animals..."

Ling Qi nodded along as her friend's speech grew more technical, and they exited the home to begin heading up toward the vent. She nodded politely to the pair of enforcers who began to trail them at a polite distance. It was still uncomfortable to be guarded like this. Oddly, Li Suyin seemed much more accepting of it, but she supposed that her friend was from a wealthy mortal family.

She would prefer to simply stay out of sight when traveling, but that wasn't an option if she wanted to walk with Suyin so she was glad for Cai's consideration, even if it had been weird to walk out of her house this morning to find disciples waiting for orders. There had been an awkward moment where she just stared at them before one of the two had politely explained that Cai Renxiang had put them at her disposal.

It didn't really make her feel much more secure; a pair of Mid Yellows would barely slow Sun Liling down. Then again, barely had been enough for her to slip the noose before, and her arts were good for bolstering allies.

She dismissed her distraction and focused on Li Suyin's speech, listening intently as they headed up to the vent to train.

Training with her two friends at the vent was a relaxing way to spend the morning. Su Ling's swordwork was coming along pretty well, as was her cultivation of her sword art, and Li Suyin even joined in now and then when they switched to unarmed sparring. Her scholarly friend had gotten faster and more precise since the last time they had trained together, although the little jabs she landed seemed weak. But as they were meant to be vectors for poison, she supposed the strength of the blow hardly mattered.

All too soon, they had to part ways, and Ling Qi headed back down to the residential area. She knew that Cai Renxiang left her home around now, and it was about time that she stopped delaying and started to make an effort to better understand the heiress before she had to respond to her recruitment offer.

Heading down, she found the enforcers who had been playing bodyguard were still waiting at the end of the path where she had left them. The two girls were probably cousins or maybe siblings. They both had dark brown hair and thin willowy builds, but the girl on the left had it cut short while the one on the right kept it long but tied in several loose trailing tails.

The short-haired girl wore something like Su Ling's mannish outfit with sturdy trousers and a shirt under piecemeal bits of leather armor dyed in earth tones. The long-haired one wore a proper gown of light airy blue. The white, shimmering ribbons in her hair were pretty, and Ling Qi wondered if she should try wearing her own hair loose instead of braided as well. Gu Xiualn was getting to her if she was thinking stuff like that.

"Miss Ling?" the long-haired girl pulled her from her thoughts. "Shall we escort you again?" The other girl had been seated, cultivating as she approached, but she opened her eyes, standing up hastily as Ling Qi approached.

"Uh... sure," Ling Qi replied awkwardly. She had been intending to shortcut through the wilderness as she had assumed these two would have gone home. "Sorry, I should have been clearer. You two didn't have to wait for me."

"I told you she was dismissing us," the short-haired girl grumbled, shooting the other girl an aggrieved look. "Sis, you're way too literal."

"Be polite, Lei," the other girl admonished before bowing her head toward Ling Qi. There was a faint jingle as the tiny bells woven into the girl's hair sounded. "My apologies for misunderstanding."

The awkwardness Ling Qi felt intensified sharply. "... It's fine. I suppose you can walk me back. I'm heading down to talk to Lady Cai."

'Lei' nodded brightly, taking up a position ahead of her, and her sister bowed again, falling into step wordlessly behind and to her side. The awkward feeling didn't change.

"What are your names?" Ling Qi asked after wrestling with some indecision. Since they had spent the last couple hours waiting for her, Ling Qi should at least learn their names.

"Ma Lei," the girl ahead of her greeted lightly.

"Ma Jun," the girl behind her greeted more quietly.

Ling Qi gave a hum of affirmation and fell silent, staring ahead. She hadn't really thought about what it meant for Cai to have put them 'at her disposal'. The idea that these two would follow her commands as if she were a noble was strange. She really had no idea how to interact with them. Well, for now, she supposed she would do her best to act dignified and not embarrass herself.

It was time to get a better look at Lady Cai.

#### Chapter 127 - Guardians 2

Thankfully, her 'guards' were happy enough with silence and did not try to engage her in further conversation. It was still awkward, but silence was better than fumbling in unfamiliar territory. Soon after reaching the residential area, she spotted Cai Renxiang

The heiress was trailed by a train of other girls hurrying along in her wake and walked with her hands clasped behind her back, posture stiff and straight. Ling Qi raised a hand to wave to the other girl for attention.

"Lady Cai, good morning!" she greeted politely.

Cai Renxiang halted outside the gates that marked the edge of the residential zone, eyeing her speculatively. "Ling Qi, good morning," she greeted in return, her train waiting patiently behind her. "It is rare to see you on the road."

"I suppose so," Ling Qi admitted sheepishly, restraining the urge to fidget under the faintly glowing girl's regard. "I was hoping I could accompany you for a time?" She left unsaid her reasons why, despite the curious looks from the other girls with Cai and her own 'guards'.

If the heiress was surprised by her request, she didn't show it on her face. She simply nodded briskly, her long hair swaying with the motion. "Of course, I would not refuse such a minor request from you." Her words were quick and without embellishment. She gestured and the other girls fell back a step, giving Ling Qi room to fall in beside Cai Renxiang. "Are the subordinates I assigned you performing to satisfaction?" the heiress asked as they began to walk.

"... Yes, I have no complaints," Ling Qi replied formally, despite her discomfort at the notion. She did her best to ignore the way the Ma sisters seemed to brighten at her half-hearted praise. "Thank you for your consideration."

Cai Renxiang dipped her head fractionally. "Given your contributions, I could not do less. If you require something, please ask. If it is within the realm of reason, I will grant it to you." Her eyes remained ahead as she spoke, but Ling Qi saw the corners of her lips quirk up. Ling Qi suspected the other girl was feeling quite pleased that she was showing consideration and interest; no doubt Cai was aware that Ling Qi had asked Gan Guangli about her as a liege.

Ling Qi ignored the respectful and admiring looks from the girls around them. It was mostly directed at the heiress, but she could feel eyes on her own back as well. Instead, she focused on Cai Renxiang, testing her improved senses. The girl was a perfectly sculpted pillar of mountain stone awash in blinding white light. She looked away before her eyes could start to water. "You have my thanks," she said again, wondering what to say. "So, where are we going at the moment?"

"I must attend a meeting with the market suppliers over bulk purchases," Cai Renxiang said. Her gown rippled briefly, the eye-like wings of the butterfly splayed across her chest narrowing. "Following that, I will go to the council pavilion to hear petitions for a time before I begin reviewing reports from Fu Xiang."

That sounded... incredibly boring, if Ling Qi was honest, but she nodded agreeably anyway. She had come to see what Lady Cai's day-to-day operations were like. As it turned out, Ling Qi's suspicion was right. Watching Cai Renxiang cow unruly Outer Sect merchants with her stern disapproval over their attempts at gouging her agents was kind of amusing, but that was the last of the entertainment. Listening to second and third year Outer disciples complain, cajole, and flatter Cai could hardly keep her attention. It did give her a somewhat unsettling idea of just how far the heiress had gone in establishing herself as an authority though.

It left her thoughtful as one of the girls attending to them laid out tea for both her and Cai Renxiang. She cast a glance out of the pavilion as she waited for her tea to cool. The line of petitioners was gone, leaving only the enforcer guards. Ma Lei was making eyes at one of Gan Guangli's subordinates while her sister seemed to be trying to set the other girl's hair on fire with disapproval. Gan Guangli himself stood at attention at the bottom of the stairs sternly looking over the field.

"You had a question." Cai Renxiang's voice drew her attention back to the girl sitting across from her. The heiress looked at her evenly over the rim of her cup, sipping from the still steaming liquid.

"Yeah," Ling Qi admitted, lifting her own. She supposed that she really didn't need to wait for the tea to cool; hot tea was hardly going to hurt her. Her eyebrows rose as she took a sip. The flavor was much stronger than last time. It was actually pretty good. "Wasn't some of that stuff too petty for you to be dealing with? Those merchants and half of those petitioners... Shouldn't you have someone else taking care of that?"

"Perhaps," Cai Renxiang agreed. "But I am no Duchess yet, and a mountain cannot stand upon a foundation of gravel."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows as the girl watched her. "So... what? You want to have experience with the lower level things as well?"

"I wish to see the order of my province perfected," Cai Renxiang answered. "Even the Lady Duchess cannot be in all places, nor be all things. Order depends upon delegation, and I must understand these lower positions in order to best select the ones to hold them. In my youth, I toured villages and forts at the edges of civilization. Here, I hold a position similar to lesser nobility. As a Cai, I refuse to approach this task with any less than full effort, regardless of what my position may be."

Ling Qi leaned back in her seat, taking a sip from the steaming tea to give herself time to consider. That was understandable, if a little obsessive. "When I was inside Sun Liling's fortress, I heard Lu Feng call all this a 'game'. Is that really all this is to you and other nobles? A training exercise?" It grated that for people like her, this conflict had real consequences.

Cai Renxiang considered her answer, the constant light shining behind her pulsing quietly. "Yes, it is," she said frankly, meeting Ling Qi's gaze straight on. "Ultimately, the purpose of the Outer Sect is for it to be a place for young nobility to compete and play at their adult roles in an environment of relative safety and few consequences."

Ling Qi scowled. "So I guess people like me just have to keep our heads down?"

The girl across from her set her cup down with a soft clink. "The ascension of talented commoners is a secondary purpose at best," she admitted. "It is also, you may find, not an inaccurate training scenario for surviving among the ranks of the least nobility where houses rise and fall in mere months and years rather than decades and centuries."

It wasn't fair, but neither was what came after she became a landed nobility. Ling Qi let out a long breath. She was being childish. The world wasn't fair, and it never had been. She knew that well enough.

"What is it that you actually want from me?" Ling Qi asked. "You know my background so you know how ignorant I am in some ways. What will taking your offer really mean?"

Interest sparked in the heiress' eyes, and the eye-wings splayed across her chest narrowed hungrily. "It would mean being my hand in many matters." The light behind her sparkled, increasing in intensity. "The Lady Duchess has, in her generosity, indicated that I will be granted a fief from her holdings in the borderlands should I prove myself worthy within the Inner Sect. Rather than serving your term within the Sect's forces, you would instead serve among the forces of that holding."

"So I'd still get a little patch of mountains to call my own?" Ling Qi asked, only half-joking.

Cai Renxiang took her question seriously. "You would, of course, retain all privileges of a normal vassal. In the interest of development, I would waive the standard property taxes until you have become established." She paused. "Primarily, you would be among those who attend to me when I must visit the capital or other similar functions." Left unsaid was what sorts of things she'd probably be asked to do there. Ling Qi knew what talents she was valued for.

Ling Qi looked down at her own empty cup then back up. "Thank you for answering me frankly," she said after a moment's thought. "May I be excused then, to think on it further?"

The other girl let her leave easily enough, not pushing for an answer, thankfully. Ling Qi dismissed her own guards as they left the pavilion area and set off into the woods, cloaking her presence as she headed down the mountain.

Her destination lay at the base of the mountain. She had put in the request and paid the points for tutoring, receiving a response promptly. Her tutor, Zhong Peng, would be available in the late afternoon, and he would be waiting for her on a hilltop a little way to the east of the main road.

She was brought up short when she caught sight of him standing at the top of the cleared hill. Zhong Peng didn't look like an archer with his build more like Gan Guangli than Han Jian, but the massive recurve bow slung across his back said otherwise. The bow looked like someone had uprooted a small tree and bent it into a bow; it would be as tall as the tutor when drawn.

The boy himself looked to be eighteen or nineteen years old with rough, blunt features and sundarkened skin. His hair was a fiery red cut close to his scalp, and the beginnings of a beard grew on his chin.

"Good effort, but quit lurking." Ling Qi startled as his sharp eyes locked onto hers. She was still more than a hundred meters away, hidden in the shadows of the trees. It wasn't like she was going all out to

hide, but... "Girl, are you here to train or gawk?" He frowned at her, crossing his arms over his wide chest.

"Sorry," Ling Qi apologized, stepping out of the shadow. She didn't raise her voice, but he seemed to have no trouble hearing her. "I wasn't trying to be insulting. I wanted to make sure I didn't get waylaid on the way here."

"Things have been loud down here this year - or so I've heard," he acknowledged, impatiently gesturing for her to come closer. "Too many big names in one place," he added in a grumble that she barely heard.

"Just a little," Ling Qi replied, doing her best to keep her voice from going dry. She hurried closer, quickly reaching the top of the hill. Zhong Peng was a good head taller than even her. "Do they pay much attention to the Outer Mountain in the Inner Sect?"

"Depends on the disciple," he said with a dismissive wave of one meaty hand. He peered carefully at her. "Your qi is a mess, but I can feel the Sect arts well enough. Mirror is a powerful tool for perception, but not an archer's. Your range will be crippled as things are."

Ling Qi blinked, startled. "How did you...?" She cut herself off. That was a silly question. Of course perception arts could read that kind of thing. "Thank you for your advice, Senior Brother Zhong," she replied politely. "I will keep that in mind. Will it impair my training?" She hoped not; she didn't have the Sect points or the time to go hunting down another art right now.

She met his hard gaze evenly as he continued to study her. "No, I will simply not bother with the distance training. What archery art do you practice?"

"Falling Stars Art," Ling Qi replied. The older disciple was brusque, but that was fine with her. He seemed knowledgeable enough about archery.

He grunted thoughtfully, but she thought that she saw a hint of approval in his eyes. "It is a good foundation. I mastered it myself in the Outer Sect. It is just a foundation though. Do not be content with only that."

"Of course. How will we begin, Senior Brother?" Ling Qi asked. She was glad that she had picked a good art at least.

"With a run," he said, turning away. "You said you wished to work on your conditioning and speed as well. Thrice around the mountain, and then we will begin shooting."

Ling Qi held back a sigh. She did put that on the form where she requested a tutor.

She would come to regret that request in the coming hours as she found herself unable to keep up with the third realm disciple. Apparently, a hail of exploding missiles was an appropriate way to encourage her to pour on more speed.

She couldn't let herself be slowed down.

# **Chapter 128 - Escalation**

Ling Qi stared down at the pale green cut of wood in her hand, expression growing steadily more thunderous. The wood groaned as the pressure of her grip increased. Poisoned. An idle comment from Cui was the only thing that had made her take a closer look at the wood that had been delivered today.

The wood bent and indented around her fingertips. She had almost put poison infused wood into Zhengui's bonfire. Someone had *sent* her poisoned materials. There was a crack, and an explosion of splinters and wood dust as the wood cut exploded under the pressure of her grip. The breeze that kicked up around Ling Qi kept the grit from her eyes.

"Ling Qi, what in the world are you doing out here? I can sense you from the meditation room," Meizhen's voice distracted her, sounding from the porch that overlooked the garden.

Ling Qi turned to look at her friend, still feeling light-headed. "Someone tried to have Zhengui poisoned. Thank Cui for me. I wouldn't have noticed without her."

The other girl's eyebrows rose almost to her hairline. "What? Who would dare?"

There was only one person who she had angered enough to skirt Sect Rules and who was in any way subtle, Ling Qi thought. Sun Liling would have burst in with weapons drawn, and so would her allies. But there was one person she had personally offended and who had already begun to perform smaller acts of sabotage.

"Yan Renshu," Ling Qi breathed, and the wind kicked up, sending the hem of her gown fluttering.

On the porch, Meizhen's expression fell into a frown. "... I see. Do you require assistance?"

"If you wouldn't mind, could you dispose of the woodpile?" Ling Qi asked absently, turning away. "I have some traders to speak to."

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Ling Qi stomped out of the shop, her hands balled into fists.

"No luck?" Ma Jun asked worriedly. Ling Qi looked up at the two 'bodyguards'. Ma Jun and Ma Lei really took their jobs seriously it seemed, seeing as they had chased her all the way from her house to the market after she had stormed out.

"He insists that the wood was fine before he sent it off," she grunted. She believed the young man too, or at least believed that he had inspected it. She had gotten worked up, played up the white and gold armband she wore, and threatened to make her complaint public through Cai's people.

"Well, um, perhaps the one who performed the delivery?" Ma Lei asked tentatively.

"I got some names," Ling Qi replied shortly. They fell in behind her as she began to swiftly walk up the street to find the disciples who had supplied the raw wood and the group that the trader contracted to do deliveries. She was going to figure out where Yan Renshu had wormed his way into the supply chain. But it was going to take quite some time to do so. There was a lot to investigate. She grimaced. She had

planned to join Han Jian and his group this afternoon to explore a cave they had found, but maybe she should cancel...

She glanced back at her guards. They could split up to cover more ground, but Ling Qi didn't think that was a good idea. They both seemed a little... naive. She would rather look the people she was questioning in the eye herself.

"Is something wrong, Miss Ling?" Ma Lei asked.

"No, just pick up the pace," Ling Qi replied.

Unfortunately, the investigation only grew more difficult. Many of the disciples who acted as suppliers were permanent members of the Outer Sect, common born cultivators who had served their military time and settled down in the area. They didn't tend to live on the mountain itself. She thought it unlikely that Yan Renshu would be able to influence someone like that, but it wasn't impossible.

The courier group proved even more of a dead end, stonewalling her questions despite her complaints. She had a feeling the group's leader was unsympathetic to Cai's council. His neighbors had closed ranks in solidarity at her attempts to ask questions too.

Ling Qi scowled as she left their building in the market, her arms crossed over her chest. With her initial anger cooled, she wasn't particularly surprised by this. Obviously, it wouldn't be easy to track down something like this, but it was still frustrating. She really couldn't afford to spend days tracking down every woodcutter or courier to question in person either. However, she couldn't just stop. Ling Qi frowned, only to glance up as a light fell over her

"Ling Qi, what is it that motivates you to disrupt the market so?" Cai Renxiang asked, standing in her path. A handful of other female disciples stood in her wake.

She really had been deep in thought if she had missed Cai Renxiang, Ling Qi thought wryly. Some part of her was suspicious though. Wasn't it awfully convenient for Cai to be here now, just as she needed help?

"I'm investigating. Someone is sabotaging me," she answered shortly. "Did me asking a few questions really draw you out to confront me?"

Behind her, the Ma twins shifted uncomfortably, and the girls with Cai Renxiang frowned and muttered at her disrespectful tone. Cai Renxiang, however, merely raised an eyebrow. "As you should well know, this is the third day of the week when I make my rounds through the market."

Ling Qi grimaced and glanced up at the position of the sun. The other girl was right; she had even accompanied her the week before. Yan Renshu's act had made her overly paranoid. "... My apologies, Lady Cai. I am still distressed, and it is affecting my manners."

"Excusable," Cai Renxiang replied with a small nod. She gestured toward the side of the street, and Ling Qi followed her so that they would not block the path. "Explain the issue more clearly."

Ling Qi took a deep breath. The girl's commanding tone irked her, but since she had been throwing the girl's authority around to try and get her answers, it would be pretty stupid for her to complain. She laid out the events of this morning and the efforts she had undertaken to find her answers.

Cai Renxiang remained silent as she spoke, a tiny frown marring her otherwise impassive expression. It was only after Ling Qi finished that she spoke. "Troubling. You believe Yan Renshu is using his connections in the market then?"

"That is the only thing I can think of," Ling Qi admitted, spreading her hands helplessly. "I'm sorry if I overstepped my authority with my questioning."

"You did not," Cai Renxiang said flatly. "I am more troubled by their resistance to your questioning. If he is able to strike at you this way, it is a threat to many of our less fortunate members. I will place Fu Xiang on alert and have this matter investigated more closely. You said you had names?"

"I do," Ling Qi replied, surprised. She hadn't expected the heiress to take up her personal vendetta. "Ah, is it really fine? I can investigate myself."

Cai Renxiang raised an eyebrow as she turned back from her followers. One of them was already running off with a message. "Such connections by a criminal element are a threat to the council. Leaving that aside, however, you are a valued member yourself. The Cai do not allow trespasses against their own to pass unpunished."

Ling Qi read between the lines easily enough even as she bowed her head and thanked Cai Renxiang. What followed was a little bewildering. The disciple in charge of the courier group, who had so easily stonewalled her, caved in like wet paper to a few clipped words from the heiress, even if he looked like he was biting into a lemon the whole time. In seconds, she accomplished what Ling Qi had spent nearly an hour failing at. They got their names and they got their schedules.

It was unsubtle, a straightforward hammer of social force. It felt bizzarre to see it exercised on her behalf. She appreciated the sentiment even if she knew it only served the wealthy girl's ends. It was hard not to be at least a little satisified at watching the person who had given herself trouble squirm. The trend continued as she followed Cai Renxiang lead into the market. It was like watching the cockroaches scatter in front of someone waving a torch.

Yan Renshu wouldn't get away with this.

# **Bonus Chapter - Hunter**

A low growl escaped Sun Liling's throat as she stalked toward the planning room. She couldn't deny it. She'd been totally outplayed. She could blame a lot of things. The passivity of the Outer Disciples, Cai Renxiang's freaky ability to coordinate a bunch of factitious, distractible, and lazy teenagers across the mountain, that damn Renshu's ridiculous blackmail book, her own fraying temper; these and more could be blamed for her failures.

That Ling Qi girl was a big part of it. Her mist had messed with her sunflowers, her sneaking had turned up Puppet Boy's indiscretions, and her attempt at a redux had made her look like an idiot when the defenses she had blown her allowance on had failed, and she'd only been caught because Ji Rong was a prickly, paranoid bastard who knew when he was being watched.

Sun Liling huffed, stuffing her hands in her pockets as she forced herself back into a casual slouch. And she'd still underestimated the girl. She should just lead with the Heart Rooted Thorn technique, overkill or no. She could got Ling Qi to medical before she bled out.

"This sleepy mountain has dulled your bloodlust my sister. It is a sad thing to see. You are a Princess! Even if she had died, so what?" Dhartiri whispered sulkily. She hadn't much enjoyed trying to bull through the blizzard.

Sun Liling rolled her eyes as she booted the door open, revealing a low stone room and a rough hewn table, around which sat her own 'council'. '*Not gonna murder some girl, no matter how irritating she is,*' she thought back to the spirit. Maybe the Bai, but that was different. She knew the snake would cut her throat in an instant if she had the chance. That Ling girl didn't have a killer's eyes.

"Princess Sun," Kang Zihao greeted, standing to bow his head like a good little dog. He was useful, but by the Thousand Gods did his brand of brazen hypocrisy wear on a girl after awhile.

"Sup Princess," she almost snorted at Ji Rong's casual greeting as she slouched past him, where he balanced on the back legs of his chair, feet on the table. That'd been a surprisingly good investment. Rong wasn't a bad sort, good in a scrap, good instincts for leading a small squad. He reminded her of the sons of Gramps' household guards, always squabbling in the yard, not afraid to give her a black eye or two when she jumped in.

Didn't stop her from kicking his chair leg and sending him tumbling to the floor with a yelp though. Feh, he liked the view from down there anyway, the cheeky bastard stared at her ass like a man entranced when he thought she wasn't paying attention.

"Princess," Lu Feng bowed low as he pulled out her seat, and she gave him a single nod. Unlike Kang, his respect wasn't a show. Lu Feng would follow her into hell, just like his Great Grandfather had done for hers. Was too bad he spent so much time on his hair and chasing boys. At least he had the good taste not to go for Rong.

She dropped into her chair. "What's the damage?"

"The 'lamps' were largely destroyed, but our infrastructure is mostly intact," Kang Zihao replied smoothly, resuming his seat a moment after her. "Overall, while this was not a victory, our losses were truly minimal."

She glanced to Lu Feng, who smiled self deprecatingly. "Sir Kang truly led an impassioned defense, but he perhaps downplays matters. Morale among our grassroot support has been rather shattered."

"That damn glow lamp let us go," Ji Rong spat as he climbed to his feet, shooting her an irritated look as he righted his chair. She smirked at him and cocked an eyebrow, giving him a silent challenge to do something about it. He turned his head away, and the flush on his unscarred cheek wasn't all anger. "I don't know what they were thinking, they had us."

"If they had pushed any further, we would have exacted a toll," Kang Zihao said stiffly, sitting ramrod straight in his chair. Managing that particular trick of looking down Ji Rong, even sitting down.

"They didn't want the Elder's getting involved," Sun Liling drawled. "The Sect is being weirdly permissive, but we can't overdo it, you know?"

Ji Rong looked like he'd bitten into a lemon. "Bullshit, they didn't care before."

She shrugged. It was what it was. There was some kinda game afoot behind the scenes here. Probably the Duchess messing with things to test her daughter, that sounded about right from the rumors she had heard. "Regardless, I underestimated that sneak of theirs," she grumbled.

"The Ling girl?" Lu Feng asked.

Her temper twinged, but she just rested her cheek on her hand. "Nah, woulda had her before she got away, but that glasses boy involved himself. Sensed his qi on the transport formation she used to run."

"Fu Xiang is a dishonorable sort," Kang Zihao said, and she almost laughed in his face. "I would not think him so dedicated to Lady Cai's cause."

"Fu Xiang is an opportunist, and he is quite loyal to a paymaster with such a well endowed purse," Lu Feng replied delicately. "It seems our window for subverting him is likely closed."

"Yeah," Sun Liling grunted. "You get anything out of this, Feng?"

He smiled. "A few of Cai's enforcers went home with my friends attached, yes."

"Good, gather intelligence for our next move then," she replied, drumming her fingers on the table. They were losing, every instinct and bit of training she had told her that, but they couldn't just roll over. "Kang, go closed door. We need another third realm."

"Yes, Princess," he seemed pleased, and why not, she'd basically excused him from duty.

"Rong, go out there and see how many of our boys are salvageable. See whose gonna tuck tail and who wants to bite back," she continued without missing a beat.

"We don't need a bunch of cowards anyway," he scoffed. "I'll figure out who's who."

Sun Liling kept up her facade, 'cause that was what a leader did, but inwardly she stewed. She had made mistakes, lots of little ones, and they were all starting to catch up to her. If chasing Ling Qi had

been like snapping a twig and sending the prey running every which way, her earlier, more fundamental mistake had been mistaking what she was hunting entirely. She had misunderstood Cai Renxiang badly. That girl had more than just her pride on the line here.

No wonder she was losing. Her enemy was playing for keeps, and she had started off by just messing around.

She would make them work to beat her however, perhaps Yan could use some funding to get back his feet? That'd distract them for a bit.

She'd just have to make a good show, and make up for the loss in the tournament.

# **Chapter 129 - Quests**

"Fan Yu, sound the place out," Han Jian ordered, examining the wide cave mouth they all stood before. Han Fang stood at his back, expression placid, while the shorter Fan Yu stepped ahead, boots crunching on the smaller bones half buried in the dirt.

Ling Qi watched them from beside Gu Xiulan, the two of them hanging a few steps back from the boys. She had helped with the grunt work of the investigation, but what remained was over her head. Fu Xiang would handle putting the information they had gathered together, and she would meet Cai Renxiang as soon as the investigation was done. With the Ma sisters guarding Zhengui, there was no reason to snub her friends.

As Fan Yu crouched and dug his fingers into the dirt, Gu Xiulan cleared her throat, drawing her attention back to the scarred girl's veiled face. Ling Qi even managed to hide her wince this time. Gu Xiulan's qi was a raging, devouring bonfire and fireworks display all in one, a primal scream for attention and adoration.

"So, I have heard quite a bit of how busy you have been," her friend said quietly, giving her a sidelong look. "But there is a matter I require your attention to." Han Jian glanced back at them as Xiulan spoke. He was fully late second realm now so she was sure he could listen in if he really wanted to, but he faced forward again, appearing to deliberately ignore their conversation.

"I'll make some time. What's the problem?" Ling Qi asked curiously

Xiulan gave her a considering look from behind her veil, then sighed, sending the cloth hanging over her face fluttering. "I would appreciate it. It is a familial matter. We have discussed this issue a few times before."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows. What was Xiulan talking about? Before she could reply, Fan Yu spoke up.

"There is only one main path," he said gruffly, brushing the dirt off of his hands. "The rest are dead ends, nothing wider than a meter or two. Nothing moving either," he reported. "Main path goes beyond my range."

She would give Fan Yu that. His earth scouting art was pretty useful when it came to not wasting time, and his range had only gotten better since he finally clawed his way up to Mid Yellow. She glanced at Xiulan, who merely raised an eyebrow at her. ... She would worry about that later.

Han Fang and Fan Yu took point as they entered the cave while Han Jian and Heijin took up the center. She and Xiulan made up the rear rank, and Xiulan's spirit provided light from overhead. Ling Qi briefly considered offering to scout ahead herself... but she felt bad for Fan Yu at this point. She didn't want to take his role, not when remaining unseen wouldn't even really help given their goals.

They encountered no trouble as they went deeper. The only sounds heard were the crunching of gravel and bone under their feet as the group remained in semi-professional silence. As they proceeded, they paused every few minutes for Fan Yu to check ahead, passing narrow branching tunnels. Ling Qi took a quick peek down the larger ones, but so far, there appeared to be little of value. A few patches of rare

moss or fungal growths useful for medicine found its way into their pouches and rings, and they continued on.

Of course, that didn't last.

"There is something blocking me," Fan Yu said, scowling as he rested his hands on the stone. "Another hundred meters on beyond the curve in the tunnel, everything grows hazy."

Han Jian frowned, cupping his chin thoughtfully. "What does it feel like?"

"Like a sheet has been thrown over everything," Fan Yu grumbled, standing. "I can feel the outlines, but none of the details."

"Mm, well, it is not as if you could be expected to push through even the passive resistance of a strong beast," Xiulan said idly, twirling a strand of hair on her unburned finger. "Han Jian, perhaps more active scouting might be effective?"

Fan Yu lowered his head, and Ling Qi saw one of his fists clench. Han Jian simply gave Xiulan a reproachful look, but Xiulan stared back, unabashed. Her friend was growing more defiant and openly rude. Han Jian didn't tell her off though, letting out a calming breath instead. "Ling Qi, please take Heijin and check ahead. Don't go too far. There's no sense in taking unnecessary risks."

Ling Qi glanced at her friend then nodded, stepping forward. "Sure, I'll just be a moment." She didn't look at Fan Yu; he wouldn't appreciate sympathy.

"Hmph. As if there is any risk at all with I, Heijin, along," the young tiger grumbled as he fell in beside her, his side brushing her leg. Ling Qi rolled her eyes and lowered her hand to his head, scratching the tiger behind the ears.

They moved out past Han Fang, who gave them an encouraging nod and adjusted his grip on his hammer, and past the curve of the tunnel, skulking silently along. More stone greeted them, but as they followed the increasingly twisty path, the tunnel grew more verdant. Hard stone was replaced by squishy growths of green-white fungus, patches of the stuff growing wider and more prevalent until the two of them were stalking through a disturbingly organic tunnel.

Ling Qi stopped as she saw the tunnel drop down and open up into a wide chamber. This was far enough. The fungus around them gave off a strong feeling of wood qi, so that was likely the source of Fan Yu's troubles. Ling Qi could barely feel the earth qi that had drawn them here in the first place.

Heijin moved past her, and Ling Qi frowned, reaching down to grasp the collar talisman around his neck. She shook her head, mouthing 'stop'.

He ignored her and tried to pull away from her, his greater strength almost making her stumble. That was when Ling Qi noticed it. There was something slightly sparkling in the air and an odd taste as well. Ling Qi flared her qi, activating the first technique of her Thousand Ring Fortress art, and flooded Heijin with a surge of wood qi.

The tiger cub immediately stopped, shaking himself violently. His eyes widened, and he let out a low bone-rattling snarl of affronted pride. Ling Qi caught his eye before the wind around him could kick up any further and shook her head violently.

Heijin was reluctant, glaring down the tunnel, but acquiesced after a few more ear scratches. Luckily, it seemed that they had still gone unnoticed, her own art use lost in the ambient qi of the cavern. Ling Qi only allowed herself to relax when she was back among her companions though. She quickly explained what she had seen, along with Heijin, who more reluctantly described the odd allure he had fallen under, a desire to reach the warm, safe cavern ahead.

Han Jian glanced down the tunnel thoughtfully as they finished explaining, glancing to Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan. "It sounds a bit like an Ash Maw, don't you think?"

Fan Yu grunted an agreement, squinting down the hall. "It would make sense. The haze had the rotten feel of yin wood."

"I suppose," Xiulan replied, flicking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Weaker, obviously, or we would already be in the creature's stomach."

"Someone mind filling me in?" Ling Qi spoke up.

"Indeed. Tell us of the beast that we may slay it for this insult," Heijin added haughtily, irritably brushing at his nose with his paw.

Han Jian blinked, turning to her, and shot a wry look to Heijin. "Ling Qi, I can understand, but... were you not paying attention, Heijin?" The tiger cub looked away, maintaining his haughty air. "It's a carnivorous plant native to Golden Fields," Han Jian let it go, turning to explain things to Ling Qi. "They disguise themselves as small oases and lure reluctant prey with a spiritual scent."

"They are grade four beasts, and their digestive fluids are worth a hundred yellow stones per milliliter," Gu Xiulan added, reciting the fact in a disinterested manner, "due to its properties as a fertilizer."

"This is not the same though," Fan Yu said. He looked pleased to be contributing. "You said there was some manner of powder in the air."

"Yeah, and the stuff on the walls was fungus," Ling Qi agreed. "A plant would need sun, right?" She had read that somewhere.

Han Jian nodded. "Right. It's probably something local that uses the same tactics. I believe we can handle this. Does anyone disagree?" he asked, looking them over.

Ling Qi simply crossed her arms and looked back. She had ignored its scent easily enough; it couldn't be that strong. Fan Yu looked concerned, but one glance at Xiulan silenced whatever objection he might have had. No one else seemed too worried.

Han Jian nodded again, drawing himself up as he unsheathed his sword. "Alright then. Take a moment and enhance yourselves. There's no point in going in unprepared. Ling Qi, can you use your mist? The qi drain effect you have should be useful against this kind of opponent."

Ling Qi considered, toying with her flute. "I can. I'll need something to target for that technique though, and I couldn't feel it in the tunnel."

"That should not be a problem in the cavern," Xiulan scoffed. "Once I have started burning it, whatever concealment it is using will fall."

There was no need for further words after that. Wind sprang up around Han Fang, and his biceps bulged as he charged himself with thunder and wind qi. Fan Yu's skin darkened, turning the color of stone, and the temperature in the tunnel flared as strands of flame blazed up around Xiulan.

Ling Qi's mist rolled out as well, engulfing them all in its confines, even as she flooded her limbs with dark qi in preparation for moving quickly. Heijin's eyes glowed in the dark as he swelled in size, his head now reaching Ling Qi's waist.

Han Jian was last. A golden banner unfurled over his shoulders, shining even in her mist. "Steel your minds and advance." His words rang with unusual weight, and Ling Qi felt his qi whispering along her channels, enhancing her spiritual defenses.

They moved quickly, no longer maintaining a careful pace. Ling Qi felt her friends activating other techniques as they advanced toward the beast's lair, and she herself enhanced her own defenses further, calling on the serenity of Argent Mirror and filling the mist with hunting shadows.

It was a good thing that she did. As they crashed through into the more heavily organic tunnel, she felt a sudden wrenching feeling in her gut as the dull, decaying qi around her spasmed in response to their intrusion. Stringy white growths tore from the walls, and tendrils of spongy fungal growth the size of thick tree limbs attempted to bar their way and push them back.

Fan Yu and Han Fang were not deterred though, the taller boy's hammer ripping one in twain with a thunderous burst while Fan Yu at least held up under their battering. Ling Qi's shadow constructs tore at rootlets and tendrils, keeping them from creeping up around her feet. Her eyes watered as Gu Xiulan's blinding blue flames lanced down the tunnel, reducing many of the obstructing growths to ash. Heijin darted forward through the gaps she made like a golden blur, shredding tendrils as they struggled to grow and regenerate.

Ling Qi, judging that the rest of the group had the damage in hand, simply called on the wind to guide everyone's movements as she maintained her melody. Han Jian evidently felt the same, and his banner unfurled further as tracers of light like a tiger's stripes began to form on his skin and armor. Ling Qi felt a rush of heat as his own qi, wind and earth together, bolstered her own.

All around them, the tunnel came alive. Early Silver, Mid Silver, then Late Silver, the fungal growths' qi grew more resilient the closer they pushed toward the cavern at the end of the tunnel, fighting back fiercely and desperately. It slowed them, but it could not stop them. Gu Xiulan's intense flames scorched it down to the earth and cut off any hope of regrowth.

They reached the entrance of the cavern.

A once serene pool of water lay beyond with a great towering white growth in its center, a bulbous, cancerous thing that trembled and writhed. Thousands of rootlets writhed up from the water even as the organic coating on the walls rippled violently with the creature's pain and fury. Ling Qi felt a hint of worry as she was unable to read the beast's cultivation failed. Third realm then, probably early but perhaps more. The air shimmered, and she felt as if a hammer had smashed directly into her thoughts.

It would be nice if she could simply lie down to rest. A little sip from the cool, clear water would be even better...

It didn't last. Silver light flared from her eyes, and she rejected the influence, drawing a horrible squeal from the pillar of fungal flesh in the center of the room as she retaliated by drowning it in a cold, cloying elegy. The others fared less well. Fan Yu stumbled, looking lost, and there was confusion in Xiulan's eyes, her flames briefly guttering.

"Do not be enraptured!" Han Jian shouted, his voice rising above her melody. Her friends shuddered, their eyes clearing, and Xiulan's hair whipped violently around her head as she stared down the beast in fury.

Han Fang and Heijin had not even been slowed by the fungal pillar's attempt. The two of them struck like thunderbolts, rootlets failing to grasp at their wind-shrouded forms. Han Fang's hammer tore a great gobbet of flesh free from the pillar, and the ensuing thunderclap cratered the pillar while Heijin's claws slashed jagged rents in a rising spiral around the pillar as the wind carried him briefly into the air.

The fungal pillar retaliated as rootlets as thick as tree limbs emerged from the ground to lash out with blows fit to sunder stone. They met resistance as Ling Qi activated Deepwood Vitality, shimmering shrouds of verdant green absorbing the impact and leaving her allies free to continue attacking without missing a beat.

It may have been their superior in cultivation, but this beast was clearly not meant for direct combat. It was messy and unpleasant, but it was no match for the five of them. The creature eventually died, torn apart by their combined fury.

Sadly, that seemed to be the end of the cave, but it was not in vain. They were able to dig out a fairly large cache of beast cores out of the fungus, the yet undigested remains of its victims. It included several low ranking grade three cores and the beast's own, of which there were multiple. With her share of this windfall, Ling Qi would be able to maintain her current expenditures.

Between the continuing investigation into Yan Renshu and her training with the Golden Fields group, time passed quickly after that. The rest of their explorations were less exciting, but in training, Ling Qi found herself rapidly mastering the portion of Argent Storm that Han Jian had shared with her. It was not an art that really fit her style well since it primarily relied on defending against melee attacks with Rumbling Squall and punishing failed melee attacks with Thunderous Retort technique, but it was a useful tool to have if someone were to close to melee range with her.

With three Argent arts active, Ling Qi felt slightly strange like she was on the verge of something.

#### Interlude - Bai Cui

Sister Meizhen gave far too much thought to that girl, Cui thought sulkily as she threaded her way through the tall grass that grew between the gnarled roots of the forest. She moved without disturbing a single blade. As silent as death. Just like Papa had taught her.

Cui had been wrong about that girl. She was not a mouse or a rat or scurrying prey for all that she cloaked herself as if she were one. Cui could grudgingly respect the bite of that oversized viper, Ling Qi.

It didn't change the fact that the girl had hurt her sister. Had sent her to huddle in her room and silently clutch Cui to her bosom for comfort, shoulders shaking. If she were not a Bai, her sister may have cried. Cui had been furious; she would have sought out the girl and ended her then and there if Meizhen had not held her so tightly and had not so clearly needed her.

Her cousin was strange, as all humans were. Cui knew this. The human members of the Bai were less strange than most, but they were strange all the same. Nothing illustrated that more than the fact that Sister Meizhen had forgiven the other girl for hurting her. Cui could not quite understand the idea. One did not forgive slights or insults, but Sister Meizhen had insisted that everything had been the fault of her own misunderstanding.

Cui did not understand.

The brush she slithered through rustled, and she flicked her tongue in irritation, tasting the scent of her prey on the air as she righted her heading. She was becoming distracted. It was unbecoming of a Bai. Sister Meizhen had requested her help, and she would not ruin things, even if she did not understand her sister's investment.

Ling Qi was stupid. She had rejected her Sister, who, while being hairy and lumpy like all humans, was surely as beautiful as their sort could be. And the girl's spirit, that whiny glutton Zhengui, was annoying, always toddling after her when his own sister was absent, stealing or scaring away her food.

At least he was sleeping now. Perhaps he would be less grating when he emerged more matured. The dirt wall around his pyre made a good napping spot at least. It would be sad if that nasty fuel had poisoned the aromatic smoke. It was not as if it was his fault that his human was so dumb. Cui knew she was sulking again. Sister Meizhen would scold her. It was so hard to stay focused with such easy prey though.

The humans she was following came to a stop ahead, crouching to root in the dirt like pigs to collect herbs. Cui peered at them from the tall grass, idly tasting the air. The five humans were alone, the strongest of them only just touching the end of the second realm. Weaklings. Years older than her sister and yet still so impotent.

Boring.

This was so boring.

Cui did not allow herself to be distracted by the tasty snacks she could feel in the grass around her and the trees above. She did not allow herself to be diverted by thoughts of bringing down the fat crow in the tree across the clearing with a well-aimed jet of toxin, or how tasty it would be as its hollow bones crunched in her throat and the vaguely tickly feeling of its feathers on her snout. No, Cui had been asked to watch, and so she would watch.

Ah, the tasty crow flew away.

Two hours later, Cui was growing ever more tempted by the morsels around her, but still, the humans had only shuffled on a short distance, filling their bags and baskets with leaves and berries and bark. Finally though, Cui's vigilance was rewarded. She felt the approach of the oily muddy qi that marked her real target and felt a thrill of pleasure. This time, her waiting had not been in vain.

The ugly, slimy white worm that emerged from the dirt caused a thrill of disgust in Cui. It smelled like rotting meat and hardly looked better. The leader of the humans clasped his hands and bowed to it, and one by one, his subordinates offered it bags which were quickly swallowed down its drooling maw. Whatever conversation passed between the leader and the swaying worm after that was silent beyond Cui's ability to listen, but that did not matter. As the worm disappeared, she sent a feeling of confirmation to her sister.

The humans moved and Cui followed, utterly silent. Despite her distraction, she had pinpointed the weaknesses in their false scales long ago. She would not insult Papa by doing otherwise. He had taught her the vulnerabilities of humankind in nursery rhymes while she was still in her shell. There would be no need for Sister Meizhen to dirty her hands with trash.

Cui would strike long before the humans reached the road that would lead them back to the Sect. Qi rippled across her scales as she slithered closer to the chatting group of humans, quiet and unassuming. They did not see her, and they did not feel her. Pathetic. She was not nearly as good as Papa or even that viper Ling Qi, but these humans were worthless.

She was practically under their feet by the time she struck. The world blurred as her head whipped forward and up with her strike, and the leftmost human let out a cry of pain as her fangs sunk deep into the artery in the girl's ankle. Her venom sacks pumped, filling the girl's blood with toxin, albeit a mere paralytic rather than one that would melt the flesh from the human's bones.

The girl fell, and with her fall, Cui felt the humans slow as the girl's arts faded. The nearest boy was just turning to look at his crumpling companion when Cui struck again, and he too fell. A blade struck her scales and rebounded, chipped. It was shortly followed by a jet of pressurized water that carved through the dirt and tree roots, but that hardly gave her pause.

The other humans fell in moments.

Cui took a moment to enjoy the fear and whimpering from the humans crumpled in the dirt around her, smugly looking down on them from above her coils as she waited for her sister.

Sister Meizhen was prompt, although she did not do anything so undignified as hurry. Instead, her sister's steps were slow, graceful, and measured as she emerged from the shadows of late evening. The

human Bai's face was cast in shadow by her regal hood of black water, which rippled soundlessly in the wind. Only Sister Meizhen's eyes were visible, glowing beacons of cold golden light.

Cui heard the girl on her right sob as Sister Meizhen's aura fell over her as crushing as the depths of Grandmother's lake. She flicked her tongue, amused. Sister Meizhen did like her little bits of fun now and then. Even Cui's serious and humorless Mother agreed that such theatrics had a certain value.

"S-sect Sister, whatever we have done to offend you, please let me apologize!" The leader of the weak humans babbled as Meizhen strolled closer, pausing to brush her hand affectionately over Cui's eye ridges. Cui hissed happily, nuzzling her hand, and took the invitation to slither up her sister's arm and come to rest around her shoulders, enjoying the cool feeling of her mantle.

"How fortunate that you are cooperative," Meizhen spoke mildly, coming to a stop. "I would have you deliver your master Yan Renshu unto me."

The boy's face went white, and one of the others shuddered, a quiet whimper escaping his lips. "W-we... Sect Sister, I do not know..."

Her Sister's hand twitched, and metal ribbons lashed out, drawing forth a scream. The scream only grew more raw and animal as the toxin took its course.

Cui closed her eyes. Silly humans. A Bai always got her answers in the end.

# **Chapter 130 - Training**

Ling Qi hissed in pain as a deep black and purple bruise swiftly began to form on her arm. She stared down, dumbfounded at the offending limb. Had she just... failed to open a meridian? That had never happened before. She had been carefully breaking up a knot of impurities, chipping away at it little by little, and then...

"Are you well?" Bai Meizhen asked her. The other girl was seated on the stone 'bench' where Zeqing taught her lessons. She was looking at Ling Qi with concern.

"Yes. I slipped when opening my meridian is all," Ling Qi said with a wince. She sat beside the fathomless black pool, soaking in the dark qi that emanated from it. "I was just surprised."

"It happens. Meridians grow more difficult to open as their number grows. Give the channel time to heal before attempting to open it again. Perhaps we should break here," Meizhen said, letting the dark water coiled about her legs drain down onto the rocky ground, where it began to swiftly freeze.

"I suppose. I did get most of my goals done for today," Ling Qi grumbled. She had trained her Argent Current some more to the Third Flow, and together with Argent Storm, she was increasingly certain that there was something more to the Argent Arts, some way that they fit together into something greater. At the same time, she was uncertain if the Argent Arts, with its focus on physical melee, really meshed with her style. The latest technique in Argent Current, Inescapable Flow, chained a targeted enemy to her with bonds of qi. It worked well with Argent Storm's defensive techniques but not very well with either of her mainstays, her musical arts and her archery.

Still, she couldn't actually use the improved Argent Current without another opened meridian. Ling Qi flicked her wrist, pulling a medicinal pill from her ring and popped it into her mouth. Soon, the swelling began to go down.

"Indeed," Meizhen said demurely, just as unbothered by the cold as she was.

Ling Qi scooted away from the pool to rest her back against the wall of the ravine, only briefly glancing at Meizhen. She was glad that things were finally becoming normal again with the other girl. They meditated together now, and when they felt ready, they would spar and clash for a time before returning to meditation to further master the flows of their techniques. Occasionally, that routine was broken up by a break for less spiritually strenuous activities. Ling Qi would take that time to work through Suyin's notes on formation constructs while Meizhen slowly continued to pick out embroidery patterns on a length of silk.

They even ate together on occasion when both of them felt like it. Ling Qi tried not to think of that though. While she was glad for what she was sure was a display of trust and comfort, it never got less disturbing to see her friend dislocate her jaw and swallow a fist-sized third grade core like a piece of candy or even an entire raw fish. The cracking, grinding sound the cores made as the pale girl's throat crushed them to powder made her hair stand on end.

On the other hand, constantly sparring with Meizhen did have its downsides. She had yet to land a meaningful blow on the girl. It filled her with frustration, and as Ling Qi leaned back against the cold stone, nursing her sore arm, she found herself giving that feeling voice.

"Meizhen, am I really making any progress at all?" Ling Qi asked, looking up at the sky. It was a clear night, and she could see the bright half moon and stars.

Meizhen cocked her head to the side as she looked up from the kerchief she had been working on. The intense cold of the upper mountain had brought a faint flush to the girl's pale cheeks. "What an odd question," she remarked, her eyebrows drawing together in consternation. "Were you not a mortal less than a year ago?"

"Alright, poor phrasing," Ling Qi admitted.

"You should choose your words more carefully," Meizhen admonished lightly, returning her gaze to her work. "I have heard that you were lapsing back into casual, common speech with Cai Renxiang."

"Was she complaining to you?" Ling Qi asked with a frown. "I forgot myself a little, but..."

"She was not 'complaining'," Meizhen corrected. "That you are growing more comfortable is good, but there are limits," she continued, glancing up to meet Ling Qi's eyes. "If you are to involve yourself in the games of nobility, you MUST temper your speech more consistently."

Ling Qi let out a frustrated huff but didn't object to Meizhen's point. She forgot to use proper speech all too easily still. "I understand. What I meant is..." Ling Qi trailed off, falling silent as the memory of her desperate run from Sun Liling surfaced. "It's just - I thought I was catching up, but... Sun Liling, if I hadn't run from her, would have destroyed me. I had no chance." Ling Qi found her voice growing quieter and quieter with each word as she folded in on herself, staring at her own lap.

Bai Meizhen stilled. It was a subtle thing, which the Ling Qi of a few months ago would not have noticed at all, but to her eyes now, it was as obvious as the cold current of highly pressurized toxic qi that flowed through her friend's channels. For a time, Meizhen did not respond.

"Only you, Qi, would find yourself at fault for such a thing," she finally huffed, giving Ling Qi a reproachful look. "A cultivator of less than a year, and you choose to feel inadequate for failing to match that girl in direct combat."

"It's stupid, I know," Ling Qi admitted, clasping her hands in her lap. "I thought I had been keeping up with you fairly well so... Well, I didn't know how much you were holding back."

There was a faint rustle of cloth, and Ling Qi found that Meizhen had turned to fully face her, a faint frown on her face. "The purpose of a spar is not to crush your opponent. Nor are my best techniques something which I would willingly use upon a... friend," Meizhen said, the last word coming out somewhat awkwardly. "Qi, you have become strong. Do not doubt that. When you break through, know that you will stand near to me, though our skill sets might differ."

Ling Qi let out a soft huff of a laugh. "Which is your way of saying that you can manhandle me whenever you want," she teased, forcing her worry down. "Your defense is ridiculous."

The flush on her friend's cheeks briefly deepened, and she glanced away. "... A Bai should remain untouched and dignified at all times," Meizhen awkwardly mumbled. "Your resistance to my spiritual techniques is impressive. Do not denigrate yourself so."

Ling Qi simply nodded, shooting her friend a thankful look as she pulled out her notes. She would have to give the meridian a rest, but that was no excuse to stop working.

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That went for her afternoons too. Her tutoring with Zhong Peng had progressed at a good pace, and today was the last day. Over the course of the lessons Ling Qi had honed the arts she had chosen to train. Fleeting Zephyr came naturally to her, and she was thankful for it, speeding her steps and protecting her from projectiles. Her accuracy and fire rate with the Falling Stars art under stress had grown greatly as well.

Zhong Peng had taken her lack of a truly long range perception art as an indication that she did not wish to follow the more standard archer path. Instead, he spent his time drilling her on maintaining her aim while under attack and teaching her little tricks that she could use to more easily handle a bow in melee. Unlike a mortal's weapon, a cultivator's bow would not necessarily be ruined by using it to parry, and an arrow could be used like a somewhat awkward punch dagger in a pinch.

Of course, Ling Qi couldn't simply use her slender bow as a bludgeon the way Zhong Peng could use his, so his lessons had required some adjustment. Ling Qi felt fairly satisfied with her progress.

That didn't mean picking the leaves and twigs out of her hair at the beginning of the session was any less of an irritation. Xiulan would blanch if she could see her now, smeared with dirt, her gown marked with slowly repairing rips and cuts. Worse of all, Ling Qi felt gross and sweaty. It seemed she had not moved beyond such mortal concerns yet. Ling Qi wondered when she had gotten used to feeling clean, a luxury - and danger - on the streets.

"You've done well." Her instructor's voice caused her to look up from undoing her braid. "You adapt quickly and have a survivor's instinct." Zhong Peng leaned against a thick tree at the edge of the clearing, his thick arms crossed. It was the young man's preferred 'at rest' pose.

"Thank you, Senior Brother Zhong," Ling Qi replied, bowing as best she could from her seated position. "Is there anything you would advise going forward?"

He let out a rumbling hum, considering her. "Not as such. You have a strong foundation, but I have little idea what you are trying to build," he admitted bluntly. "You are not like me. The bow is not your focus."

Ling Qi reluctantly nodded. She enjoyed shooting, much like she enjoyed music. But she wasn't sure yet whether she wanted to build her cultivation around either.

"That is fine," the older boy continued. "My father was a hunter, and my mother an army scout. Archery is in my blood. I have known what I wanted for many years. Not all are so lucky."

"So I have to figure it out myself then?" Ling Qi asked ruefully, letting her hands fall into her lap. Not what she had hoped for.

"As we all must," Zhong Peng said, shrugging his broad shoulders. "Choose what you want to do. Tailor your skills to that. As things are, once you have mastered Falling Stars, I would suggest looking into mid and close range variants utilizing water or pure wind elements if you wish to continue the path of the bow. One who tries to do all things will only find themselves drowning in mediocrity."

"The Sect arts cover all the elements though, don't they?" Ling Qi asked defensively. "The Sect Head can't be wrong, right?" The Argent arts had been personally developed by him after all.

Zhong Peng inclined his head slightly. "That is a path all its own," he explained. "An Inner disciple who wishes to follow in Master Yuan's footsteps would do well not to be distracted by other arts." The young man frowned, reaching up to scratch at the stubble on his chin as he considered his words. "What you are doing is not wrong. Yet you lack focus. Secondary skills are an asset, but you need to choose a clear primary skill."

Ling Qi grudgingly nodded. If she *had* to choose... her music would be her primary skill. Forgotten Vale Melody was one of her highest quality arts and a very versatile control and support art. Sable Crescent Step, another gift from the moon, worked well with Forgotten Vale Melody, but its quality and upgrades meant she could use it with other styles as well. The problem was that her other arts didn't necessarily support a music-focused build at the moment, not the way Xiulan's skills all built on empowering her flames or Meizhen's all supported her utterly impregnable defense. The whole reason she had sought Falling Stars art was because her current music repertoire lacked a way to truly damage others in a reasonable time frame.

She parted ways with her tutor amicably. Perhaps next year, once she had sorted her style out, she could show off a coherent art suite to him.

# **Chapter 131 - Favors**

It was true that Fu Xiang had helped her a great deal in her successful escape from Sun Liling. It was also true that he was now heavily involved with the investigation of Yan Renshu's contacts. It was also true that she absolutely did not trust the older boy. His whole attitude and demeanor set her on edge. However, Ling Qi felt the need to repay a favor if only so that more might be forthcoming in the future. With that in mind. Ling Qi was hardly surprised when she found the normally elusive Fu Xiang easy to find.

A word to one of the enforcers working in the market and a few hours spent cultivating while it was passed up the chain earned her a hasty invitation to the same teahouse they had met at before.

Once again, she found herself slipping into the private booth at the little restaurant where she had last met the boy. Fu Xiang had not changed overly much. His presence was greater, granting the boy a quiet weight that he had previously lacked. At the same time, it seemed that his physique was not yet Third Realm.

"I am glad to see you doing well, Miss Ling," Fu Xiang said as she sat down, his air of self-satisfaction fully intact. "I hope your excursion to the Medicine Hall this week was not serious?"

"It was nothing important," Ling Qi replied. Han Jian had insisted that they all visit the hall after their cave raid to check for lingering toxins. She had gone along with it since they had a good crop of materials to sell. Being locked in a room and drenched in decontaminating medicinal mist to purge lingering fungal spores had not been great fun though. "And you? I suppose Lady Cai has been keeping your nose to the grindstone, sorry about the extra work."

"Not at all, it is an interesting challenge to flex my skills against a proper peer, no matter how misguided," he said with a thin smile, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Well I'm glad you're having fun," ling Qi grumbled. "Are you doing everything yourself then? That must be tiring."

"Talents like mine are in high demand for a reason, sensory and divination arts such as mine are rare below the third realm, and they will only grow more potent now that I have reached it," he said with a touch of pride. "Sadly, I am still limited by the costs involved."

Ling Qi hummed noncommittally. She could see a use for being able to talk over distances. What she found on the subject indicated that the qi costs involved increased massively and exponentially with time and distance though. "Do you plan to sign up with Lady Cai when you're done with the Sect then? Become her coordinator?"

"Heavens, no," Fu Xiang answered, looking at her as if she had suggested that he go streak through the market. "I intend to use my eventual place in the Inner Sect to receive a recommendation into a junior position at the Ministry of Communication. I am a son of the capital. I shall leave the barbarians to you border nobles."

Ling Qi blinked. "Oh," she said, lacking any better response. She supposed that she hadn't really considered the various Ministries as potential landing spot post-Sect. She wasn't terribly familiar with them. She knew about Communication, Law, and Integrity, but she was sure there were a few others. She vaguely recalled hearing mention of a Ministry of Spiritual Affairs and Ministry of Commerce. "Well, I hope you have good fortune with that."

"And you as well, with whatever you might decide on," he replied easily, bringing his hands together on the table. "You may even be able to help in that regard."

Ling Qi's expression became more serious. This was what she had been expecting. "Well, I do owe you. That transportation formation couldn't have been cheap," she acknowledged.

"Just so," Fu Xiang said with a cheerful nod. "Worry not. My request is nothing too onerous for one of your skills. It will even help those friends of yours. Li Suyin and Su Ling, I believe?"

Ling Qi pursed her lips, a little unhappy at his casual mention of her friends. She reminded herself that the smirking boy was an ally. "Oh? Just what might your request be?"

"Well, given your impressive destruction of a fellow disciple's hopes and dreams, I thought that you might be up for doing a few more," Fu Xiang continued with a laugh. She wasn't sure what to feel about the tinge of genuine admiration in his voice. "There are several promising production students who have already begun their final projects. If you could ruin the projects or steal their materials, it would ease things considerably."

Leaning back in her seat, Ling Qi considered the request. She could see what Fu Xiang meant. If she took out some of the competition, this would help Suyin too. But Suyin would probably not approve of this method; Ling Qi could very easily imagine the look of betrayed expectations on her friend's face. Unlike Yan Renshu, an absurdly obvious villain, this would be disciples that hadn't harmed her.

Of course, what Suyin didn't know couldn't hurt her. "I'm listening," she said neutrally.

"The three targets I have in mind have their facilities in the market," Fu Xiang explained. "The market wards merely prevent violence, not sabotage or theft... but I admit, you would be taking a risk. Should you be caught, you could receive a ban from the market."

Ling Qi grimaced. "That is quite a risk." She hadn't had a good track record for getting out undetected on most of her heists for all her general success.

"It is, but I will act as a go-between for the remainder of the year should it come to that," he reassured. "However, I think you will find their security less severe than Sir Yan's. None of the targets are third realm themselves or wealthy enough to purchase the services of one." He paused, eyeing her speculatively. "I will be satisfied with the sabotage of one of my competitors, but I do not need to tell you that the production track is crowded. Both of us benefit from thinning the herd."

"... Let me sleep on it," Ling Qi replied after a moment. In the end, it was a matter of how much risk she wanted to take and how much she was worried about tainting her relationship with Suyin. The girl had grown more practical, but if she found out about this, she would probably be unhappy.

For that matter, she couldn't imagine Cai being pleased by it either. She was not keen on seeing the hammer of 'justice' turned her way.

# **Chapter 132 - Courting**

"Ugh, I can't believe I'm doing this," Ling Qi grumbled as she and Xiulan approached the outskirts of the town at the base of the mountain. The sharp autumn wind tugged at the hem of her gown, briefly revealing the black and silver slippers she wore beneath. It was a testament to her trust in Xiulan that despite her discontent, she was still going along with Xiulan's request.

Xiulan rolled her eyes above the golden veil that covered the lower half of her face. The wide sleeves and the train of her rose colored gown trailed behind her elegantly. "I do not understand why you are being so childish about this," she said, exasperated. "It is not as if we are going to kidnap you for a ceremony this very hour."

"You would if you could get away with it," Ling Qi sniped, half serious. She knew Xiulan wouldn't do such a thing to her, but her family... Well, who knew. Talk of betrothals and contracts made her jumpy.

"Spouse theft went out of fashion with the unification, Ling Qi," Xiulan commented dryly. "Really, who would be so gauche?" She then deliberately changed the subject, asking, "You like the new hair style?"

Ling Qi huffed, reaching up to toy with pale lilac 'petals' of the ornament pinning her hair back. Gu Xiulan had helped her pick it out. The clip was silver, decorated with what looked like a live orchid flower. It seemed cultivators could do a lot of frivolous things with formations. With the hair pin, most of her hair was pulled back and hung loose down to the middle of her back.

The Ling Qi of six months ago would have quailed at the price of the medicinal solution Xiulan had coaxed her into using. She had to admit that it had good effects though. Even unbound, her hair was perfectly straight and smooth. "I'll get back to you. I don't know if it is going to get in the way yet," she answered grudgingly.

Xiulan gave her a flat look. "If you cannot manage so simple an exercise in your sleep, I shall eat your left shoe."

"Not your left shoe?" Ling Qi shot back as they passed the city gates. Feeling a prickle on the back of her neck, she glanced to the side and saw a young mortal boy their age gaping at them from a market stall. He flinched away when he met her gaze and quickly busied himself. Ling Qi felt a moment of satisfaction followed by a twinge of guilt.

Unmindful of her thoughts, Xiulan laughed. "Of course not. To ruin my own pair would be a travesty."

Ling Qi let out an amused sound in response. She supposed that there had been no reason to glare, but she was still feeling on edge. "So where are we meeting this cousin of yours anyway?" Ling Qi asked as they passed through the street, untroubled by the morning crowd.

"In the square," Gu Xiulan replied. "Relax. This is a polite offer and enticement, no more. There is no need-"

"Lan-Lan!" A male voice broke over the sound of the crowd, and Ling Qi blinked, looking ahead as people moved aside for the owner of the voice.

Xiulan's perfectly sculpted eyebrow twitched violently, pulling at her scars. "... Tai, did I not ask you to wait?"

Ling Qi caught sight of the speaker a moment later. Her first impression was that she could see the family resemblance. The young man in the street ahead had the same refined features as Xiulan, but they were of a hard cast and his skin a shade darker, tanned by the sun more than birth. His hair was streaked with lines of dark red, rather than being a solid red, and was bound in a top knot. As he approached, Ling Qi could see that he had a few centimeters on her and a lean build. He didn't seem to be much older than eighteen or nineteen.

"Asking me to stand around for so long - isn't that a bit cruel of you?"

"Lan-Lan?" Ling Qi asked in a low voice, barely moving her lips as she glanced at her friend.

The withering look she got in return put to rest any thoughts she had of teasing her friend... for the moment. "I see patience still eludes you," Xiulan said haughtily, crossing her arms to look imperiously up at the taller boy.

"A curious accusation," Gu Tai said with a shrug. "Cousin, you know perfectly well that no Gu without gray hairs has a drop of that."

"At least he's honest," Ling Qi said, studying him critically despite her flippant response. Gu Tai wore a loose vermillion jacket patterned like the feathers of a bird over a more tightly fitting black silk shirt with red highlights along its center. A familiar bright red fingerless glove covered his right hand.

"The lady of the hour speaks!" Gu Tai said brightly, offering a bow of greeting. It wasn't shallow enough to be mocking, but it also wasn't one which conveyed a great deal of formal respect. "It pleases me to meet you in person, Miss Ling. Xiulan's letters have been quite colorful in the past months." Ling Qi wasn't quite sure how to take that comment so she just gave him a polite smile in response.

Xiulan caught her questioning look and let out a quiet sigh and slight shake of her head. He just had that kind of personality, it seemed. "Tai, I think the both of us would prefer not to turn this meeting into a street show."

The mortals were very deliberately ignoring them while leaving them space as far as Ling Qi could tell, but a handful of people who read as first realms were watching them curiously. "Yes, I am glad to meet one of Xiulan's relatives, but this is a little public, isn't it?"

The older boy nodded easily in response, his good cheer unaffected. "If that is the lady's wish," he said politely. "But I am surprised to see you express such a sentiment, La-" Ling Qi was fairly sure that she saw his hair smolder under the force of Xiualn's glare. "Xiulan," he corrected.

Ling Qi followed the two fire cultivators further into town, feeling slightly bemused. Given Xiulan's situation, she had almost expected her relatives to be very proper. This Gu Tai, for all that he was a third realm cultivator, didn't give that impression. Then again, if Xiulan had told her family so much about Ling Qi, perhaps he was simply acting for her benefit.

She allowed herself to fade into the background of the conversation as her two more bombastic companions traded jibes with an air of long familiarity, only offering an occasional comment when

prompted. Gu Tai was difficult to read, his higher realm obscuring much of his nature, but she could get a feel for his secondary element at least. Where the purity of Xiulan's flames had been mixed with the explosiveness of lightning, her cousin had a strong tinge of wind like a forge fire stoked by powerful bellows.

They soon arrived at their destination, a rather elaborate building near the center of town. It seemed to be a teahouse and restaurant catering to the settlement's elite. Although the staff of the establishment was still mortal, Ling Qi caught a whiff of first realm qi from the kitchens.

The elderly matron who came out to lead them to their reserved room was early second realm. From the pleasantries traded, Ling Qi picked up that she was the owner. She supposed the Gu family was pretty distinguished. Her own perspective was probably kind of skewed with Bai Meizhen as her roommate.

Soon they were seated in a private room filled with a light flowery scent. An open window and balcony provided light from the pleasant day outside. Ling Qi seated herself next to Xiulan while Gu Tai sat opposite them.

"Have you examined me to your satisfaction then, Miss Ling?" She blinked as Gu Tai spoke up, referring to her directly. "I did not imagine you a shy girl, so I assume your silence was one of thought."

"I did not want to interrupt you and Xiulan," Ling Qi deflected, meeting his dark brown eyes. "You two seemed to be enjoying yourselves."

"We have already caught up well enough over the past week," Xiulan interjected evenly, eyeing her cousin with irritation.

"Perhaps," Gu Tai admitted. "Yet I cannot help but feel that I have not yet succeeded in my goals."

"I am not a child anymore, Tai. Your foolery is unnecessary," Xiulan snipped. "Do not insult Ling Qi by ignoring her so."

Gu Tai let out a thoughtful hum and returned his gaze to Ling Qi. "My apologies if that is how it came across, Miss Ling. I am, of course, glad to have your company. You have been very quiet though."

"It's no trouble," Ling Qi said uncomfortably. "I am uncertain about how I am supposed to act," she admitted.

"Understandable," Gu Tai said lightly. "I suppose you have not had much experience with betrothal negotiations."

Ling Qi barely kept her expression neutral, thoughts flashing back to memories dredged up by recent events.

Tai continued speaking though, as if he didn't notice her discomfort. "... an insult to your grace, of course. What louts these southern nobles must be."

"Right," Ling Qi agreed a little thickly. "I... What exactly does this... I mean, what do you want?" She stumbled over her words, and Xiulan shot her a look of confusion and concern.

The young man sitting across from them peered at her carefully, his easy smile fading. "To be blunt, our exalted grandfather has negotiated with the Han for a portion of the new lands opening up in the latest wave of reclamation." He paused, glancing at Xiulan. "How much does she know of Golden Fields?"

"Little, I expect," Xiulan replied absently, studying Ling Qi's face. "Most of our province is ruins and ash. The land is so soaked in warring sun and death qi that it poisons those who attempt to live there."

"Except the Walkers," Gu Tai continued, resting his chin in his hands. "Dreadful creatures. However, we have steadily cleansed stretches of land enough to render them... livable."

Now Ling Qi was confused. "I'm not sure what that has to do with what we were talking about," she ventured.

"Aside from providing an enticing vision of your prospective home..." Gu Tai said with a bit of humor. "I intend to be among the settlers wrangling the newly reclaimed lands. This would mean beginning a branch house, for which I would, of course, like a lovely and talented wife," he continued brightly. "Preferably one which would not mind getting her hands a bit bloody at times."

Ling Qi glanced away, feeling confused. This wasn't quite going how she had expected it to. She looked to Xiulan for help.

"It is typical to seek new blood in the establishment of branch houses," Xiulan explained airily. "The Golden Fields bloodlines are somewhat... insular."

"This did not stop your honoured Father from claiming a bride from the capital," Gu Tai noted. "It was rather scandalous at the time," he added in a more conspiratory tone, looking to Ling Qi with a grin.

"Ancient history," Gu Xiulan dismissed with a sniff. "The Golden Fields have been opening up for centuries now. Even the senior generation has acknowledged the foolishness of continued isolation."

"I shall be sure to inform Aunt Xiaoli that you consider her to be ancient," Gu Tai teased. "But yes, as unromantic as it might be, the offer is a practical matter," he said, returning his attention fully to Ling Qi. "Your talent and rapid growth have drawn my uncle's eye, and he believes us to be a good match. I have no objections. You are a bit young yet, but by the time negotiations are over, that should no longer be a problem. You will be a lovely woman by then. Your more practical talents are a much more important consideration."

Ling Qi felt conflicted. At least this time, the one complimenting her appearance wasn't some disgusting slime like Huang Da. But this offer still felt very transactional to her. She didn't bother asking the question on the tip of her tongue. Gu Tai was clearly fine with marrying someone he didn't even know. "I understand. I think. So if I agree, we ship off to Golden Fields and start scrabbling in the sand?"

Xiulan frowned at her, but Gu Tai laughed. "There would indeed be much scrabbling," he admitted. "But nowhere else in the Empire will you find the possibilities of past treasures and rich resources, lost under a bit of sand and ash," he said, the lines of thunder running through his qi pulsing. "I am afraid it would be at least two years, more likely three, before any such things were finalized. You would have to remain under the Sect for that time."

Ling Qi relaxed a little. She didn't like it - the idea still rubbed her the wrong way and made some part of her feel like she was selling herself - but this offer didn't feel malicious, even if all she had to go on was gut instinct and a half year's spotty experience with nobles.

"That sounds like it might be interesting," she conceded. If marriage wasn't involved, it would be really intriguing actually. The part of her that found joy in her heists thrilled at the idea of plundering long lost vaults. "I hope you do not mind if I do not give you any answer today though."

"Of course not," Gu Tai said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I think Xiulan and I have the recklessness quite covered as it is." He flicked his wrist and a crisp, stiff letter appeared between his fingers, which he held out and offered to her. Ling Qi took it gingerly and gave him a questioning look. "That contains the full text of my uncle's offer, Miss Ling. Please review it at your pleasure."

Ling Qi nodded, carefully storing the letter away. By the thickness of the envelope, she had a feeling that she would want some help reading over it. Still, this gave her time to think - and another option, if she felt that Cai Renxiang's offer was not to her taste.

They continued to chat as the food was brought in, but it quickly returned to the two Gu family members dominating the conversation, despite Gu Tai and Xiulan's occasional efforts to draw her into the conversation. She didn't need to make her decision yet. Gu Tai would remain here until the end of the year regardless. Apparently, he was serving as the Gu's representative in a number of minor negotiations at the moment. If she wanted, she could try to get to know the young man better before she made her choice.

# **Chapter 133 - Courting 2**

Thankfully, neither Xiulan nor her cousin were offended by her lack of definitive answers, so her time spent with the Golden Fields group did not become even more awkward. She continued to work steadily toward mastering the Falling Stars Art and kept up with the group's explorations.

Her thoughts were troubled. Between Gu Tai and Cai Renxiang, she was quickly becoming aware of how ignorant she was of a lot of basic knowledge about the Empire and how everything about it worked. Perhaps she could spend some time in the archives when she found a moment to breathe.

Right now, she didn't have the time, not if she wanted to keep up with her cultivation. Whatever might come in the future, she would be better off with more power. Her first major task was taking another shot at doing a Sect mission. Tutoring had been very effective for her so far in advancing her skills, but she needed more Sect Points to hire an Inner Sect tutor.

One mission in particular stood out as suited to her skills. Near the Sect mountain was a small river valley with a tree that grew potent Immortal Peaches. It was guarded by a young dragon, and a successful completion gave nearly twice as many points as any other mission on the board. Ling Qi was confident that she could manage.

However, she remained wary of interference by Yan Renshu. After some deliberation, she elected to simply perform the mission before actually registering that she was taking it. That introduced a little trouble for her since she couldn't get proper directions from the Sect without accepting, but she had a solution to that problem too.

Namely, Fu Xiang. In the wake of their last meeting, he had left her a means of contact in the form of a sheaf of treated papers that worked like the little messenger 'birds' the Ministry used, albeit with less range and durability. She sent off a query regarding the valley and received a response by evening, giving her directions to the dragon's valley.

The second part of her plan to avoid Yan Renshu's interference involved simply slipping off the mountain in the dead of night and laying out a confusing and convoluted trail. It cost her an hour, but anyone following her at a distance should be thrown off, and if what Fu Xiang had said was any indication, remote viewing could not easily be maintained for such a long time either.

There were probably defenses for that kind of thing. Ling Qi made a note to look into that kind of formation or talisman.

Despite her delay, she traveled quickly once she was off the mountain, blurring through the canopy of trees. She headed south toward the rising rampart of mountains over which the Sect stood guard. The valley lay in the steep foothills.

She came upon it by following the small river that wound its way through the hills, as per Fu Xiang's directions. Her path took her to the top of a steep cliff where the water thundered down into the valley below. She found herself pausing there at the cliffside as she took in the sight before her.

It was beautiful, a lush, verdant valley, bursting with life. The water of the river was clear and fresh, sparkling under the light of the moon and stars, and mist that drifted from the river lent the place a mystical air. The qi too was rich and wholesome, filling her with vital energy.

This would be a cultivation site unparalleled by any she had found so far, even the Argent vent. Ling Qi felt shocked that Fu Xiang had simply told her about the place. No, she was shocked that this place was not flooded by disciples. The reason for that became clear as her eyes fell upon the grove of fruit trees nestling by a bend in the river.

Coiled around the base of the trees lay the napping dragon. Its body was vaguely serpentine and covered in glimmering azure scales. The middle of its body, between its two sets of limbs, was wider and flatter than a serpent's with sharp crystalline ridges on its back. It was at least ten meters long in her estimation, although the curling of its long neck and tail made it difficult to tell for certain.

Its limbs were almost stubby in comparison. They were short and thick with muscle and claws longer than her daggers. Its head, resting on an upraised tree root, had a long and narrow muzzle with only a few of its fangs poking out. The rounded horns at the rear of its skull looked like mere stubs, barely grown in, and only a tiny wisp of mossy fur curled from its chin.

What really drew her eye, was the gleaming stone seemingly affixed to its throat. It was an emerald green spirit stone the size of her fist, a perfectly smooth sphere of condensed qi that gleamed with inner light.

The sheer value... Ling Qi shook her head. That alone confirmed her thoughts. She would take the job warning seriously. The young dragon was in the third grade, but if it didn't have a stronger protector, someone would have come here to harvest it by now. It didn't seem to show signs of being bonded to a cultivator... which meant it had a notable parent, probably bound to some core disciple or elder.

Ling Qi wanted no part of that, even if it meant this was probably more of a challenge than a legitimate job. She made certain her qi was well muffled as she crept down the side of the cliff.

Ling Qi barely breathed as her limbs turned dark under the moonlight, and she became little more than a fleeting shadow on the rocks. She passed over the river without causing even a slight ripple on the water and flowed over the grass without a rustle. The young dragon remained asleep, its loud breathing like the sound of a forge's bellows.

It was hard to describe what things were like as a shadow. Her body felt hazy and indistinct in that state, her limbs ephemeral. This did not stop her though. Many, many illusionary obstacle courses under Elder Jiao had taught her to move while in this state, and so she blinked from the grass up into the branches of a tree without pause. She hopped from one to another with barely a disturbance, feeling potent qi in the wood under her feet in her brief moments of solidity.

The dragon seemed even larger as she approached it, closer to twelve meters than ten. Her entire body was smaller than its torso. Its head shifted and its tail flicked, and Ling Qi froze, not daring to move until the creature had settled again. She let out a tiny breath as it stilled and continued forward, leaping from one shadow to another and eating up distance with ease.

After her fumble at the fort and the subsequent Sun Liling pursuit, it almost seemed too easy. She supposed that this was the result of preparation. The little finned ridges on the dragon's head, which she assumed to be ears, twitched very slightly as she settled on the upper branches of the tree furthest from it. She stilled again, but aside from a low growl and and twist of its tail, the dragon remained asleep.

Moving very carefully, Ling Qi reached out and pressed her hands to the bark. This was going to be tricky. These trees were spirits in their own right and would require propitiation before they would allow her to take the peaches. With a worried glance at the dragon, she pricked her thumb on the edge of one of her knives and pressed it to the bark, channeling qi through her hands.

She closed her eyes, despite her nerves, focusing on conveying gratitude and supplication through the qi that she channeled into the wood. It worked. Barring unusual circumstances, tree spirits were rarely less than docile, and she soon received a feeling of acceptance. The trouble would come if the dragon scented her blood or felt her qi.

She held her breath as the blood smeared on the bark dissolved into black mist, and the dragon... rolled over, making a noise not unlike a man's snore, greatly magnified. Ling Qi didn't dare sigh with relief. Instead, she quickly plucked enough fruit to fill her quota before soaring away from the beautiful and deadly valley.

... It would be such a good place to cultivate in though. Surely there was some way she could manage it.

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Ling Qi panted as she leaned against the icy wall of the ravine where she and Meizhen trained. Welts and bruises stung painfully on her arms, and her vision swam with the light toxin Meizhen had inflicted on her. Meizhen had taken their conversation last week as a signal to use more of her repertoire in spars.

Ling Qi was of mixed feelings about that.

"That was a well thought out attempt," Bai Meizhen complimented, looking as unruffled as ever. The snow on the ground was torn up in wild patterns from their spar, but Meizhen herself was untouched. Well, she did seem to be breathing a little harder than usual. Ling Qi might have been imagining that though.

"It still didn't work," she grumbled as she straightened up, her back twinging. "Did you have to throw me into the wall like that?"

"It was the most efficient non-lethal solution," Meizhen replied demurely, dismissing her ribbon sword. "You had come quite close to striking me with your final flanking maneuver."

That 'maneuver' had left her pretty drained. Jumping multiple shadows in rapid succession and summoning her worms right on top of her friend to distract her for a crucial instant... It had been hard on her reserves.

"You didn't even look back when you threw me away," Ling Qi said grumpily. "Your awareness is just too amazing," she added to ensure that the other girl knew her complaints were good-natured.

"It is nothing," Bai Meizhen dismissed, although Ling Qi could hear the slight smile in the girl's voice. "Shall we rest then? You expended a great deal of qi."

"That sounds good," Ling Qi agreed, allowing herself to slide down the wall and sit, a gust of wind blowing away the powder before it could soak through her gown. Meizhen was much more elegant about it. "Meizhen, can I ask you something?"

"You may," her friend responded. "Is something troubling you again, Qi? You are advancing as quickly as can be expected."

"I met with Gu Xiulan's cousin a few days ago. I left with a betrothal offer," she said bluntly. "I don't... I don't like the idea," she admitted, "but I know that isn't necessarily rational."

Meizhen's expression was blank, her lips pressed together in a thin line. "I see. The offer is hardly an insult. The Gu family is quite prominent," she said slowly. "However, I believe Cai Renxiang's offer to be a better choice."

"Probably," Ling Qi admitted. "But if it didn't come with a marriage attached, I'd probably jump on it. Getting to explore places no one has been in a thousand years or more? That's more exciting than politics."

"I suppose," Meizhen huffed, clearly disagreeing.

"It's..." Ling Qi paused. "It's an option, you know? Even if I don't necessarily like it, I'm glad I have the choice." She was rambling. "The point is - if you have an idea for how I could stay with you, I'd like to know about it, even if you believe I won't like it."

Meizhen stared at her in silence before looking away, her right hand clenching on her gown. "It is amazing," she said quietly, "how cruel your earnesty can be at times, Qi."

"I'm sorry, Meizhen," Ling Qi said, guilt creeping into her tone. "I just... I want to know."

"Nothing would stop me from visiting you in Cai Renxiang's domain," Meizhen pointed out. "Given my relationship with her, it is even fairly likely that I may argue to receive assignment to the Duchess' court as a liaison."

Ling Qi fidgeted. She hadn't really considered that. "That's not the point though."

"It isn't," Bai Meizhen acknowledged. "You foolish, reckless, greedy girl." The insults had no heat in them.

"I'm sorry," Ling Qi apologized carefully, although she wasn't quite sure what it was she was doing it for.

"You are not sorry," Meizhen said clearly, meeting her eyes once more. "Please do not condescend to me so." She let out a frustrated breath. "I do not understand you. You rejected me." Emotion strained her voice.

"Meizhen-" Ling Qi began.

"Let me finish, Qi," she reproached, her voice cracking like a whip. "You rejected me. Completely. Yet you persist in approaching me - in remaining intimate with me." Meizhen's voice trembled slightly. "Friends are not as close as we are. Friends do not reject a position as a province heir's right hand merely to 'stay together'. So tell me, Qi, why do you do this?"

Ling Qi's shoulders slumped. She hadn't meant to pick at her friend's wounds. On some level, she knew the other girl was still hurt, exacerbated by their close proximity, but Meizhen showed so little, it was hard to remember at times.

"You were my first friend too, you know?" she said, looking away, not ready to meet the other girl's eyes. "Before I came here... I was nothing."

Meizhen didn't say a word, simply letting her continue. After a beat of silence, she did.

"You know how badly educated I was? Even for a commoner?" she asked rhetorically. "That's because I was a street kid. I was a pathetic, petty thief, and I could never stop watching my back."

"I suspected," Meizhen admitted, "given your proclivities."

Ling Qi let out a sharp bark of a laugh. "Then I came here and met you. You were terrifying, but you were lonely too. And you helped me again and again, even though I couldn't offer you anything. During Elder Zhou's test, I decided that I didn't want to be the kind of person who would spit on that anymore."

Meizhen's gaze dropped to her lap. "I still do not understand."

Ling Qi squeezed her eyes shut. "My mom was a whore, you know? I guess maybe you could call her a courtesan, if you wanted to be polite. The place she worked for was pretty fancy. I don't want to talk about that, but... I guess, I don't really have an idea of how people are supposed to relate to each other and where the line between friends and... other stuff is, beyond the obvious."

"I see." Meizhen didn't look up.

"I also... I don't think of girls that way," Ling Qi continued uncomfortably, rubbing her arm nervously. "At least as far as I can tell."

An awkward, lingering silence fell between the two. "Should I defeat Sun Liling publically during the tournament at the end of the year, I believe Grandfather would be willing to grant me a favor if I request it," the pale girl finally said, plucking at the hem of her sleeve. "To that end, I could take you as my official handmaiden, rather than selecting one from among the Xiao clan, as is traditional for the White Serpent caste of the Bai."

Ling Qi perked up. "That doesn't seem too-"

Bai Meizhen shook her head. "Understand, Ling Qi, that the Bai do not countenance weakness. My... feelings for you are a large one. I do not doubt that my cousins would make things incredibly difficult for you, and even making the request would undermine my own position. You would suffer for accepting such an offer. Whatever you might feel, you would come to resent me, and I, you, assuming you survive the internal politics of my clan." She clutched her sleeve tightly. "Please. Accept Cai Renxiang's offer - or even that of the Gu Clan, or stay in the Sect. It would be better. For both of us."

If Meizhen was so certain, it was probably a bad idea. Still, Meizhen's assessment rankled her. Surely she could handle some backstabbing Bai cousins.

... She wished that she could believe that.

# **Chapter 134 - News**

Ling Qi,

It seems you have grown a great deal. I can easily recall the days when you had no eyes for anything outside your obsession of the day. Your Sect has done what I never could - or perhaps it was the time in between? I apologize if my words seem terse, but you did request that I be candid.

Biyu and I are well. I did not lie; your gifts are enough for us to live in comfort, even allow the occasional luxury. However, things are rarely so simple in Tonghou. I suppose you can imagine that I did not come to my position at the brothel of my own will. I would not burden you with the details in a letter, but suffice to say, your old mother has few friends.

My previous occupation was the only one which would accept me, despite, if I may be so prideful as to say, my passable skills in some fields. That is an old complaint though, and not one which bears revisiting. It does relate, however, to current troubles. A number of creditors have begun to darken my doorstep of late, speaking of debts unpaid. While I will not say that I never borrowed, I am quite certain that it was never so much.

You recall my efforts to teach you your numbers, I am sure, albeit perhaps less than fondly. I am not so lax as to make so many errors. I still hesitate to say this, as some small pride remains to me, but it would be helpful if the Ministry of Law could be made to bear an interest in a poor old woman, if only for a short time.

It seems I am in the habit of using many words to say little, despite your admonishment. I, too, look forward to speaking with you face-to-face once more, my daughter. As you have said, certain matters are best left to such a meeting.

Let us speak no more of that for the moment. I am glad that studies (?) are going so well and that you are making some good connections. You were always such a flighty girl when you were younger,. I worried you would have trouble tying yourself to others. However, the young lady you mentioned by name... The characters you wrote were not in error? No other clan dares use that character.

Finding out that my daughter found herself in 'difficulties' with a member of the Bai is not good for my heart, Ling Qi, but I suppose the rest of your words reduce that worry. The two of you are still friends then? I hope that you remain careful not to cause offense.

As to your request, I am, of course, willing to share my humble attempts at composition. You are likely better than I by now, but it gladdens my heart that I may be of some help to you.

Ling Qi smiled slightly as she folded down the front page of the letter, revealing the first page of the rest of the sheaf. Musical notation in her mother's neat hand filled the revealed page, and carefully formatted notes hugging the margins of the page explained her mother's thoughts on the composition.

"Can we get started again?"

Ling Qi looked up from her letter to see Ma Lei looking at her expectantly, bouncing on her heels. She had decided to get a feel for their abilities, and to that end, she had come out to a training field to spar with them. They had just been getting started when the letter arrived.

"Lei, be patient," her sister chided, peering at Ling Qi worriedly. "Let Miss Ling finish reading her letter."

"No, no, it's fine," Ling Qi said. "I brought you here for a reason. I can practice my mother's compositions later." She dismissed the packet of papers into her ring and stood up from the bench. She was feeling pretty happy with her mother's gift. Even if her mother was having trouble and being evasive about some matters, her mother had shared something personal with her.

"Oh, is your mother an entertainer?" Ma Jun asked curiously, fingering the strings of the small zither cradled in her hands.

"... Something like that." Ling Qi gave a small cough. "Ah, how about you two? What does your family do?" The Ma sisters didn't come across as nobles to her; she doubted they'd be so cheerful about having to trail around behind her all day if they were.

"Dad is a potter," Ma Lei replied with a shrug. "He makes fancy vases and stuff."

"Father is a popular artisan in our hometown," Ma Jun replied more demurely, shooting her sister a chiding look. "And he worked very hard to send us here."

Ma Lei grimaced at her sister's look. "C'mon, sis, you know I'm not being disrespectful."

"You still need to consider our position, Lei," Ma Jun stressed before turning back to Ling Qi. "My apologies, Miss. We should not squabble in front of you."

They were better off than her, but who wasn't? Still, if their father had 'sent' them here, that implied wealth over what a mortal could usually access. She supposed that the Ma family must be 'common' cultivators, like the people in town who were three times her age but still first realm.

"It's fine," Ling Qi said after an awkward beat, dismissing the apology.

It was bizarre to think of people whose status was so high above her a year ago as 'common'. Even a first realm physician or artisan was highly sought after among mortals. Ling Qi briefly wondered how many people from who had troubled her when she was a thief would void their bowels if she gave them a glare now. Maybe she could give Meizhen a tour?

... Well, that would be childish, and the Ma sisters were waiting on her. She dismissed the tangent her thoughts had gone on. "In any case, I thought it would be good to get to know your fighting style, so we can work together better if Sun Liling's raiders decide to hit us."

The crimson princess wasn't taking her loss lying down. They were hitting Cai Renxiang's enforcer patrols, striking from stealth with overwhelming force and leaving Cai's people stripped and humiliated.

"We won't let you down, Miss," Ma Lei said cheerfully. "Bring it on!"

The confidence was good at least. "Since you two are supposed to be bodyguards, I figured the two of you could defend yourselves from me and show me what you can do."

Ma Jun looked concerned. "If you think that is for the best," she said nervously. "I hope that we can meet your expectations."

"Sounds great!" Her more boyish sister spoke right over her. "Fighting someone tough without having to lose my stuff will be nice."

"This is why I do not allow you to carry our money any more," Ma Jun sighed. Her sister either didn't hear her or ignored her words.

Ling Qi glanced between the two, amused. "... Right. For our first bout, I'll let you two have a ten count to set up before I attack." She wouldn't break out Forgotten Vale Melody yet since most people who would attack the three of them were likely to be physical types. She backed up until there was a good twenty meters between her and the Ma sisters and then gave them a nod. "Let's start."

Ma Jun bit her lip but nodded, and Ling Qi watched and listened curiously as the girl began to pluck at the strings of her instrument, beginning a soft, slow melody. The air gained a feeling of solidity and weight as natural wind qi was displaced by heavy earth qi. The bells twined in Ma Jun's hair chimed, and her music grew louder, the qi pouring from her zither gaining greater potency.

Ma Lei grinned and fell into a combat crouch. A solid, heavy square shield made of fired clay appeared in her right hand, and an iron mace appeared in her left. The ring on her right hand glimmered as well, and clay burst forth, slithering up her arm to form a heavy looking vambrace, seemingly in counterweight to her shield. It then began to spread further, making the beginnings of a breastplate, but...

The ten count was over. Ling Qi moved. She crossed the distance between them in a flash. There was resistance as she closed in - her limbs felt heavy, and her feet seemed to be slogging through thick mud - but she adjusted quickly. Ma Jun's eyes widened as Ling Qi lashed out with a knife hand aimed at the girl's throat.

Ling Qi was surprised when she found herself having to abort the attack as Ma Lei's shield appeared in front of her. Her fingers had only barely brushed the clay of the shield before the curved surface erupted in grasping, muddy tendrils and spikes of baked clay, forcing her back a step.

Ma Lei was now standing where Ma Jun had been, her brow furrowed in concentration as the tempo of Ma Jun's melody grew more energetic. Some kind of switching technique?

Ling Qi flowed right into her next attack despite her musings. Steam rose from her skin as she fell into the movements of Argent Current. She drove Ma Lei back with a heavy flurry of attacks that had the girl desperately blocking and playing defense, unable to retaliate as her qi began to drain under the assault. Cracks started appearing in her clay armor.

Ling Qi felt the moment that changed. Vitality suddenly flowed into the other girl, repairing her armor even as she took one of Ling Qi's strikes head on and used the opening to swing the heavy head of her mace toward Ling Qi's head. It wasn't fast enough to hit her, but it did disrupt her pattern. The breeze that ruffled her hair spoke more of a boulder than a fist-sized lump of metal swinging past her.

Ling Qi dissolved, shooting into the shadow of a training bench at the edge of the field. Time to see how they dealt with harassment.

As she emerged from the shadows, her bow appeared in her hands, and she let loose three shots before the Ma sisters could even spot her. Ma Jun cried out as three blunted training arrows struck her in the back, causing her to stumble, her song faltering. Ma Lei moved with admirable quickness to prevent her follow-up shots, but once Ling Qi really started to move, the girl couldn't keep up with her, even with her sister scrambling back to her feet to resume support.

For the next several minutes she continued to snipe and harass, using the spar to practice with her bow, she drove the two sisters from one end of the training ground to the other. Until at last Ma Lei panicked and pulled up a fully enclosing dome of earth to give them time to breath.

It ended with the two collapsed on the ground, sweaty and depleted of qi, while Ling Qi simply took a Wellspring Pill to top herself off as she strolled over from the edge of the field.

"Your endurance is pretty good," Ling Qi complimented. You were supposed to do that in this kind of situation, right?

"That's my job," Ma Lei panted, pushing herself up onto her knees. Her clothes were covered in bits of clay, and Ling Qi suspected that the girl was bruised from her arrows. "I take a pounding and keep on going."

Her sister muttered something that sounded distinctly unkind to Ling Qi's ear, despite being little more than a garbled mumble. "T-thank you for your instruction," Ma Jun managed as she too pushed herself off the ground with shaky limbs. "Do you… have any suggestions… for improvement?"

Ling Qi scratched her cheek, glancing away as the Ma sisters stood and comported themselves. "You two are kinda slow and immobile. It's fine, I guess, given your current job. But one of you should probably have some kind of answer for ranged attacks," she pointed out. "Um, oh, that big dome of earth you pulled up at the end was good!" Praise was important too. "It took three solid shots to break through that."

"... That took a third of my qi," Ma Jun mumbled glumly.

"I guess we just have to work harder," Lei said cheerfully, clapping her slimmer sister on the back. "I'll spend some points looking for a ranged counter."

Ling Qi thought the spar went fairly well. The Ma sisters were well suited for a guard and delay role. Sure, Sun Liling or Meizhen would tear through them in seconds, but that was true for most people. Maybe she should assist Gan with his plans for a counter ambush on the raiders.

### **Chapter 135 - Heiress**

It was slowly becoming a new normal for Ling Qi to no longer go around alone - at least any time she was in the open. The Ma sisters served as constants while she was down among the main parts of the Outer Sect. More and more often, she found herself trailing around in Cai Renxiang's entourage, watching the girl work.

One thing she was beginning to notice was that Cai Renxiang was almost always working. Her only breaks seemed to consist of taking tea in the early afternoon and the hour or so she spent with Meizhen every other day. Somehow, that still annoyed her, but Ling Qi had to grow past that. Meizhen was right; Ling Qi wasn't being fair to her. She couldn't - shouldn't - try to keep her friend all to herself. That would be selfish, not to mention kind of weird and clingy.

Although Ling Qi might spend more time cultivating, Cai Renxiang was even more of a 'workaholic', as Su Ling might say, than she was. She just spent a lot of time on stuff that seemed petty and pointless to Ling Qi. Managing people the way Cai did would probably drive Ling Qi to distraction.

It was really difficult to get a read on Cai Renxiang. The face Cai presented to the world simply didn't slip. There were no gaps, no hesitation, no hints of falsehood. Even Ling Qi was beginning to doubt that the girl was not exactly what she presented herself as: a diligent, straightforward, and mostly fair administrator.

While Cai Renxiang was much better at etiquette and social manipulation than Ling Qi, Cai was ultimately about as blunt and subtle as a sledgehammer. Ling Qi struggled to continue telling herself that Cai was anything less than sincere in her stated intentions toward her. When Cai made definitive statements, it seemed like she meant them.

As she shared tea with Cai one day, Ling Qi found herself considering taking the initiative in conversation with the girl. The times she found herself partaking in tea with the girl were usually quiet with conversation limited to polite inquiries into each other's cultivation. Ling Qi had a feeling that this was deliberate on Cai's part. Cai Renxiang probably thought Ling Qi would take badly to perceived pushiness and was choosing to be passive to let her grow comfortable at her own pace.

... It rankled a little that it was working.

"Why do you do so much yourself?" Ling Qi asked, swirling the liquid in her cup. Today's tea was white, almost like milk; it had a pleasingly sweet flavor. "I feel like you could delegate a lot of what I see you do."

Cai Renxiang considered the question as she drank from her cup. The eyes half-closed expression the girl had when tasting her tea was the closest Ling Qi had seen her to being relaxed. "I suppose I find it useful to experience such direct leadership while I can. As my responsibilities grow, delegation will, as you say, become an increasing necessity."

"So you enjoy listening to people complain all day?" Ling Qi winced at the sarcasm that had slipped out. "Er... My apologies. That was rude."

"It was. Just a little," Cai Renxiang stated, and if Ling Qi didn't know better, she would have thought she was being teased. Cai inclined her head slightly, the light behind her glimmering and casting her shadow across the table. "One who has not the patience for the base will find themselves unable to reach the peak."

Ling Qi placed her cup on the table with a faint clink, drumming her fingers on the polished stone tabletop. "Well, I gue - suppose you take your lessons on the lower tiers of leadership seriously. Does it really matter though? At the top, you can just command whatever you want, and it'll happen."

"Within limits, that is true," Cai Renxiang acknowledged. "The natural hierarchy of strength is ultimately immutable, but many things slip through the cracks in such a view. Details, though small, can add up to greater turmoil and lessened prosperity. Even the mightiest ruler is ultimately fleeting. Harmony and order must be tended to carefully, or they will crumble the moment that one's gaze turns from them." Cai paused to allow the girl attending them to pour her another cup before continuing. "I must understand the tasks at each level in order to know the qualities I must seek in my subordinates and the adjustments to organizational structure that are needed."

They were retreading old ground. "What I'm trying to ask, I think, is what you get from it," Ling Qi said slowly. "Let's say you're right - and I'm not saying you are not - and things are overall better if everyone acts in their place, fulfilling their duties." She felt a little dubious about the feasibility of that idea. Surely, a great number of people would chafe badly at that. "Why does that matter to you? I'm pretty sure that all this little stuff doesn't really touch the people at the top." Everyone had personal reasons for their goals. People just weren't completely selfless, and the fact that she couldn't work out Cai's reason was part of what bothered her about the other girl.

Cai Renxiang placed her cup on the table, regarding Ling Qi coldly. Ling Qi worried that she might have overstepped her bounds as the silence stretched on. Slowly, Cai Renxiang's expression changed, her intense stare dipping down to the tabletop as she laced her fingers together. The fabric of her gown rippled and shimmered under the light of her aura.

"Although we might be called 'Immortals', we are anything but," Cai stated with conviction, looking back up to lock her eyes with Ling Qi's own. "One should seek to have works which endure beyond death or ascension. How many geniuses have had their work swept away in a mere few centuries or less, their great work forgotten the moment a new generation arrives to supplant them?"

"And you think the order you want to build would endure better?" Ling Qi asked, cocking her head curiously. That seemed almost foolishly idealistic.

"It is possible," Cai Renxiang replied. "The Empire in which we live is testament to that. Even..." The heiress paused, her gaze briefly flickering to the attendant. "Even if the players change, the framework has endured."

"That's a pretty lofty ambition," Ling Qi said, hiding her frown. That was the first hint of uncertainty she had seen from Cai, but she couldn't quite work out what it meant. "I suppose this practice must be pretty frustrating, if that is what you want."

"No artisan produces their masterwork on the first attempt," Cai Renxiang said with a touch of a smile. "But yes, it is somewhat frustrating to know that the nature of the Sect means that my efforts here will inevitably collapse."

Ling Qi hummed thoughtfully. "Do you mind if I ask you what you know about the Ministry of Law?" she asked, changing the subject. Cai's views on order still twinged at something in her, but she didn't have the articulation to argue for it.

The heiress' brows furrowed. "They are arbitrators, judges, and scribes who handle legal functions below the notice of lords. It is typical for most rulers to retain a number of Ministry advisors to aid them in properly drafting new laws and decrees. It is an important function, and they serve as a check on the Ministry of Commerce due to their authority over contracts," Cai Renxiang recited. "They also serve to ensure that provincial law does not conflict with Imperial law. They also comb the records to ensure that contradictions between older and newer laws are brought to the attention of relevant lords, so that the lords may decide which is to remain valid."

Ling Qi blinked. She had caught and understood most of that, but the answer was rather more thorough than she had been expecting. That explained her mother's request. "If I needed to make a request of the Ministry, how would I go about doing that?"

"I could, of course, contact the Ministry for you and ensure that your issue is represented," Cai Renxiang said, peering at her over the lip of her cup. "But that is not what you ask, is it?"

"I really should learn this stuff. It's not good for me to just leave it to others," she said sheepishly. It really wasn't. After spending time around the heiress, it was beginning to dawn on her what responsibilities she was going to have as a lord in the future. "I wouldn't complain if you put a word in to make sure my request is taken seriously though. I haven't quite broken through to the third realm yet."

Cai Renxiang nodded approvingly, the halo of light behind her head gleaming. "I will make time to tutor you on legal matters. I believe you are active at night?" Ling Qi nodded in response. "May I ask what the issue is? I assume it is a family matter."

Ling Qi's instinctive reaction was to clam up, but if Cai Renxiang wanted to find out, she would. And hiding the problem would only hinder her efforts to help her mother. "My Mother is being harassed by false creditors. I'm not sure why, but I'd like to help her if I can."

"I see," Cai Renxiang said, looking unhappy. She always did when the subject of corruption came up. "The Sect's protection would not extend that far. Please give me two days to make arrangements."

Ling Qi nodded happily, glad that this new matter could be taken care of so easily. Now it was time to speak of Yan Renshu, which was the original purpose of the meeting. Yan's sabotage had stopped, but she was sure that was only because of the heat brought down on him by Cai's faction.

He had chosen to not take his defeat and leave her in peace, Ling Qi would just have to personally see that he understood the mistake he had made in pursuing his vendetta against her.

#### Chapter 136 - Law

"ORA!" A keg-sized fist crashed against stone, and the stone lost. The cliff face lit up like a festival lantern, the carved characters of a hideously complex array of formations characters appearing under the evening sun.

"ORRAA!!" A second fist crashed down, and the rock face cratered under the steel spikes which adorned its knuckles. Thunder boomed, flames erupted, and lightning sparked up the hulking figure's powerful arms. Emerald qi textured like bark barely held up under the formation's assault.

"OOOOORRRRAAAAA!!" Gan Guangli roared, and this time, stone shattered beneath his punch and through into the chamber beyond. Strings of chiseled characters cracked and sputtered, and the air seemed to shudder. A vile miasma of toxic violet qi seeped out from the broken rock.

Beside her, Cai Renxiang gestured sharply, and the heiress' eyes flared with colorless radiance. Light pulsed out from her. On the seams of Gan Guangli's armor, the light lingered, the radiant tracery of Cai Renxiang's Empyreal Warrior technique layering itself over the bark-like qi of Ling Qi's Hundred Ring Armament and Deepwood Vitality techniques.

Ling Qi straightened up as Cai's potent light qi washed over her as well. The light gleamed in the folds of her gown like liquid starlight, and the toxic qi that had been eating away at her mist vanished like morning dew before it. Ling Qi began the next bar of her Forgotten Vale Melody, calling on her phantoms to fill the mist seeping through the broken doorway and rubble at Gan Guangli's feet.

Ling Qi had to admit, there was something satisfying about a direct assault. She was glad that Cai Renxiang had convinced her, earlier this day.

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"You've really tracked him down?" Ling Qi asked dubiously, giving the heiress a surprised look.

"Fu Xiang tracked him," Cai Renxiang corrected. "The damage inflicted upon his infrastructure by your actions certainly contributed as well."

"I suppose so," Ling Qi said slowly. Still, it was hard to believe. Somehow, she had expected this to take much longer.

It was Cai Renxiang's turn to regard her dubiously. "Ling Qi, are you unaware of the sheer damage you inflicted upon Sect Brother Yan? The majority of his boltholes and workshops have been destroyed, and the release of those false contracts resulted in a considerable number of his victims destroying or sabotaging projects. My own efforts to clean matters up and Princess Sun's poaching would have exacerbated the damage to Yan Renshu. There are limits to the resources of an Outer Sect disciple."

"Limits to the resources of one without backing at least," Ling Qi mused.

The other girl frowned. "Even then, most families will not be willing to lose face by involving serious assets in the squabbles of children. The calculus may change somewhat in the tournament, as it is a public event, but even then, there are limits. Do you imagine that my own budget is unlimited?"

Ling Qi's silence was her answer.

The heiress closed her eyes briefly. "... It is not."

Unlimited was a relative thing, Ling Qi thought, but she kept her mouth shut. "So, what did you find?"

"We were able to find the one who had delivered the toxin and from there, Fu Xiang traced it to its origin." Ling Qi's hands tightened in her lap at the mention of the attempt to poison Zhengui, but she didn't care about patsies. She wanted to punish the one ultimately responsible. "The infrastructure required to make such a thing indicates a concentration of resources that I doubt one in his position would be willing to surrender or be able to move unnoticed."

"So he won't just drop it and run. Where is it? I'll sneak in again and..." Ling Qi began.

Cai Renxiang held up a hand. "I do not believe a solitary operation is in your best interests. He will be expecting such a tactic given your... proclivities."

Ling Qi grimaced, remembering her mistake at Sun Liling's fort. She had succeeded against Yan Renshu the first time, but that had been close as well. "What do you intend then?"

"We will assault the location and utterly crush any resistance," the heiress said calmly, sipping from her cup. "Your assistance in this matter would be greatly appreciated."

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Ling Qi's assistance took the form of moving ahead of the group to sniff out and disable the various alarm formations and talismans planted around the cleft valley where the workshop was located and placing the totems that would make the use of escape talismans more difficult. With Fu Xiang acting as the eyes and the hands, their approach was screened quite effectively.

In addition to Gan Guangli and Cai Renxiang, Xuan Shi had volunteered to help as well, acting as a reserve along with a handpicked group of Gan's enforcers. Bai Meizhen was back on the mountain in the residential area, 'waving the flag', so to speak, to make sure Sun Liling and her band didn't get any ideas.

"Ho, villain! Your schemes have come to naught! Present yourself and surrender!" Gan Guangli bellowed as he stepped through the broken doorway. His oversized frame had to shrink back to something approximating human height to manage it.

"Shall we?" Cai Renxiang asked calmly, taking a step to follow. Her unsheathed saber rested against her shoulder as she strode down the tunnel, and the glow of light around her cast strange shadows in Ling Qi's mist.

Ling stared at the smoking ruin where Yan Renshu's elaborate, likely expensive security formations and door lay in sparking pebbles strewn across the ground. All the work Yan Renshu had put into it, all the preparation in the world... and all of it amounted to nothing in the face of a ducal scion on the warpath.

Ling Qi followed and sank into the shadow of the tunnel, trailing along behind the other two and bringing the cloying Mist of the Vale and its hungry phantoms with her.

The noise in the tunnel nearly drowned out her melody. Every step Gan Guangli took was rocked by traps. Gouts of flame, hissing streams of acid, crackling lightning, and other, more esoteric effects went off one after another, battering the bulwark of his oversized armored form. Between his own armor and formidable defense, the benefits of Ling Qi's Thousand Ring's Fortress art, and the techniques being layered over him by steady pulses of light from the Cai heiress, he weathered it all unharmed.

But it wasn't only traps that met their advance. Secret panels and carved chutes opened, disgorging one faceless mannequin and puppet after another, some wood, some clay, and some metal. Some had the birdlike masks of the one she had seen in the woods. They all swarmed out to halt their party's progress.

Her phantoms swarmed them in turn, yowling black shapes, the formless predators of a child's nightmare, slashed at silent puppets with blood red claws. The eerie bars of her Melody rose, thickening the mist into a cloying blanket that settled over one foe after the next, draining the qi from the glowing stones that powered their motion and bolstering Ling Qi's own reserves.

The puppets' claws skittered at Gan's armor, and his armored fists smashed limbs and bodies into broken fragments. Gan Guangli shouted one challenge after another as he stomped forward, crushing puppet limbs and bludgeoning new foes with the broken remnants of others.

Behind him, Cai Renxiang walked unhindered, and on those rare occasions where a puppet lunged for her, her saber flashed, an arc of silver in the dark, and it would fall to the floor in pieces.

As they turned down a wide hall, they saw metal gate after metal gate slam down from the ceiling, a dozen in all. At the far end, a veritable regiment of Yan Renshu's puppet constructs was gathering.

"Coward!" Gan Guangli roared, reaching for the bars of the first. "No more tricks!"

"Enough," Cai Renxiang cut him off with a word and a sharp gesture. "Step aside, Guangli. We are picking up the pace."

She leveled the end of her saber as Gan stepped hastily to the side, and a bead of light bloomed at the tip. It was tiny, barely the size of a marble. It gleamed and pulsated for a fraction of a second. Merged with the shadows as she was, Ling Qi shuddered at the sheer quantity of qi gathering there.

Then the silk of Cai's gown rippled, the wings of the butterfly sewn across her chest moved, and that tremendous qi doubled in density. The tiny marble bloomed into a star before erupting forward, a solid bar of light as wide and tall as a man. Metal shrieked and stone sizzled, and when the light faded, the gates were gone, the puppets were gone, everything was gone. Only dripping molten stubs hanging from the ceiling and ashen outlines on the far wall remained.

"Gan Guangli, full charge. Ling Qi, offensive support," the heiress commanded crisply, and Ling Qi found herself obeying almost without thinking. The steaming qi of Argent Current rose in her channels and the forearms of Gan's gauntlets began to glow red hot as he took off down the ruined hall, the ground trembling under his footfalls.

Ling Qi ghosted behind his vanguard, and her qi flexed as she replaced her flute with her bow. The mist remained, carried on echoes as she had learned from Zeqing. In moments, they had reached the end of the hallway and burst through the charred and molten frame where a door had once stood. The

workshop beyond was in disarray, a straight line of obliteration cutting worktables and other furniture in half. A figure spun to face them, tall and whip-thin with poisonous green eyes.

"Have at you!" Gan bellowed as he charged, his fists raised. The figure's handsome face twisted into a furious snarl as rotten, black and violet mist sprang forth from every fold of his robes, eating away at stone and hissing on Gan Guangli's armor. Ling Qi felt her Deepwood Vitality technique shatter almost immediately as a worm as thick as an arm shot from the figure's sleeve, maw agape, and struck Gan Guangli head on in the helm. It let out a hideous screech before detonating violently.

Gan Guangli's fists came down in a hammerstrike, and there was an echoing crack as they halted in midair, stopped by the figure's raised arms. The stone beneath the figure's feet cracked, but his arms did not waver.

"You..." he hissed.

But whatever else the figure was going to say was lost as Ling Qi melted out of his shadow, sheets of lightning crackling from the tip of her arrow, and fired point blank into the small of his back. The workshop rocked with the detonation. But she felt no satisfaction.

"Gan, this isn't the real Yan Renshu!" she yelled as she flew back on her gown's shadowy wings. She had seen the real one, crippled, scarred, and short. "It's another-"

Ling Qi gagged on the sudden, concentrated burst of horrid purple qi. So dense as to be liquid rather than mist, it struck her like a river current and only her and Cai's defensive techniques protected her from the flesh-eating, hungry qi as she smashed into the wall.

Yan Renshu's false self stood in the clearing smoke, his robe bearing a ragged hole where her arrow had struck and the gleam of metal showing through the scorch mark on his skin. A staff of dark red wood capped with silver spun in his hands, fending off Gan Guangli's loud assault. The end of his staff lashed out, striking the taller boy in the stomach, and Gan folded in half, skidding back a meter. "Just walking right into my sanctum, wrecking everything without a care in the world. You dare-!"

"I do." The curved upward slash of Cai Renxiang's saber struck the Yan puppet's raised staff with the force of a falling mountain. The puppet struck the ceiling and skipped, the sheer momentum of the blow dragging it along the ceiling before gravity once again took hold. "It seems that this is not even your final hole. I must compliment you. That is a masterful construct."

Ling Qi pried herself from the wall and Gan Guangli straightened up as the puppet landed in a crouch, clutching the two broken ends of its staff in its hands. Its robes had been torn ragged, and its flesh was not much better. A portion of the puppet's face was gone, revealing a complex mass of moving gears and panels.

"I do not need compliments from the likes of *you*," the thing's damaged, distorted voice spat out. The thing shot Ling Qi a look of utter loathing as well. "A jumped up brat succeeding on her Mother's..."

Cai Renxiang's saber caught him in midword, shattering one of the remaining halves of his staff and launching him back toward Guangli. "I did not give you permission to monologue. Surrender, and I will not destroy your creation."

Like that, the spell was broken. Gan slammed his fists together with a ringing cry of metal, and Ling Qi pulled back another arrow. The puppet let out a furious, wordless cry, its flesh splitting and limbs bending oddly as it landed in a crouch more akin to a skittering insect than a man. Wet, oily worms fell from it'd damaged robes, amassing in a growing pool on the floor.

It jolted to the right, dodging her first shot, more of its skin tearing off in the spray of fragmented stone, and leapt up and over Gan's charge, the worms swarmed up the larger boy's legs writhing and biting, armor sizzling under their acrid exrections and Ling Qi spun out of the way of a jet of acidic liquid that hissed and curdled the air where she had just been.

Then Cai Renxiang's blade hammered it down, the heiress crossing the room with what seemed like a single elegant step. The puppet landed in a shower of sparks and broken gears among the worms, trying to rise on twitching limbs.

Three arrows struck it in the face in a shower of lightning. A massive boot stamped down, pinning it to the floor.

And above, colorless light bloomed on the end of a saber.

### **Chapter 137 - Reconciliation**

Yan Renshu was still at large, his location unknown. But they had ruined him.

The puppet they had destroyed was, in Fu Xiang and Cai Renxiang's assessment, a masterwork, the sort of project that a cultivator of Yan Renshu's status must have been working on for years. Along with everything else they had destroyed at his workshop and the losses he had already accrued, even years of building up in the Outer Sect could not have given him the resources to recover from these losses.

She was still going to find him, but Ling Qi could rest a little easier for now. But she wasn't done. Yan Renshu wasn't her only enemy, and with her share of the loot taken from Yan Renshu's base, she finally had the funds to outfit herself with some emergency tools.

Finding a trustworthy outfitter was a little troublesome. Ling Qi was, in her opinion, justifiably concerned about sabotage. Su Ling had come to her aid there by giving her the name of a trader she thought trustworthy. So Ling Qi had asked her to pass on a message about what she was looking for. She didn't want to do her shopping openly this time. Hopefully, her friend's contact would come through on her request.

The shop's name didn't fill her with confidence though. Fatty Hao's Talisman Banquet sounded like the name of a rigged festival stall.

"I've compiled only the best items for your eyes, Miss Ling. I assure you of that." The smiling young man behind the counter had an easy grin on his pudgy face.

She trusted Su Ling's recommendation. That girl did not trust easily, and Ling Qi could recognize that the grudging compliments the rough girl had given as the equivalent to high praise from anyone else. All the same, it was a little hard to take someone who used the moniker "Fatty" seriously. It wasn't inaccurate - the boy did carry a fair bit of extra weight, and his soft, round features gave him a non-threatening air - but it made her wonder at his self image if he could reach early silver and still look like that.

"... If that is the case, why do I just have a list of prices for half the things I asked for? I don't want to spend this much without seeing the product."

Fatty Hao, overall boss of several small shops in the market area, gave a serious nod. "As much as it pains me to say, a list is the best I can do. Those items are beyond the skills of an Outer Sect disciple," he explained cheerfully, leaning on the counter in front of her. "Or at least what they're willing to sell. Escape Talismans are no cheap thing to acquire!"

Escape Talismans were her primary concern. Little breakable arrays that could rapidly transport a cultivator out of danger, they were popular with the children of nobility for obvious reasons. Ling Qi frowned at the list. The cheapest talisman on there was three hundred red stones. At only one use and with a range limit of half a kilometer, it seemed to cost way too much. "How am I supposed to know this is legitimate if I can't even see them first?"

He laughed. "Miss Ling, your mistrust wounds me. Do you really think I would cheat you when you are so high in the esteem of so many very frightening people? Why, a word from Lady Cai, and everything my family has built would be gone in an instant!" He seemed surprisingly sanguine about that.

As much as those prices pained her, her own knowledge of formations told her that they probably weren't undue. Transportation formations were hideously complex and required many spirit stones to power, even when placed in a fixed location. Anything meant to transport any significant number of people more than a few kilometers was beyond any but the wealthiest or most skilled people. Something that could do the same while being portable was obviously even more expensive, even if it was limited to one person

"I suppose that's fine, if it can be delivered quickly," Ling Qi allowed after consideration.

"No more than a few days from your order, Miss Ling," the rotund boy replied. "Now, in regard to your other requests, I've brought some examples of the work a few of my partners have done. Warding against clairvoyance techniques is an unfortunately common request..."

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With her shopping squared away, Ling Qi was left with problems that could not be shot, exploded, bought or punched. The matter of her tutoring with the spirit Zeqing weighed on her. Ling Qi had, in the wake of their last conversation, researched the Sect's relations with the various powerful spirits that resided on or near the Outer Sect mountain. In exchange for being allowed to live freely in Sect territory, spirits were expected to follow a number of rules. The big ones seemed to be that they were not allowed to do harm to mortals or knowingly allow their get to do so. They were also not allowed to interfere in Sect activities nor to go out of their way to harm disciples out of malice.

Ling Qi suspected that helping her against Sun Liling edged up against the second rule. After all, it had been a 'duel'. The last rule stuck out to her as well. The malice limitation on the rule seemed like it could very easily be circumvented.

... Like, say, a sad, stupid girl saying that she wished a spirit of dark hunger and possessiveness was her mother. Ling Qi had shivered when she read up on the possible results of that. Being spirited away wasn't just a story told to scare children. She had been *very* lucky that Zeqing had restrained herself since Ling Qi had basically just shoved her head into the proverbial bear's mouth.

Some traitorous part of her wondered what it would have been like. Or perhaps she should have listened to the voices of the spirits on the wind when she was a child and saved herself a lot of pain.

Ling Qi shoved those thoughts into the deepest hole she could imagine as she climbed the mountain. Ling Qi had left the Ma sisters behind in favor of making the climb in stealth. She wouldn't be so foolish as to move about openly while alone again. Sun Liling's remaining forces had begun to strike out with a vengeance in the last couple days.

Using her arts and her gown, she wove a trail that would be impossible for anyone ground-bound to follow and worked her way up the mountain. It doubled the travel time, but as she arrived at the pool unmolested, she supposed that it was worth it.

She could already hear Zeqing playing as she approached the ravine, a soft, mournful tune that nonetheless cut through the biting, icy winds of the upper peak as if the spirit was playing right next to her. The song stopped as she arrived to find the spirit patiently waiting for her, hovering above the surface of the pool.

Ling Qi bowed low, hands together in front of her. "Lady Zeqing, please allow me to apologize again for abusing your hospitality."

Zeqings looked down on her silently with blank white eyes, but after a moment, she made a dismissive gesture with her billowing empty sleeve. "I accept your apology in the sincere spirit it was given," she said simply. "Speak no more of it, and let the matter rest."

Ling Qi relaxed. It seemed that Zeqing was fully willing to dismiss any insult she may have offered. She was glad that things could go back to normal between them. Straightening up, she gave the spirit a lopsided grin. "Will do. Would you mind if I tried some new songs today? I received some compositions that I would like to practice."

"That seems reasonable," Zeqing agreed, floating down from above the pool toward the stone 'bench' they used. "I admit, in recent decades, I have perhaps allowed my pursuit of the arts to stagnate. Hanyi has simply taken so much of my time."

"Children do that," Ling Qi said. "How old is Hanyi anyway?" She took a seat and expressed the pages of her mother's notes.

"I do not track the individual years as closely as a human would," Zeqing replied thoughtfully. "Some twenty or thirty winters, I think?"

So the little snowball was probably a decade her senior. That was strange to think about. She couldn't imagine how one could remain a child for so long. Then again, cold and ice qi tended to represent stasis in many qi theory interpretations. She wondered if Hanyi would still be the same brat in another hundred years. "So, what do you think of these?"

Zeqing peered over her shoulder, her chill aura cutting through Ling Qi's gown like a knife. "Hardly masterful work," she mused, reaching down to trace the lines with a clear icy finger. She breathed in, and Ling Qi shuddered as she felt the hungry void at the snow spirit's core briefly awaken. "The emotion put into the work grants it a certain base potency. Longing, despair, betrayal, and weariness… A lovely bouquet. The garnish of hope atop it all makes the combination all the more poignant."

Ling Qi's fingers tightened briefly on the pages, her lips setting into a thin line. "You make it sound like it's a fine wine," she joked weakly. "Shouldn't we be talking about the meter and rhythm?"

"I forget. Even with the insight I gave you, you still require certain crutches," Zeqing commented, leaning away and granting Ling Qi a reprieve from her chill. "You still require a few more refinements of spirit yet to truly grant your own melodies life."

Ling Qi blinked, looking over at Zeqing. "Do you mean that I could make my own art? Like the Forgotten Vale Melody?"

"In time," Zeqing replied simply. "For now, let us play. I believe we may be able to refine your work."

"It's not mine," Ling Qi reminded the spirit. "... But I suppose I can make it so." he spread the pages on the stone between them, eyeing the notes inscribed on the page, as she expressed her flute.

Her mother's music was a sad one, and as she played, she found herself feeling something like what she suspected Zeqing had, of emotion transcending the crude approximations that mortal composition could lay down. It brought back memories of lying awake in bed at night, hearing the sound of notes floating through the thin walls on those rare nights when Mother had gone to bed alone.

How long had her Mother worked on this?

# **Chapter 138 - Connections**

Improved senses were a detriment in some cases, Ling Qi thought, trying not to grimace as she walked the dirt path that wound between the fields on the outskirts of the town at the base of the mountain. The scent of the goats grazing in the rocky field to her right wasn't even the worst smell she passed so far. As bad as the city streets could be, Ling Qi had always preferred them to fields and farms.

She could still remember the first time she had stolen a chicken. The vicious little monster had clawed her arms to ribbons before she was able to wring its neck. No, she much preferred picking pockets to rustling livestock.

Yet here she was among the mundane fields around the town, heading toward the cultivator farms that were further out. The note from the tutor she had hired said that they would meet out there so Ling Qi had little choice but to walk quickly and try not to linger near recently fertilized fields.

At least the scenery got more interesting once she passed by the mortals fields. Livestock grew more exotic and colorful. Even the plants were more unique, a riot of color compared to the endless brown and green that had come before. Still, she continued south where the land began to rise in hills. Ahead of her stretched entire hillsides covered in dark green and deep red hummocks of plant life, grown in curved but orderly rows.

Tea fields, Ling Qi mused. She supposed they must need a lot of it given how popular the stuff seemed to be. She peered around as she walked, searching for her tutor. There were plenty of men and women scattered around, wide straw hats granting them shade from the sun. The vast majority were only a step into the first realm with a handful at the middle stage.

It made it rather easy to search out who she was looking for. The potent aura of a third realm cultivator stood out like a bonfire.

The young woman's attire also made her stand out. Where the other field workers wore coarse and shapeless clothing, the tutor wore a clinging, emerald green dress, plain and unembroidered with a mantle of what seemed to be living flowers worn over her shoulders. Her face was concealed by a rose colored veil, but her hair was put up into an elaborate arrangement held together by what again looked to be living flowers.

To make her presence stand out even more, she was riding sidesaddle on the back of a three-tailed red fox the size of a small horse. The fox carried her at a sedate pace through the lanes between the rows of tea plants. One hand rested on the fox's neck, but the other was held out, a faint sparkle in the air as something fell from her hands. As she drew closer, Ling Qi could feel the heavy, vital qi infusing the earth as the tutor was carried along the rows, and she imagined that she could see the plants swelling in the girl's wake, healthier and more robust.

The girl looked up as she approached, and the fox stopped. She waited patiently for Ling Qi to cover the remaining distance while observing her serenely.

Once Ling Qi had reached a polite distance, she stopped and bowed formally. "Would you be Senior Sect Sister Bian Ya?"

"I am," the girl replied, her voice light and lilting. "You would be the Junior who requested assistance then?" Bian Ya's mantle rustled as the flowers shifted of their own accord. The fox she was mounted on briefly sniffed the air as she spoke before making a low whuffing sound and turning up its snout. The gesture seemed contemptuous.

Ling Qi eyed the fox warily but bowed a little lower. "Your Junior Sister greets you, Senior Sister Bian."

"I am glad to see you are punctual. Rise and walk with me, if you would," the girl said, patting her mount on the neck. "I would like to complete my morning stroll."

Ling Qi straightened up and hurried to follow as the fox turned in the lane between the tea plants to resume their walk, falling in just behind. "May I ask what you are doing, Senior Sister?" she asked, observing the mixed flows of wood and wind leaving the girl's outstretched hand. Now that she was closer, she could see the scattering of vibrant qi was being thrown quite far, falling over plants like a light spring rain even hundreds of meters away.

"Bringing health to the fields. It is Outer Sect work, I know, but I do not find it unpleasant." The girl raised her free hand and waved, drawing Ling Qi's gaze to where she was looking. At the edge of the field, several young men struggled with a heavy totem on a sledge, dragging it uphill. It was sweaty, dirty work, Ling Qi could see. "The scenery is not unpleasant either," Bian Ya added, as if reading her thoughts. "The Inner Sect can be stuffy at times."

"Senior Sister knows best, I am sure," Ling Qi mumbled, averting her eyes and ignoring the heat rising on her cheeks. She really should be better than this by now. "I understand the use of wood qi for your task, but what are the wind flows accomplishing?"

"Does not the wind carry seeds to their destination? Conceptually, weaving the two together only makes sense if you wish to scatter the effects of your wood qi far and wide." The girl's airy tone became more serious. "The odd combination you requested was almost passed over. I am no archer, nor is wood a common element among those who are."

"I was worried about that," Ling Qi admitted, watching the girl's back and her mount's flicking tails. "Thousand Ring Fortress art has saved me several times though, and it doesn't feel right to leave it behind while I master others."

"Wood, or at least its yang aspect, is solid and dependable like that," Bian Ya agreed, turning her head to look over her shoulder. "You are from a common background?"

"I am," Ling Qi said, a bit of defiance entering her tone as she met the older disciple's gaze.

"Nothing wrong with experimenting then," she said, seemingly taking no notice. "I may not be an archer, but I do have some insights on wind to share which may be of use. That is why I chose to accept your request."

Ling Qi was glad that she had good luck with tutors so far. She hurried her pace to keep up as the girl in front of her began to speak in an idle tone, describing her insights into the elements which Ling Qi had requested tutoring for.

Unlike her previous tutor, there was no explosive training or tests of endurance. Bian Ya seemed to take a more theoretical approach, inviting Ling Qi to speak her own thoughts as they discussed the vagaries of wind and wood qi. Her tutor continued to trek across the fields as they did, occasionally pausing to chat with a group of workers. This was occasionally uncomfortable when the older girl got into a bout of playful flirtation with particularly handsome farmhands, but Ling Qi endured.

They didn't cultivate at all that first day, but Ling Qi was fine with that. She left the fields feeling as she had gained a greater understanding of the elements her arts used, and that would speed her private cultivation later.

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In the time not spent on tutoring and cultivation, Ling Qi continued to work on ensuring her safety for the rest of the year. She explored the mountain and its surroundings, learned its paths and terrain. Ling Qi focused on finding places where she could hide or escape. She mapped out ravines, crevices, and other pieces of difficult terrain where her Sable Crescent Step and its shadow walking would give her advantage.

She also, for the first time, took an interest in Cai's enforcers, learning their patrol routes and schedules with the same detail that she had learned the patterns of the various forms of security in Tonghou. For rather opposite purposes, of course. After all, the law was on her side now.

LIng Qi did not let her work on identifying escape routes get in the way of training. She continued to work with Xiulan and the others in the afternoons and Meizhen in the evenings to improve her arts and unlock further meridians. There was no repeat of her singular failure this week. With the aid of a Highsun Pill, she returned to opening her channels with ease, the excess from her cycling settling into her bones and muscles, pushing her closer to the absolute peak of second realm.

Her work on the successor to her very first art came to its conclusion as well. With mastery of the final exercises of the Zephyr's Breath, she could now create a gust of wind powerful enough to send an enemy flying far away beyond the meagre pushback of her earlier techniques. The dummy she had used to practice on ended up smashed to splinters against the mountainside. Even better, this Fleeting Strike technique could catch a whole group and force them away if she tagged them with the art's first technique, Against the Wind, beforehand.

If only her other training was so easy.

Ling Qi stifled a sigh as she turned the page of the massive tome in front of her. The book, if one could call the mammoth slab of parchment and leather that, probably weighed half as much as she did. It would take a strong mortal just to lift the hateful thing.

Perhaps that was to be expected of something titled "Unabridged History of Financial Regulation of the Modern Age." Page after page of tax codes and contract laws had been branded into her thoughts. She saw numbers and tables when her eyes were closed. This book was not merely a record of current laws. It included the evolution of those laws over the last thousand years and had page upon page of scholarly dissertation about each and every change, as well as its effects, current and projected.

"Have you completed the introduction to credit law?" her tormentor asked blithely.

Ling Qi looked up, suppressing the glower that wanted to surface, and met Cai Renxiang's steady, unshakeable gaze. The heiress was seated behind a heavy desk, working through a stack of letters and papers half the size of the monster on the table in front of Ling Qi. The brush in her hand continued its motion across the paper in front of her as she waited for Ling Qi to respond.

At first, Ling Qi had felt nervous about entering Cai's home, worried that she would give offense. That feeling had faded within a day or two. The heiress' living quarters were as rigid and regimented as the girl herself. Everything was arranged to perfection within. Ling Qi had not seen a single thing that was not actively in use out of place since coming here. Even the flower arrangements and other decorations had an angular, geometric feel to them.

"Almost," she replied grudgingly, glancing down at the precise, tiny text in the book open on the table in front of her.

Cai Renxiang observed her, the brush in her hand pausing. "Do you require assistance with a passage?"

LIng Qi rubbed the bridge of her nose as she glanced from the book to her notes, already turning into a hefty sheaf themselves. "... Not right now, no," she admitted. "I just needed to pause to absorb the information."

"You are doing well," Cai Renxiang complimented after a moment, making Ling Qi feel as if she were back at home, wanting praise and a treat for doing her sums. "You took in the essentials of filing and interacting with the Ministry bureaucracy quite quickly."

Ling Qi grimaced at the minutiae she had already memorized, forms and files and types of address. "Why is that all so complicated anyway? I thought knowing etiquette for nobility would be enough, but now there's this whole other-" Ling Qi gestured at the weighty tome, searching for a word, "- culture and language to learn!"

The other girl glanced at the tiny window of her study then set her brush down carefully. "You are not wrong." Cai Renxiang interlaced her fingers together in front of her face as she continued to observe Ling Qi. "The Ministries are a necessity of our society. While the right to rule rises from personal prowess and enlightenment, those abilities do not always lend themselves to administration."

Ling Qi glanced down at the book in front of her, which was currently discussing Emperor Yi's decrees revising the standards of record keeping for lenders and the massive upheaval that had caused as millions of debts were rendered invalid. "I can understand that. So the Ministries are there so the nobility can focus on cultivation and war?"

"That is oversimplifying things somewhat," Cai Renxiang said, a touch of dryness to her tone. "They also serve as an honorable occupation and a place to slowly seek advancement among the lower class of cultivators, as well as a place for the less martially inclined scions of the lower and middle nobility."

"That makes sense," Ling Qi mused. "Even among cultivators, not everyone wants to fight. Still, don't the Ministries end up in a lot of conflict with the lords? What's to stop a high noble from just overriding them? As you said, the strong rule."

"Tradition carries a strength of its own," Cai answered smoothly. "To treat one's ministers poorly is to court the disapproval of one's peers. And while any titled cultivator outranks any but the highest

members of the various Ministries, they do have their own strength and their own methods of leverage. The Ministry of Law, in particular, is the most venerable of the Ministries. It is not lightly crossed. Under the proper circumstances, mastery of law may be far more deadly than mastery of blade or fist."

Ling Qi considered her own mastery of music then Xin's words about choosing Ways and concepts. She wondered just how metaphorical the heiress was being. "I guess I better get reading then," she grumbled. "Ten thousand strikes to become a master, huh?" she said under her breath.

"Far more than that, sadly," Cai Renxiang answered without looking up from her work. "Let me know when you have completed the introduction. I will help you find the appropriate statutes under which you may file your request for investigation."

Ling Qi turned her eyes back to the tome in front of her. She could have asked Cai to write the cover letter and fill in the proper forms for her, but she had wanted to do it herself. She had asked for this. She had no right to complain. And now, here she was.

At least once she finished reviewing the introduction, she could just flip through the actual laws. She had never been happier to see a table of contents.

### **Bonus Chapter - Betrothal**

"You led me quite a ways astray," Gu Tai jibed, glancing over at Xiulan as they walked the path out past the village outskirts.

"Honestly, she isn't normally like that." Xiulan frowned. "I have no idea why she was suddenly so skittish."

"Mm, I recall you said that she had some trouble with a pushy suitor. Perhaps it affected her more than you had thought?" he asked curiously. Gu Tai grimaced as a breeze blew through the trees. The Emerald Seas really was chilly; he would have to take some time to acclimate himself.

"It was never such a serious matter," Xiulan said with a sniff. "That Huang fellow was certainly a cad, but it's clear that her association with the Bai caused his clan to put their foot down."

"Perhaps something in her background then," Gu Tai mused. That skittishness, flaring up as it did, was not born from minor incidents. He was quite certain that she had some rather negative experiences regarding marriage. "Well, it's not my business I suppose."

"I would say it certainly is," Gu Xiulan said dryly as they turned off the path. "Are you saying that Father did not collect a dossier before penning that deal?"

"And have you read such a thing, dear Lan-lan?" he teased, following her lead deeper into the forest. They were headed out to the cultivation site cousin Yanmei had shared with her. Gu Tai was quite looking forward to luxuriating in a bit of proper warmth.

She scowled at him from behind her veil. "Do not call me that. And obviously not."

"Quite. It would be poor form to start a relationship with spywork," Gu Tai replied. Even with her disappointing reactions, he didn't *dislike* Ling Qi. He hadn't been jesting that her cultivation relative to her age was the most important point. To found a house in the wastes, he would need a partner who was both hardy and ambitious. She had made him doubt the former, but the latter certainly wasn't in question. One did not rise so swiftly in cultivation without a core drive.

"I suppose," Xiulan huffed, smoke curling from her ears. An obvious sign of annoyance - and a worrying one.

Not for the first time, Gu Tai examined his cousin with great concern. Gu Xiulan should have better control than such displays indicated. Her channels sang with lightning. The heavenly energies churned through her body and spirit, and the marks were clear. It was a minor miracle that she had not lost that arm entirely. It was hard to hide a scowl, but he did so anyway. Xiulan, his precocious, proud, and domineering little cousin, would not appreciate pity.

"I do honestly think you would make a good match," Xiulan said quietly as they strode through the underbrush, weed and bush alike withering before their passage. "You are certainly sentimental enough for that girl, even if you are a tad scrawny for her tastes."

"And it has nothing to do with wanting to bring your best friend home with you, I am sure," Gu Tai teased back. As if he was scrawny. 'Athletic' was most certainly the right word. Just because he was not some bulging brute did not mean he lacked strength of the body.

"Ling Qi is not-!" Gu Xiulan snapped, glaring at him as they stepped into the clearing where the volcanic vent lay.

"Lan-lan, do not be coy with me now," he interrupted. "You have not spoken so positively of another girl since the first time you saw cousin Yanmei in the training yard." Ah, youthful hero worship.

"Hmph," Xiulan sniffed, and Gu Tai could not but imagine a baby-faced young girl who had toddled after him, insisting that they play in the garden when they both should have been studying. "It *is* a good match."

"I don't necessarily disagree," Gu Tai chuckled. If this Ling Qi came out of her shell a bit, it might not be so bad. He didn't think she was really one of those dull, shrinking violet types. She had just been... off-balance. "But enough of that for now. I believe you wanted me to show you a few pointers regarding the Vermillion Regalia art?"

"If you would," Xiulan replied, acquiescing to the change in subject. They both stepped up to the smoke-spewing chasm lit by dull red from within. Almost as one, they grinned as they bathed in the native fire qi. "I have had some troubles keeping the constructs stable while using other techniques."

Much more homely, Gu Tai thought as he took a deep breath of the cloying black smoke. It tingled pleasantly in his nose and throat, particulates breaking down into pure qi to be circulated through his lungs. He could do without the smell introduced by the earth-based elements though. "Well, show me what you have accomplished so far."

Xiulan nodded sharply, taking a step back through the sulphurous smoke. She closed her eyes, falling into a traditional battle stance. Her veil fluttered as she breathed out, sparks escaping from her lips, and deep red flames erupted along the lines of her gown. They raced across the silk hungry and consuming, tongues of flame growing and merging into the wavering shapes of armor.

Then with a snap and a hiss, the scars on Xiulan's face sparked with electricity and static, leaping from her marred skin. The whole construct exploded outward in a rippling display of heat and static.

Gu Tai lowered the hand he had raised to shield his face and glanced down at the embers burning on his shirt, snuffing them with a thought. "I expect you do not need me to point out the obvious problem," he said dryly.

"No," Xiulan hissed, stamping her foot in frustration. "I know the lightning is interfering. But the technique is destabilizing before that."

"It is," Gu Tai said. The Vermillion Raiment art was an unusual one in the Gu roster, an attempt to turn fire to an unusual and unfitting task. "The art requires a delicate touch. Let me show you."

It was good to see his cousin again. Even if things might fall through with her friend.

He rather hoped they would not. Gu Tai supposed he would just have to bend his efforts to setting his potential wife at ease. It would be an interesting challenge.

### **Chapter 139 - Spirits**

"It's alive!" Li Suyin said excitedly, clapping her hands as the figure laid out on the workbench in front of them shifted, its bony limbs moving mechanically

"... It's not *actually* alive, right?" Ling Qi asked warily as the empty sockets of the bear skull they had used turned to face them. Its toothy jaws clacked as they worked open and closed.

"Well, no," Li Suyin admitted, flushing. "But it sounds more exciting that way, doesn't it?"

"You're a little weird sometimes." Ling Qi backed up a step as the thing climbed clumsily from the table, the heavy cloak of bearskin around its hunched shoulders rustling and revealing the silk-bound bones underneath. Li Suyin had invited her over to show off her progress, but she hadn't expected this. She eyed the thing now looming over her, its low-slung skull nearly scraping the ceiling as it stood in a hunched, bipedal stance. "Please tell me you didn't go graverobbing. We talked about that, didn't we?"

Li Suyin looked horrified. "Of course not! I just used grandfather's arts to reshape the bones." The thing raised one bony claw and flexed its digits as she inspected it, the thick spider silk shrouding the bones stretching with the motion. "Do you really think so little of me?"

"No, I was just surprised," Ling Qi assured her friend. "I didn't know your art could do stuff like this."

"Dead tissue does not resist the way living tissue does, so something like this is definitely possible," her friend explained. Li Suyin stepped away and gestured at the bone puppet, causing it to begin going through a handful of stretching motions, testing its range of movement. It was eerie in its near silence.

"And the spider silk?" Ling Qi asked. "The original formation just used qi to hold everything together. Doesn't this make the construct more expensive?"

"It does," Li Suyin agreed. "Zhenli is too small to produce so much silk herself, although she tried." Her friend glanced up to the thick web in the corner of the workshop where a ball of pink fuzz slumbered. "The poor girl tired herself out. Senior Sister Bao was kind enough to provide the rest."

"I suppose I can just buy it if need be," Ling Qi considered quietly. She didn't want to rain on her friend's parade. "What are the benefits of using spider silk then?"

"With an actual physical medium taking the place of ligaments and muscles, the construct can move more smoothly. Overall, it is more sturdy as well because less energy is needed just to hold everything together," Li Suyin rattled off as her construct smoothly moved back into a standing position. "It is... a bit flammable though," she trailed off.

"I'm sure we can work on that. What about power?" Ling Qi asked curiously. Lifting the concealing cloak, she examined the glowing stones embedded in a thick bundle of webbing where the construct's heart should have been.

"Each construct only needs ten red stones to create," Li Suyin answered eagerly. "But - You know the control formation is the main power source, right?"

"Right," Ling Qi replied. That was the array's main limitation. The constructs were keyed to a stationary array and couldn't last long away from it, hence, the "vault" part of the "vault warrior" formation. "Then you finished deciphering that?"

"I did." Li Suyin sighed. "It requires a yellow stone a month to keep the array running, in addition to the initial cost. And it can only support three warriors."

"That's not great efficiency," Ling Qi commented. She remembered when such costs would have been far beyond her means. "So, are you willing to prepare the materials for me? As it is, I can't exactly do this on my own with these changes."

Li Suyin flushed and covered her face with her hands. "I didn't even think of that..." she said despondently.

Ling Qi couldn't hold in a snort of laughter. Suyin really outdid herself with this. Of course, she still had to learn the array.

It was another layer on her efforts to defend herself. While the invasion of Yan Renshu's workshop had shown that unsupported constructs could not stand against focused third realm assault, they could deter less powerful enemies, so Ling Qi considered the time spent learning Li Suyin's Silk Warriors formation to be well spent.

She wouldn't install it at their residence yet though. It would be rude to do so without asking Meizhen. In addition, she had spent quite a bit on ordering talismans and charms from Fatty Hao so her funds were back to being really limited. It would be worth it though to have proper escape talismans and antiscrying charms. Her desire for a proper formation breaking tool set had been more impulsive, but she couldn't bring herself to regret it.

With her preparations complete for the moment, Ling Qi finally felt confident enough to take on another Sect mission. It would be a more involved mission with a greater chance of sabotage. The mission to go and propriate the forest spirits stirred up by Elder Ying's "remodeling" had been sitting untaken on the board for some time now, and while the reward was relatively low, it would be a good opportunity to practice her skulking. Walking in the shadows always left her feeling more in tune with the Grinning Moon, and lunar qi flowed more easily in her cultivation afterward.

Once again, she set off without actually accepting the mission. It would mean having to spend a few spirit stones on the proper incense and offerings herself, but all the protection she had bought would be useless if she made it that obvious where she was going. Her first stop was in the temple quarter at the south end of the town at the base of the mountain.

It was her first time entering such a place. In Tonghou, the temples were all in the inner districts. The sprawling outer ring and the slums packed up against the walls made do with small shrines. Temples were open to the public on certain festival days, but Ling Qi had never been one to attend. Mother did not have festival days off, and after, Ling Qi hardly had reason to go. Stealing from a temple was the height of stupidity.

So it was with some curiosity that Ling Qi examined the sprawling gardens that filled the grounds inside the temple's sturdy walls as she passed through the tall wooden gates of the town. The quarter

seemed like it could serve as a fortress in its own right going by the ballistae mounted on the corners. Inside that militaristic shell, it was beautiful though. Well-ordered rows of flowers grew in geometric perfection separated by low hedge rows and artificial channels carrying bubbling streams of clear water.

The temple itself was a tall building with a slanted, green tiled roof. Its wooden walls were almost completely overgrown with brightly colored ivy and flowers, making it seem like the building itself was alive and filling the air with a sweet scent. People moved about the gardens quietly, a mixture of mortals and early first realms clad in the pure white garb of shrine attendants. She passed through the gardens unhindered and quickly entered the temple proper, heading for the central room. If she was going to find a proper priest anywhere, it would be there.

Ling Qi found the open, airy central chamber quickly enough. The hundreds of candles burning smokeless in their sconces lit the main shrine brightly. Glancing around, she saw several individual shrines lining the walls. The planter of rich black loam representing the Bountiful Earth was centrally placed, but there were plenty of others. She recognized the coils of the Celestial Dragon rendered harshly in bronze, the spear-lined shrine of the Eternal Watchman, patron of guards and others of their ilk. There were others as well, dedicated to spirits of all kinds. She didn't pay it much mind for now, instead focusing on the elderly man who had been kneeling at the shrine of the Bountiful Earth.

He stood up and turned to face her now, a curious expression on his wrinkled, sun-browned face. He was bald, though whether that was purposeful or merely the result of age, Ling Qi didn't know. He was also peak first realm, which made him the strongest cultivator that she had seen so far in the temple. Nothing on his plain white garb indicated any kind of rank.

"Greetings, Honorable Disciple." The man's voice shook her from her study as the man clapped his hands together and bowed formally to her. "Does the Sect require something of us this day or are you merely here to make an offering?"

It still felt awkward and uncomfortable for someone decades her elder to speak to her in such deferential tones. "Something of both," she said, doing her best to sound formal. She would burn a stick to the Grinning Moon while she was here. "I am here to solve the problem with the forest shrines."

The old man looked surprised. "My apologies. I had not heard word from the Sect that our request had been accepted."

Ling Qi glanced away sheepishly. "... It hasn't. Yet. But I am here all the same."

He frowned at her briefly before understanding lit in his gaze. "Ah, trouble with a rival?"

"I guess you would be familiar, living here for so long." Ling Qi sighed. "Is that fine? I can pay for any materials I need."

"Of course, Honorable Disciple. Preparing the necessary materials will be no trouble if this terrible business can be sorted out," the old man said with gratitude. "It will, however, take some time. Would you like to be shown to a guest room?"

Ling Qi shook her head. "Could you show me where you keep your shrines to the Great Moon spirits? I want to offer some gratitude before I set out."

That seemed to please the old man, who cheerfully gestured for her to follow him down one of the corridors that extended off the main hall.

He left her at the shrine of the Moon, an elaborate eight part construction of silver and mirrors lit only by a single, dim, paper lantern, the light of which sparkled dazzlingly from the reflective surfaces of the shrine. She stayed there for a time, head bowed as a stick of expensive incense burned in the censer that lay at its center. She did not speak aloud but simply conveyed her gratitude in silence for the arts which had given her the chance to flourish and for earlier favors.

There was no obvious response, but Ling Qi liked to think that the intensity of the sparkling light and the faint musical chime on the wind were not her imagination. The old attendant returned soon enough, bearing with him a pack containing sacred incense and oils, as well as more mundane tools for repairing and cleaning a damaged shrine.

Ling Qi thanked the man and set out after that, channeling qi into her Misty Lake charm as she did. She was not going to make it easy for Yan Renshu to interfere with her mission.

Ling Qi had not been back to this part of the forest since the day that Elder Ying had carried her and Su Ling out after the disastrous mission to investigate disappearances. At its edge, the forest seemed much the same, but as she ventured further inwards, it was clear that something was amiss. The trees were crooked and the ground humped and cracked, roots poking up from the soil like grasping fingers. The canopy overhead was dark, a solid clump of green that seemed to devour the light of the bright gibbous moon and the stars alike.

Things crept in the corner of her vision, tiny twisted things that, despite her perfect night vision, vanished the moment she tried to properly look at them. They whispered and crawled among the underbrush and in the branches, wormlike and vaguely unsettling. The qi of the forest thrummed with ill feeling and deep anger, and the trees themselves seemed to twist and writhe on occasion, stirred to rage by desecration. Yet she managed to slip through the woods unmolested, no more than a shadow herself.

The first and closest of the shrines was a half circle of carven stones the height of a man in the center of an overgrown graveyard, all covered in a soft coating of moss that obscured the carvings. In the center of the half circle was a small stone plinth upon which rested an overturned clay bowl. The sacred liquor which it had once held was long spilled and dried. Ling Qi carefully picked her way through the clearing, her qi held tightly in her dantian. She could feel the restless spirits under the earth, furious at their neglect.

Fixing this one was a simple matter. She knew the right prayers to offer restless spirits, and the shrine was not badly damaged. It was soon cleaned and the bowl replaced, filled with clear wine that glittered in the moonlight. She burned purifying incense and whispered the prayers of rest over the restored shrine, finishing her first task.

The unclean feeling in the air faded a little, and Ling Qi continued, skulking deeper into the forest, avoiding the restless spirits that clawed through the air. It became harder as the forest's spirits grew more numerous and present. Things of dirt and wood with staring knothole eyes and thorny limbs stalked the game trails. Ling Qi slipped past them all though, silent as a soft breeze.

The second shrine stood in the middle of a grove of fir trees at the top of a hill with a wide flat space cleared in its center. Bronze censers lay scattered across the ground, their chains torn from the branches, and aromatic ash spilled all over the dirt. Each censer depicted symbols of plants and trees representing different, relatively minor forest spirits. The creeping things in the corners of her vision infested this place, wriggling through the dirt and leaves as their hissing clawed at her ears.

Gritting her teeth, Ling Qi lit the protective incense she had been given and set about hanging the censers properly from their respective perches. Each of the six largest trees still held a dangling chain, left in place so long that bark had grown to encase the metal rings from which the chains hung. Cleaning out the censers, polishing them until they shone, and filling them with the proper incense was dirty and tedious work, but she set to it with determination.

It took a great deal of effort to work through the skittering, crawling feeling of the unhealthy spirits that swirled around her while she worked, held back only by her incense and the rhythmically chanted prayers that she spoke under her breath, not daring to pause. She was no frail mortal any longer, and she was confident that she could face any number of minor spirits. She was far less confident that she could deal with the greater things that would come, drawn by her qi if she did fight the minor spirits.

So she did not unleash her mist and drive away the whispering sprites, no matter how irritating they were. Soon, a clean and healthy scent wafted from the repaired censers, and the hostile spirits fled, fading into the night and leaving her at peace.

Sadly, that feeling did not last long as she continued on to the last of the shrines. The terrain grew rough and the path twisted unnaturally. Trees stood tilted at mad angles by upturned earth, and many others lay rotting on the ground. The air reeked of death and blood. Distance and heading grew difficult to discern.

She pressed on though, determined to finish. She had already spent a fair portion of her night on this. As the trees grew sparse, a bare handful of sturdy trunks still standing, Ling Qi, for the first time, got a good look at the devastation Elder Ying had wrought.

The ground dropped abruptly as if a giant had come along and simply tore a great chunk of the earth away, and the remaining sinkhole stretched far into the night, more than a kilometer wide and at least half that deep by her reckoning. Within it, nothing lived. All that lay at the bottom was a fine grey dust, inert and dead to every sense she possessed. Here and there, a sparkling green totem stood in the wreckage of stone and dust at the bottom. Around the totems was fresh soil and a few, precarious shoots of greenery and life like oases in a desert.

She turned her eyes away from the uncomfortable sight. Something about the dead, lifeless dust made her skin crawl. She moved along the edge of the sinkhole until she reached her target.

The final shrine was a vast redwood tree stretching over a hundred meters tall. It clung tenaciously to the edge of the sinkhole, roots as thick as a human torso curling out into empty air while others anchored it to the remaining earth. By all logic, it looked like it should have tipped into the hole, and yet, it stood steady. The actual shrine took the form of a hollow carved into the trunk a few handspans wide and perhaps a meter high with a small shelf for offerings.

The skull of a stag, seemingly cast from liquid silver that gleamed in the moonlight, was affixed to the wood just above of the hollow. Unlike the others, it was not damaged, merely neglected. The blank eye sockets stared down at her as she busied herself arranging the prepared offerings, dried and treated fruits, a portion of cured meat, and other such knicknacks meant to appease the spirit which presided over the place.

With everything set, she carefully kneeled among the roots and lowered her head, offering the correct words of propitiation. It took time for the last of the hostile air to fade, but when she opened her eyes, the offerings were gone, save for a few scraps.

She carefully swept those back into the bag, letting out a breath of satisfaction now that the job was done. As she turned around though, she froze.

Behind her, barely three meters away, loomed a massive shadow with many pointed horns curved into the air, gleaming with the light of the moon. Ling Qi did not normally think of a deer as a frightening animal, but the black furred mountain of muscle, more than three times her height at the shoulder, certainly put the lie to that. The potent mass of its qi, a match for what she felt in Zeqing's storms, put to rest any other doubts.

She stared into the creature's silver eyes for a few horrifying seconds as it bent its neck to peer at her, nostrils flaring as it scented her. Slowly, almost mechanically, she clapped her hands together and bowed her head in silent respect. What else could she do at this point?

Moments ticked by while Ling Qi tried to calm her nerves. She had not made any mistakes in the ritual appearsement. This was fine. She would be fine. Everything would be fine.

It was difficult not to flinch when she felt the spirit beast's breath on her face. Her hair fluttered in the breeze that it kicked up as it snorted, but then, it was gone. The weight of its presence vanished, and she heard a soft thump as something landed at her feet.

She opened her eyes, seeing nothing but the ragged landscape of fallen trees and four deep depressions in the earth in the shape of hooves. She glanced down and found a small wooden cube covered in complex silver patterns. Carefully picking it up, she found that the silver lines picked out dozens of tiny wood slats, some of which moved when pushed.

She had seen puzzle boxes before but never one so complex. On its side, covering the largest solid piece, was a black circle chased in white. The sign of the New Moon. Ling Qi peered around, but she was still alone. Perhaps Xin was still looking out for her.

# **Chapter 140 - Finishing Moves**

"Good of you to join us, Miss Ling!" Gan Guangli boomed cheerfully. He stood flanked by two other male disciples wearing the bands of enforcers and standing at a stiff attention. "With your skills, the raiding scum has no chance of escape!"

Ling Qi eyed their surroundings carefully. They were perched on a narrow ledge halfway up a steep rock face. With the Ma Sisters and her, there was barely any room to move about up here.

"Thank you for the invitation," she replied politely, a little unsure of the proper response in this scenario. "I'm sure you could have managed without me," she added. It seemed right. "Were you really only going to do this with three people if I didn't come?"

"I had intended a larger cohort, but with you and your escorts joining us, I deemed it wasteful to pull more from their duties," Gan explained. "The bandit Ji Rong travels with but a handful on his raids, and too many would risk detection besides."

"That's who we're hitting, huh?" Ling Qi mused, peering down the cliffside. They would probably ambush them when they passed below then. "That makes sense. But how are we going to get the drop on them? Ji Rong has pretty sharp senses, and..." She gestured vaguely at the tall, muscular, and singularly unstealthy boy.

She studiously ignored the stifled sound of amusement from Ma Lei. Gan Guangli simply grinned and plucked a small gourd that had been dangling from his belt, raising it for her inspection. "Sir Xuan has seen fit to solve that problem for us. The villains will never see the first blows coming!"

Ling Qi blinked and accepted the gourd, peering inside. There were a series of carved wooden stakes. Removing one, her eyes widened. She could just make out its function. As Gan had implied, the four stakes would create a field between them which utterly concealed any living things within. Its inner workings were hidden from her though, the character arrangements seeming like indecipherable gibberish to her eyes. "That guy really doesn't do half measures. Is that the whole plan then? We just wait for them to pass by and jump down?"

"Yes," Gan Guangli replied, still grinning. "There is no need for complex planning in this case. I would have you support us close range fighters from above and prevent any attempts at escape. With any luck, Ji Rong can be greatly weakened or even put down in our opening move. Of course, I welcome discussion of the particulars."

Hashing out the details of their exact plan of action took a bit of time, but soon enough, Gan Guangli received a message from Fu Xiang indicating that they needed to activate the formation. The array Xuan Shi had crafted traded a short duration for potency so their timing needed to be exact. The Ma Sisters and Gan's helpers took care of the activation while she and Gan Guangli kept watch on the trees below, waiting for their prey to arrive

Ji Rong was the first one that she spotted. He walked cockily out in front of the three other boys with him. Despite that, he looked alert and ready for trouble, his aura charged like the air before a thunderstorm. His companions were less disciplined, joking and bragging among themselves. None of

the other three, two Mid Yellows and a Low without any special equipment or exotic quirks to their qi, caught Ling Qi's eye. One of the two Mid Yellows was a wind element user though; she'd keep an eye on him to ensure that he didn't do something to help the others escape.

Ling Qi was well aware of just how fast the wind could carry after all.

She stilled as Ji Rong's eyes passed over the ledge they were crouched on, but there was no recognition, not even a twitch in his qi indicating that he had noticed them. Around her, she felt her allies start to activate combat arts. The faint chiming of bells filled the air, and clay armor flowed across Ma Lei's arms and chest. Gan Guangli's armor took on a brilliant shine even as he began to grow, crowding the already narrow ledge further, as his guards charged their weapons, a spear and a bow, with fire and wind respectively.

Ling Qi simply breathed out as she expressed her bow, the edges of her gown gleaming a vibrant emerald, which spread, forming a shell of bark textured light over her. The glow spread to Gan Guangli and Ma Lei as well. It was a high cost to her qi, but it would bolster the two's already impressive defenses for when they jumped down.

She drew back her bow as the armor finished forming, and the wind kicked up around her feet, rising to circle around her arrow as she drew it back, aimed right at Ji Rong's shoulder. She glanced at Gan Guangli as he loomed beside her, crouched at the edge of the cliff, his face concealed by his gleaming helm. Ji Rong's group passed below, and he nodded.

Ling Qi let loose, the wind howling around her companions, urging them to strike in unison. Ji Rong jerked in surprise the moment the arrow shattered their concealment, and although brilliant lightning immediately burst from his channels shrouding him in light, it wasn't enough. The arrow struck home, causing him to grunt as his defenses failed to absorb the full power of the shot.

Ma Lei and the spear wielding guard immediately leaped down to engage Ji Rong. Ji Rong juked away from their weapons, ducking Ma Lei's mace and twisting away from the boy's spear, its fire-wreathed head grazing along his side. In the wake of the alarm and noise from below, the first notes of a sleepy, relaxing tune began to play beside her, and Ling Qi felt Ma Jun's soporific qi latch onto the enemies below, draining away qi and making limbs and eyelids heavy. Even Ji Rong's corruscating aura briefly dimmed, opening him to another wind-wreathed arrow from the second of Gan's subordinates.

Of course, all those attacks were swiftly overshadowed as a great shadow fell over Ji Rong and his raiders. Ji Rong barely had a moment to straighten up and brace himself before Gan Guangli's armored boots slammed down onto his shoulders, driving the glowing boy straight into the ground with a thunderous crack that rocked and split the earth. Unnatural shockwaves tore up the soil and flung Ji Rong's allies away to impact against rocks and trees.

That was Ling Qi's signal to begin the next phase. She dropped her bow and expressed her flute, leaping nimbly down the cliffside as she began to play, mist blossoming rapidly outward to consume the battlefield. Ma Jun's chiming bells amplified her power further, and she felt the sense-altering effect of her mist settle over Ji Rong's three allies. The raiders wouldn't be running away easily.

She found her attention pulled back to the main fight as the ground exploded with light, muted by her mist. Gan Guangli was shoved backward by a shockwave of qi as Ji Rong thrust himself out of the impact crater with a furious roar. His hair stood on end, bleached and white in the light of crackling electricity pouring off of him in sheets.

He launched himself at Guangli, fist outstretched, and the giant boy met him head on. The sound of his fist striking Gan Guangli's breastplate was like a temple gong, the crack of thunder nearly deafening her, but Gan Guangli did not move an inch, the flickering green of the armor she had given him holding.

"Not enough, Bandit!" Gan shouted, laughing as he brought his huge, spike-covered fists down in a two handed hammerstrike. Ji Rong juked backwards, his sparking sandals somehow finding purchase on the rippling earth.

"How about-" the scarred boy began, batting aside the spear of Gan's aid with a glowing fist. Thunder boomed as the boy's legs curled, and he darted forward into a punch that struck the spear-wielding boy's breastplate. Ling Qi winced as she felt the shell of her Deepwood Vitality crack and then shatter under the visible stream of voltage that erupted from Ji Rong's fist, launching Gan's fellow enforcer backwards through the air until he hit the ground and bounced, his chest smoldering. "- you shut up for once, lardo!"

"Fiend!" Gan Guangli bellowed, literally swelling with rage as he thundered back into melee, his footfalls sending visible ripples through the earth. The other raiders converged, but Ma Lei interposed herself, catching a boy's handaxe on her clay-covered shield and bringing the other up short with a rising wall of mud that forced him to backpedal or slam face first into it. The wind-natured boy was more troublesome, a bolstering wind sweeping across the battlefield to speed his allies' movements; Ling Qicould feel his qi coiling around their legs, preparing to launch them at Gan's back.

Ling Qi had a solution to that. A sad, mournful elegy began to play, and the boy suddenly let out a shout of alarm as in his eyes, the mist thickened and converged upon him, blanketing him in a misty world where he was all alone without an ally in sight.

Under the effect of her technique, the bolstering qi the wind-natured boy had spread fizzled out without his guidance.

Thunder boomed, and the sound of impacts on metal resounded. Ji Rong drove Gan Guangli back a step, then two, his fists a sparking blur as he rained dozens of blows on the bigger boy's armored stomach, shattering Gan's Deepwood Vitality protection, then laying into Gan himself. But in his flurry, he overextended, and when Gan brought up a massive knee and slammed it into the scarred boy's chest, Ji Rong was launched back, coughing violently as he landed in a crouch.

Floating on the breeze, Ling Qi adjusted her melody, and emerald sparks danced in her eyes. Vital wood qi rippled out, and the fading bark textured energy clinging to Gan Guangli and Ma Lei's armor rekindled, renewing their protection. Gan laughed, and Ji Rong cursed.

It ended quickly after that. Gan Guangli kept up the offense while Ling Qi isolated and drained the other raiders of qi one at a time. Ji Rong thrashed and fought like a wild beast, but four on one was too much.

The raiders were soon facedown in the dirt, unconscious and quickly bound, and their belongings seized. Ling Qi was pleased to be the proud owner of a higher quality storage ring with nearly twice the space of her old one.

Sun Liling wouldn't recover easily from this. Aside from her vassal Lu Feng, Ji Rong and Kang Zihao were really her only major supporters, and with Kang Zihao still in seclusion, Ji Rong had been the one carrying Sun Liling's offensive efforts against Cai Renxiang. Going forward, Cai Renxiang's faction would have an advantage against Sun Liling's.

# **Chapter 141 - Finishing Moves 2**

Their ambush, combined with several smaller ones targeting the Sun Princess' remaining followers, proved to be the breaking point. The fortress on the cliffs closed, and raids on the enforcers stopped. Sun Liling's few remaining followers seemed to enter a fully defensive mindset.

With tensions ramping down, Ling Qi finally had time to complete the lessons she had begun under Cai Renxiang.

Ling Qi grimaced as she set her brush down, peering at the letter she had just finished. She had finally completed the proper forms, and now, she was drafting the cover letter that requested assistance from the head of the local Ministry in Tonghou.

Leaning back in her seat, she reviewed line after line of pleasantry and formality. This was her third draft. This time, it was free of ink smears or ill-formed characters; it was as perfect as she could manage.

"It appears that your calligraphy is at an acceptable level." She glanced up as Cai Renxiang reached down to pluck the letter from the writing desk, scrutinizing it for errors. "You merely had to take your time."

Ling Qi restrained the urge to make a face at the heiress, her propriety worn thin by her recent efforts. It had taken the better part of an hour to carefully draft the final copy of the letter due to Cai's insistence on perfection. Ling Qi hated to waste her time on something so pointless, but good draftsmanship would probably be the sort of thing needed to make a good impression on some high-up legal official.

"I'm just glad this is all done," Ling Qi said aloud instead. "Thank you though," she added more sincerely. "I do not want to think about how long it might have taken me to do this without your help."

"It was little trouble," Cai Renxiang replied, carefully folding the letter. "These are matters which you will require an understanding, if not mastery, of," she continued as Ling Qi rose from her seat to follow the heiress out of the study and into the hall. "We all serve the Empire. It is foolish to not understand its underpinnings."

"I just wish those underpinnings were in good Imperial," Ling Qi grumbled. Half of her trouble had come from trying to parse the dense legal language everything was written in. "Your explanations are the only reason I ended up actually understanding what I read."

"It is an understandable trouble for a novice," the heiress said. "I will send this on the morrow with my recommendation attached. If you would like, I will review any response with you when it arrives."

"I would like that," Ling Qi said agreeably as they reached the entryway. She turned as she passed the other girl and offered a respectful bow. "Thank you for your time and your help. I might not be very close to my Mother anymore, but I don't want to see her troubled."

She caught a flicker of some emotion in Cai Renxiang's eyes, but then the girl simply nodded, her expression stern. "Duty to one's family is a virtue. Your efforts are commendable. I am glad to aid them. Good fortune to you, Ling Qi."

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Ling Qi allowed her eyes to close as she let out a sigh of relief. After so long sitting stiffly behind a writing desk, lowering herself into the hot scented water of the bath felt heavenly. The warmth seemed to seep in, right to her bones, easing away points of stress she hadn't even noticed. She felt like she could stay here soaking forever.

"My, when was the last time you took the time to let your hair down, Ling Qi?" Gu Xiulan's voice broke through her reverie, and she opened her eyes to look at the other girl.

The thick steam in the small private room they had rented was no real obstacle to her eyes, so she could clearly see her friend sitting perched on the polished wooden bench that wrapped around the perimeter of the room, still wrapped in a towel with her hair hanging damply around her shoulders. Of course, her eyes quickly drifted to the thick cloth wrapping around the girl's crippled arm, worn even now, seemingly impervious to the moisture in the room.

"Too long," she replied, instead of voicing any of her thoughts. "You were right though. This is a good way to cap off the night. What do they put in this water?"

Ling Qi could feel traces of qi and smell hints of medicinal aroma in the air. She knew the feeling of relaxation seeping into her body could not be wholly natural.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Xiulan said with a careless shrug and an amused smile, which stretched the scars on her cheeks awkwardly. "I did not ask the chefs at the restaurant we stopped at which spices they used either."

"You are such a noble." Ling Qi rolled her eyes as she leaned back against the edge of the bath. The smooth stone tile of the bottom felt much better than the rough floor of the natural spring. "Aren't you curious at all?"

"Why, thank you for noticing," Xiulan answered with mock courtesy. "And not particularly so. I will always have others to take care of such things for me. Why waste my time on it?"

Ling Qi let her friend's answer pass with only a good-natured grumble in response, letting her head loll back as she stared up at the dimly glowing grey circle in the ceiling which provided the lighting. It had been pretty easy to convince Xiulan to come along with her tonight. The girl's acerbic demeanor hadn't faded at all in the past weeks, but she reserved the majority of her venom for Fan Yu and Han Jian. Ling Qi had been mostly exempt from it.

It had been odd and uncomfortable at first, wandering around the center of the city practically in the shadow of the magistrate's mansion, surrounded by richly dressed mortals and lesser cultivators. It made her fingers itch and her heart race. Some part of her still expected every guard they passed to seize her by the shoulders and throw her out, no matter that her cultivation exceeded all but a bare handful of the armored men and women they passed at their stations. In contrast, Xiulan had walked

along through the streets as if she owned them, haughtily staring down anyone whose eyes lingered too long on the scars visible behind her veil.

Even with Ling Qi's lingering unease, the evening had been fun. They had made chitchat, lingering in various shops debating over the merits of minor things. Xiulan had purchased several vials of perfumed liquids, and she had cajoled Ling Qi into purchasing a few new ribbons to work into her hair. It was all very frivolous, but Ling Qi found it difficult to begrudge the expense. Money just didn't concern her as much anymore, not when they had each traded a stone or two for a full jangling pouch of silver before even entering the market.

"Did you fall asleep?" Xiulan asked dryly, shaking her loose from her thoughts. "Is the water truly so relaxing?"

"Of course not," Ling Qi replied. The last time she had slept had been a little nap in the garden outside of Zhengui's pyre four days ago. She didn't have time for things like that. "I was just thinking about what I bought today."

"Those ribbons?" Xiulan moved to sit at the edge of the bath, letting her legs dangle into the partially opaque water. "I told you they would match your eyes quite well. You are going to have to spend more care on yourself if you wish to wear your hair loose though."

"I know." Ling Qi huffed. Even now, without certain special oils, her hair tended to turn into a frizzy mess. "It's not fair," she grumbled. "Yours is always so shiny and straight."

"Well, of course." Xiulan smirked. "But I have been taking care of it for years," she added, fingering the dark length of her hair. "You know," she began, eyeing Ling Qi critically, "if you lightened how much straightener you used, you might be able to pull off a bit of curl. It would look good."

"Maybe," Ling Qi replied noncommittally, not enthused about spending time experimenting to get an effect that looked presentable. Just making her hair behave like everyone else's was enough.

"Only a suggestion," Xiulan said carelessly as she slipped into the water, leaving her towel behind at the edge. Ling Qi noticed how she carefully kept her wrapped arm out of the water.

"... Are you feeling better then?" Ling Qi asked quietly. She was hesitant to bring such things up, but she felt that in the end, nothing good would come from ignoring it.

Xiulan shot her a heated look, which she met steadily, not backing down. "I have gotten used to it. For the most part," her friend answered. "As much as one can. It is more than worth it."

"That's good," Ling Qi agreed, holding in a grimace at the somewhat brittle edge to the girl's tone. "I don't just mean the physical stuff though. I guess..." Ling Qi fell silent, struggling with her wording. "... how are you holding up with... everything?"

Xiulan didn't answer, looking down into the water instead. Ling Qi didn't press further, hoping she had not offended the prickly girl.

"Mother is horrified at what I have done to myself." When Xiulan spoke up, it was quiet. She didn't sound like the bombastic and confident girl Ling Qi had gotten to know. "Father... I think Father understands. But even he thinks that I have gone too far, that I gamble too much and too freely."

Ling Qi remained silent, letting her friend work out what she wanted to say.

"And that is not even considering what he might say if Fan Yu had a spine to his name," she added more venomously. "I know I have broken with propriety - that I have been incredibly rude and insulting... I just cannot bring myself to care!" The water around Xiulan bubbled with heat for a moment before she took a deep breath.

"I can't say that I really get all of that," Ling Qi said slowly. She understood on an intellectual level because of her recent forays into understanding noble behavior. It wasn't part of her the way those things were for a born noble though. "Didn't you used to say things about a lady maintaining her composure even if you don't like it?"

Xiulan sunk further into the water, her expression darkening. "I did, didn't I? I was always a poor student when it came to Mother's lessons," she said bitterly. "Yet another thing Sister Yanmei is my superior in."

Ling Qi grimaced. "I don't think you can really be blamed too much for losing your patience in the past couple months," she consoled.

"It has not been merely since this happened!" Xiulan retorted hotly, gesturing at her scarred face. "Ever since I came here, it seems that I have been forgetting myself, ignoring the things Mother taught me about how a proper woman of the Empire should act." Her shoulders slumped. "I have been acting little better than a barbarian at times. Is that why Jian rejected me outright so suddenly?"

"I don't think so," Ling Qi said uncomfortably. "I think... he is just trying to take his duties more seriously."

"While I continue to act like a child," Xiulan said glumly. "Hmph. I suppose it is no wonder."

"I don't think there is anything wrong with being upset," Ling Qi said carefully, "about losing something you've wanted for a long time. But you do have to move past it eventually."

"Look at you playing counselor," Xiulan teased. "You are too patient for your own good. Sometimes I wonder if you are some long lost cousin of Mother's."

"Probably not," Ling Qi replied dryly. "If you're thinking silly things like that, maybe you should go cool off."

Ling Qi hoped her friend would be able to reign herself in a little better in the future. She had a bad feeling things would get messy if she didn't.

## **Chapter 142 - Finishing Moves 3**

Bian Ya was certainly not a bad tutor, and she was friendly enough, even if her spirit beast was not. But her insights were clearly focused on the manipulation of wood qi. To Bian Ya, wind was secondary, combining with wood to form the concept of "dispersal."

While Ling Qi could comprehend the older girl's understanding of the combined element, it was at odds with her more usual understanding. The exercises in maintaining flows of wood qi disconnected from her channels, attached only by threads of wind, were certainly helpful in advancing her understanding of her sole wood art, Thousand Rings Fortress, in improving the range at which she could hold the shielding qi around her allies.

It was less directly useful in her practice with the Falling Stars art, but eventually, she reached an understanding. Wind, or rather air, was not simply freedom and motion; it was also a thing of connections. Wind lay between earth and heaven and touched all things. An arrow and a target thus already held a connection. With this understanding, she was able to complete the Falling Stars art and master its final technique, the Falling Star Shot, which would allow her to fire a single shot which flew true no matter the obstacles so long as there was a path to her target.

She parted ways with her tutor on good enough terms, but she couldn't really say that she had connected to the older girl. She reminded Ling Qi of Xiulan in many ways, and while Xiulan was her friend, that relationship had taken a great deal of work and shared troubles.

Still, for some things, cultivation had to wait.

When Ling Qi felt the twinge from the minor alarms she had set around Zhengui's pyre, set to go off at any unusual fluctuation of qi, she raced out into the garden, the door of the meditation chamber banging off the wall behind her. The pyre had burned down by the time she arrived. No longer a towering bonfire that rose more than two meters in the air, it now guttered low, dull red embers burning atop scraps of wood heaped on a small hill of gray ash, held within the solid fire-baked clay of of the firebreak she had set up around it during construction.

More importantly, she could feel that her spirit beast's qi was no longer masked by the qi-infused wood she had used to build and maintain the fire. Ling Qi settled to the ground beside the pit, hands resting on the warm surface of the clay walls as she peered down. Everything she had read indicated that all this was natural, but she couldn't help but worry.

Ling Qi was often so busy that it was difficult to think about things outside her many tasks, but she could admit that the niggling worry in the back of her thoughts had never quite gone away. It was rising to the fore, now that a change was occurring in Zhengui's pyre. The ash from the fire formed a thick blanket of heavy qi, which prevented her from sensing Zhengui in detail. Had he broken through successfully? Could spirit beasts even fail like humans could? Had he changed, while buried down there under the ash?

The grey hill at the bottom of the pit shifted, and Ling Qi leaned forward, brows drawn together. "Zhengui? Can you hear me?" she called. "Are you ready? Do you need more fuel? I can-"

The ash exploded outward, and Ling Qi flinched as it enveloped her, stinging her eyes and getting caught in her throat. That surprise left her entire flat-footed as a heavy, stonelike mass smashed through the clay wall and bowled her over.

'Mother!' A deeper but still recognizable voice rumbled in her ear as the heavy weight settled on top of her, pinning her legs in place. 'Mother, where are you?'

'Oaf, you're sitting on her!' A more sibilant voice spoke from further back. 'Stand up, and let Big Sister up.'

Ling Qi had been worried for nothing. Zhengui hadn't changed at all, even if she would have to have a talk with Gui again; she was definitely no mother. Cool qi flooded her limbs, and Ling Qi flowed out of confinement, growing solid again as she crouched in front of her no longer little spirit, a smile on her face. "Little Brother, you've been asleep for too long," she scolded playfully.

Gui blinked his big emerald eyes at her. He was now more than two meters long, and half that across. The blocky dull-edged spikes of his shell rose high enough to reach the bottom of her chest from standing height. He still pushed his blunt, scaly head up against her hand in the same way when she rested it on his head.

'I was dreaming!' Gui chirped, though it couldn't really be called that anymore. 'It was very hard to find the path home. But I wanted to come back to you!'

Zhen rose from his resting place on Gui's back to nuzzle at her cheek with his warm snout, lines of light burning between his scales. 'Only because of me. Silly Gui would have gotten lost many times on his own,' his serpentine half bragged. He too had grown much. Now, over two meters of serpentine body extended from the rear of Gui's shell, making Zhen longer than his lower half, if much smaller overall.

'Zhen wanted to sleep longer. Lazy Zhen,' Gui accused from below. 'I finished my first dream much sooner!'

'You did not!' Zhen hissed, drawing away from her to glare down at his other half. 'Clumsy Gui probably did not even find answers!'

"Settle down," Ling Qi intervened, tapping Zhen on the snout. "I'm just glad that you're back. You've gotten so much bigger now. I won't be able to carry you anymore."

'I can carry Mo-' Gui caught Zhen's eye and corrected himself. 'I can carry Big Sister now. I've gotten really strong!'

Ling Qi let the slip pass, her grin not fading as she leaned down to wrap her arms around Gui's stubby neck, and Zhen hurried to pile on, coiling around her shoulders. "I bet you can. We'll definitely have to try it out."

Ling Qi could admit to herself that she took a certain pleasure in the expressions of her fellow disciples as she rode out of the residential district on Zhengui's back. Being blatant was fun sometimes. Even if it was a really uncomfortable and awkward seat. Thankfully, Zhengui kept it slow, and she didn't fall off. That would have been embarrassing.

Zhengui's presence in spiritual form was much like a warm blanket constantly wrapped around her shoulders. She would never be caught wholly alone again, and that thought was comforting. It did make her realize that Meizhen had been present less and less often of late to the extent that she had begun to miss their training sessions.

That was a little worrying, particularly since the girl had not made any excuse for it. Her friend could be incredibly frustrating at times by taking reticence to the extremes that she did. Bai Meizhen did stop at their home at least once a day though, late at night. So after spending the day ranging about with Zhengui and working out the final kinks in her cultivation of Thousand Rings Fortress, Ling Qi returned home and settled in to wait in the front room while Zhengui went to nap in the garden.

Ling Qi prepared tea for Meizhen and herself. It had been awhile since they'd taken a cup together, and she'd come to appreciate it more after spending so much time around Cai Renxiang in the last few weeks. She had guessed the time correctly because Meizhen arrived home just as she poured the first cup.

Ling Qi took her first sip as she heard the door close and heard Meizhen's faint, even footsteps on the wooden floor of the entry hall. As Meizhen stepped into view, Cui coiled loosely around her shoulders, Ling Qi met her eyes. "Welcome home. Do you think you'd like a cup?"

Bai Meizhen paused, her brows slightly furrowed as she regarded Ling Qi. "I suppose," she replied, even as Cui flicked her tongue dismissively and looked away. "What brings you to the house at this hour?" she asked as she stepped into the dining room and settled herself elegantly across from Ling Qi. "You are usually out taking in moonlight."

This was cutting into her meditation time, Ling Qi knew, but she could afford it. She was nearing the point where further cultivation was stalled until her breakthrough anyway. She carefully poured a cup and pushed it toward Meizhen before answering. "Even I take breaks now and again," she said lightly. "I thought it would be nice to brew a pot of this again. It's been awhile."

Meizhen leaned forward to take the cup from her, taking care to avoid brushing her fingers over Ling Qi's. In a moment of relative expressiveness, Meizhen closed her eyes and inhaled deeply from the steam rising over the cup, some of the tension melting from her shoulders. "It has. But I recall that you used to find the flavor rather repulsive."

"It grew on me," Ling Qi said with a shrug. "Maybe my taste improved?"

"Likely enough. You have the senses to appreciate the flavor now," Meizhen acknowledged.

Ling Qi made a sound of agreement, eyeing her friend over the rim of her cup as she sipped. "What has made you so busy? I don't mind if you need some time to yourself, but I admit, I'd like to know why. Sun Liling is probably hurting for a victory. Going off by yourself can be dangerous."

Meizhen favored her with a flat look.

Ling Qi waved off her nonverbal response. "I hide while I'm out and about. She only caught up to me that last time because I was being incautious and that ass Yan Renshu was tailing me. You don't exactly disguise your presence anywhere you go."

"It would be beneath me to do so," Meizhen said with a frown. "Skulking is best left to the lesser branches of the family." Ling Qi simply nodded, not taking offense, since she knew the girl didn't mean any. "If the barbarian wishes to confront me on my travels, she may. I will meet her with my full force."

"I know you will." Ling Qi smiled. "But all the same, she's been getting trickier. I wouldn't put it past her to jump you with her whole faction at this point."

"What is left of it, perhaps," Bai Meizhen scoffed as Cui dipped her head down, stealing a taste of the tea as she had done when she was smaller. "I do see your point. Trusting in the honor of a Sun is foolish. I suppose I imagined that she would have more pride than that."

"Maybe she does. What have you been doing that's so important? Did you find a really good site to cultivate at?"

Meizhen looked away, seemingly hesitant to answer. Ling Qi regarded her friend patiently. She would drop it if the other girl asked her to, but until then, she was going to ask.

"I have been taking steps to eliminate the threat that Yan Renshu represents. The efforts you have put forth alongside Lady Cai have been impressive, but his threat remains," the pale girl answered after consideration. "I may be overstepping my bounds to an extent, but if you are too softhearted to do so yourself, as your friend, I feel I must do so."

Ling Qi blinked. That wasn't quite the answer she expected, but there was something weird about Meizhen's phrasing. "I don't mind, but I'm not sure what you mean by 'overstepping your bounds.' You can beat up whoever you want, can't you?"

"He is your prey," Meizhen expanded, staring at her as if she had said something dumb. "You took it upon yourself to ruin him. I do not understand why you stopped - and I apologize if you had some longer plan - but you cannot leave an enemy half-defeated like that. I had assumed you to simply be squeamish about finishing things..."

"He's already about as neutralized as he can get, isn't he? What is there left to do?" Ling Qi asked.

Meizhen studied her. "Ling Qi, who do you imagine would retaliate if that boy were crushed entirely? Death may be a step too far here in the Sect, but he still retains the resources to do harm."

"I thought that I had after breaking his last base. Do you know something more?"

Cui flicked her tongue disdainfully at her, and Meizhen sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "... I have located his primary remaining lairs, a storage facility and a residence. In the past week, I have foiled no less than three attempts to set an ambush upon you. Would you like to come along, so that I may show you the proper treatment of an enemy without sufficient connections?"

Ling Qi frowned. She was no moral paragon herself, but she had an inkling that Meizhen was not kind outside of their friendship. Meizhen's offer sounded... ominous.

# **Chapter 143 - Finishing Moves 4**

"I appreciate the help," Ling Qi said sincerely, meeting Bai Meizhen's eyes from across the table.

"And yet you are going to disagree with my methods," Meizhen replied coolly.

Ling Qi nodded reluctantly. "I don't know exactly what you intend, but it's probably going to skirt the Sect rules, right?" When Meizhen failed to disagree, Ling Qi continued, toying with the cup in her hands. "I don't want you to be taking a risk like that for me, even if it's a small one given your status. Why don't we just drag Yan Renshu to Lady Cai? Let her spin it as a victory and stuff him in a hole until the end of the year."

Meizhen pursed her lips, not happy with the idea. "This is a personal matter. While I do not doubt Cai Renxiang's skill nor her ability to create a convincing narrative, why bother her with such a thing? Restraining a third realm cultivator is neither cheap nor easy."

"I just don't think going any further than that is necessary. The Sect... Iit's all supposed to be a big game, right?" Ling Qi said. It tasted like ash to say, but that really did seem to be how it was. "Even if Yan Renshu has done some really unpleasant things, I don't-"

"A game?" Bai Meizhen asked flatly, interrupting her. It was startlingly rude for the usually reserved girl. "Shall we go visit that retainer of yours, so that you may tell her the loss of her eye was only part of a game? That she should cease her efforts to ruin her rival?" Cui nuzzled her cheek affectionately as Meizhen closed her eyes in frustration. "While the Imperial court has transformed the sects into a playground for the lesser families, that is not true for cultivators such as yourself."

Ling Qi scowled, the reminder of Li Suyin's situation making her temper flare. "Maybe I don't want to be the kind of person who cripples someone, then makes some half-assed excuse about it," she snapped. "And I want to ask that of you even less. Don't get me wrong; I'm going to help you. But I want to actually follow the rules, and not just the letter of them."

"... It is your vendetta," Meizhen agreed unhappily. "You are being too soft, but I will not gainsay you on this." Meizhen clearly wanted to though. "I had intended to settle the issue three nights from now. Is that acceptable?"

Ling Qi nodded. She didn't like displeasing her friend like this, particularly when she was just trying to help. "I'm thankful that you were willing to put in so much effort for me."

Bai Meizhen simply nodded, elegantly rising from her seat. "Thank you for the tea. I am afraid I have cultivation to catch up on. If you will excuse me?"

Ling Qi sighed, standing up herself. "I do as well. See you in a few nights, Meizhen."

"I will see you then, Qi," Meizhen said as she paused in the doorway, glancing over her shoulder briefly before heading toward her room.

Ling Qi hoped that she hadn't offended her friend too much with her refusal. Glancing down at the dregs in her cup, she drained the rest of the tea with an inelegant gulp and stood. She had three days to wrap up the rest of her plans for the week.

Ling Qi started by heading to the roof to cultivate under the stars and work on deciphering the puzzle that the Moon, or perhaps Xin, had left her. The polished and lacquered wooden slats had moved easily under her fingers as she meditated under the stars, drinking in the stellar and lunar qi. The edges clacked against one another quietly as she lined up the patterns painted on the box's sides. It had taken some time, but she managed to complete it easily enough. It had almost been disappointing in its ease.

That had been a foolish thought. When the last slat had fallen into place, the box shook in her hands, giving off a single, high, clear note. The outer layer of wood then collapsed, transforming into crumbling leaves which had fallen from her surprised hands, only to be blown away by the next breeze.

Left behind was a smaller box, this time of polished and worked silver with deeply inlaid patterns of onyx. Curious, she moved the first piece, sliding it smoothly into a new position. A soft twinkling song began to play and surprised, she stopped to examine the apparently musical box.

Then the tune cut off, and the piece she had moved snapped back into its starting position, almost pinching her finger.

To her mounting frustration, Ling Qi found herself unable to keep up with the second box's timed resets, and by the time the sun had begun to rise over the horizon, she was more than ready to put the irritating box away. She would come back to it tomorrow night, but for now, she was going to meet up with Su Ling, not to mention she first had to get Zhengui up and moving. Her spirit was still terribly lazy in the mornings.

Actually, with Zhengui awake again, perhaps she could have a bit of fun with her friend...

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Upon giving it a second thought, Ling Qi could admit that surprising her friend with Zhengui might not have been the best idea.

It was still pretty funny though.

"I'm sorry!" she called up, from where she stood on Zhengui's back, balanced on the spikes of his shell. "Please don't be mad. It was just a joke." Dust and grit still drifted across the clearing, stirred up from when Zhengui had burst from the ground.

Su Ling glared down at her, still clinging to the uppermost branches of the tree she had bolted up, ears and tails both standing on end like a startled cat. "Ha. Ha," she stated flatly. "What the hells made you think that would be funny!"

Gui peered up at her guilelessly. "Big Sister? Why did the fuzzy girl go up the tree like that?"

"Why do the prey run when you jump out, foolish Gui?" Zhen hissed from behind. He smugly peered up at Su Ling from over Ling Qi's shoulder. At least someone thought the prank was funny.

Gui blinked and appeared to be thinking hard for a moment. "Ah! I'm sorry! Don't worry. Big Sister won't let Zhen bite."

"She'd better not," Su Ling grumbled darkly, giving Ling Qi one last glare before dropping from the tree. She landed in a crouch, easily rising back to her feet. "Seriously, leave the jokes to other people, will you?"

"I suppose I'm not really good at it," Ling Qi muttered. She had figured Su Ling wouldn't be fooled by Zhengui's trick, but the other girl's guard must have been down. "No harm, right?"

Su Ling ran her fingers through her tangled hair and gave a frustrated sigh. "Sure, no point in getting mad at you. Anyway, I had something to give ya, if you're done trying to give me a heart attack."

Ling Qi hopped off of Zhengui's back, leaving the spirit to bicker back and forth between himself. It would be some time before they were done. "Oh, did you guys manage to do something with that liquid from the vent?" she asked curiously.

"Yeah. Made a pill that'll give your spiritual cultivation a pretty strong boost and make working with Argent Arts easier." Su Ling's ears twitched as the other girl tossed Ling Qi a small pill case. "I can't refine more than one a month, so use that well, alright?"

Ling Qi inhaled deeply from the medicinal vapor which escaped when she cracked the case to peer in. She was already at peak Yellow so it wouldn't do her much good at the moment, but once she broke through, a pill like this could be a real boon.

"That's pretty impressive," she complimented. "I'm glad you guys managed to do something with it. Are you sure you just want to give it to me though?"

"First one's free," Su Ling said, showing a bit of tooth with her smile. "Suyin has gotten some good use out of the stuff with her project too, and you were the one who found the main ingredient."

"Thanks." Ling Qi tucked the case away in a pocket. "How about you? Thinking about what you're going to do yet?"

Su Ling frowned, her eyes briefly flicking over Ling Qi's shoulder. She glanced back, only to see that Zhengui had wandered off to dig into a fallen log, the loud crunching of the wood echoing over the clearing.

"I told ya I'm not worried about that," Su Ling said dismissively. "I haven't changed my mind."

Ling Qi nodded, unsurprised. "Fair. That's why I'd like to ask you something." She was worried about her friend. If things went well, Ling Qi and Li Suyin would both enter Inner Sect, leaving Su Ling alone on the Outer Mountain. Meizhen's reminder of what can be done by high nobles to commoners without protection pushed that worry further to the fore. "What do you think of those girls who have been following me around?"

Su Ling wrinkled her nose. "I get why you let 'em. You've pissed a lot of people off." Ling Qi simply continued to look at her; the girl knew that wasn't what she meant. "They're fine, I guess? They seem nice enough. Haven't traded more than a word or two with 'em though."

"So you wouldn't mind them joining us for training?" Ling Qi asked cheerfully. "Not here," she added, gesturing toward the vent, "but in general."

"I... guess?" Su Ling raised an eyebrow. "They're not like that snob you hang out with in private, right?"

Ling Qi frowned at the insult directed at Xiulan but let it pass. It wasn't wrong. "No. Ma Jun is a little prickly about politeness, but that seems like a personal dispute with her sister." She paused to find the best way to articulate her reasoning. "I just think you could use more friends."

"I don't need that kind of handholding," Su Ling said, irritated at the implication.

"Maybe not," Ling Qi shot back. "But have you really thought about what it's going to be like if Suyin and I both graduate?"

Su Ling frowned, her ears flat against the side of her head. "Yeah, I have. Doesn't change the fact that I don't want to be pitied."

"Just give them a chance, you stubborn girl," Ling Qi said, exasperated. "I'm offering to introduce you to some friends, not giving you a treasure."

"Fine," Su Ling conceded. "Now, are we gonna train or what?"

"Sure," Ling Qi replied cheerfully. "Have you thought about what you want to trade me for Argent Current yet?"

"... Yeah," Su Ling answered reluctantly. "Will a second one of those pills be good for a down payment?"

It would pay for it in full considering that she had wanted to give it for free, Ling Qi thought, but any argument would just make Su Ling insist on paying more. Instead, she nodded, glad that her friend would be a little better armed.

## **Chapter 144 - Finishing Moves 5**

The remaining three days passed quickly in training and cultivation. Hunting with Zhengui, as well as helping him get used to his new size and power, ate into much of her time. The puzzle continued to frustrate her, snapping back into its starting configuration long before she could solve it. In the end she decided to set it aside to work on the other project that she had wanted to work on this week.

Researching dragons, as it turned out, was quite easy. The only trouble was sifting through the subject matter for something useful instead of collected folktales or treatises on the uses of powdered dragon scales.

As she put the last of the books away at sunset on the third day, she headed out to meet with Meizhen to plan their approach. Some part of Ling Qi wanted to call in Xiulan and the others, or even Cai and her enforcers, and come down on Yan Renshu with impossible force, but... Meizhen did have a point. Ultimately, this was personal between her and Yan Renshu. From his initial attempt to frame her to her retaliation leading to his faction's downfall, the enmity had only escalated. And Ling Qi did not want to go running to Cai at every threat.

So the two of them would take care of this. Fu Xiang would keep an eye on Sun Liling's movements to make sure they didn't get pincered if Yan Renshu called for help, but actually dealing with him would come down to her and Meizhen.

Ling Qi dropped soundlessly from the branches to land beside Meizhen. "We're clear. No one is following," she said as she straightened up, smoothing her gown. "How long do we have before the charms wear off?"

"Six hours," Bai Meizhen said softly, opening her eyes to glance at Ling Qi. "The false images will last for two. Are you certain this is where you wish to strike first?"

Bai Meizhen did not often remind her so explicitly of the kind of resources the pale girl could call on, but she had not held back tonight. Their home in the residential area lay under an illusion, giving the appearance that they were at home performing their normal evening routines. Meizhen had also provided Ling Qi with a bracelet of silk cord that sparkled like diamond in the moonlight, far superior to the little charms she had purchased at the market. Bai Meizhen wore one herself as well. They were well and truly invisible to remote viewing and detection arts from a cultivator at their level.

"Yes," Ling Qi said confidently. "Yan Renshu's threat is from his resources. Cut those off, and even if he gets away, his threat is much reduced." She felt a stirring of excitement from Zhengui, dematerialized in her dantian. He thought of this as an adventure.

Meizhen let out a sigh. Ling Qi could tell that she disagreed still. "Very well. Let us proceed then. The tunnel lies further ahead."

Ling Qi followed as her friend began to walk, moving with the same ephemeral grace as always despite the rough terrain and scrubby underbrush in the lightly wooded region that lay past the outskirts of the market. Ling Qi had not expected one of Yan Renshu's remaining bases to be so close to a public area. She glanced at her friend's impassive expression as they walked.

"I did not mean any insult when last we met," she said. "I just lost my temper when you mentioned Li Suyin." She didn't want Meizhen to think that she thought poorly of her.

Meizhen did not reply at first, and they continued to move in silence. Eventually, her friend responded, "I did not take it as one. You are soft, and that worries me. But I suppose I would not value you as I do if you were as cruel as I."

"I'm not soft." Ling Qi frowned. "I've told you how I grew up. It's not like I don't know how things are. And I don't think you are cruel either."

"Then you have a false impression of me, Qi," Meizhen said candidly. "The Bai are cruel. I am cruel. You are my friend and uncomfortable with that, so I have made an effort to spare you from witnessing it." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Perhaps that was a mistake."

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think you are," she replied. "I've seen cruelty before. You're not... You're ruthless, maybe, but I do not believe you are cruel."

Meizhen sighed. "This is not the time for such a talk." She shook her head as she came to a stop between two thin trees. "The tunnel is here beneath our feet. Your spirit can breach it?"

"He can," Ling Qi confirmed, Zhengui sending her twinned feelings of enthusiastic confirmation. "There are no worms nearby?"

Meizhen stood still, and Ling Qi felt a tingle as the girl's qi passed over her. "No. There are no deliveries at this hour. Those that remain are inside. Break the token I gave you once you have entered the main chamber. Then signal Zhengui."

Ling Qi nodded, recalling the image of the polished blue stone slip Meizhen had given her in preparation. Breaking it would release a small lake's worth of water, flooding the room and tunnels. More importantly, it would let Cui have the complete freedom of movement to catch any worms that her mist failed to trap. According to Meizhen's investigation, the smaller worms weren't actually bound to him, so killing them wouldn't notify Yan Renshu via changes in his bound gi amount.

Ling Qi nudged Zhengui with her thoughts, pushing him to dematerialize in front of her, his bulk quickly taking shape. With her silent urging, her energetic spirit attempted to quietly dig his stubby claws into the dirt and burrow down.

Meizhen gestured, and a shimmering plane of water formed in the air before her. Cui slithered down from her perch on the girl's shoulders, eyes fixed on the water. By the time the floating pool had finished expanding, turf and dirt had piled up behind Zhengui, and Ling Qi felt the sudden rush of air as he breached the tunnel.

Ling Qi's form blurred into darkness. Then, she was inside, gritting her teeth at the disorienting sensation of being squeezed into a space too small for her normal body. It remained deeply uncomfortable, but she could deal with it.

She did only have so much time if she did not wish to waste qi though, so she rushed forward, little more than a streak of darkness. She flowed through the narrow, partially collapsed tunnel as fast as she could. When Ling Qi emerged into a cavern, she took in her surroundings.

Crates, baskets, and other containers were stacked haphazardly around the enclosed space. The floor was simple packed dirt, and the walls and ceiling were held up by wooden supports. On the far wall, she could see a wide array that looked like the entrance mechanism.

Nearer to her and of more immediate interest was a sight that made her wrinkle her nose. She had emerged from a bowl-like depression in the floor a bit more than a meter deep filled with offal and the half-devoured carcasses of several goats. Worms burrowed in and out of the half-rotten and partially dissolved goat corpses and sloughed off meat.

A quick glance showed a half dozen of the things, smaller specimens that were only as thick as her arm and perhaps a bit longer. They were a far cry from the huge specimen she had seen in his other lair or even the ones in the pits. Were these what he had left?

Having emerged right in their midst, Ling Qi knew she didn't have much time to consider the matter. As her form expanded to its proper dimensions, she expressed the tablet Meizhen had given her and snapped it between her thumb and forefinger.

Despite expecting it, her eyes widened at the deluge that poured out, roaring like a waterfall from her hand. The worms screeched in alarm as the water flooded over them, rapidly filling the depression and washing away their noxious food. She winced as the resulting waves knocked over the nearest crates with a crash, but they weren't the main concern. Sending a feeling of readiness to Zhengui, she drew her flute and began to play, drowning out the sound of water being forced from a rapidly collapsing storage space.

Mist flooded from her flute, and by the time she had alighted on an overturned crate, the first screeches of distress and pain were rising from the worms as shadowy fangs and claws tore at their rubbery hides. She felt her qi settle into all but one of their numbers, and her eyes fastened on the single worm that wasn't thrashing about in confusion.

She needn't have worried. In her element, Cui was little more than a blur, and Ling Qi caught only a flash of green scales between the young serpent's emergence from a ripple in the water and her darting forward to sink her fangs into the side of the unaffected worm. The thing shrieked, almost sounding human in its agony despite the warbling distortion of the water.

Ling Qi tore her eyes away from the shriveling creature even as Cui pulled back, the bite wounds in its side rapidly blackening and flesh visibly rotting away. She had felt the tug of one of the remaining worms breaking through her mist, slithering rapidly toward one of the flooding tunnels, the rush of the water speeding its movements.

Because her mist would persist and trap the others for long enough, she let her flute drop from her hands and expressed her bow, smoothly nocking a sparking arrow and firing it into the center of the fleeing worm's mass. The arrow punched all the way through the squirming creature and left it spasming as lightning wracked its nerves. A single bite from Cui finished it.

What remained was essentially spearing fish in a barrel. None of the others were successful in breaking through the mist to escape, and their panicked attacks accomplished little as she and Cui finished them.

It was a little piteous if she were being honest, but Ling Qi pushed those thoughts aside as she hopped down from her perch on the crate. She grimaced as her slippers squished on the muddy floor and scooped her flute out of the water. Resolving to polish it later, she dismissed it along with her bow as Cui pulled her fangs from the twitching corpse of the last worm.

"Good job. That went as quickly as we could have hoped," she said, glancing at her green-scaled companion.

'Do not speak to me,' Cui replied coldly. Her voice still sounded like that of a younger girl but one close in age to her. 'Open the door for Sister Meizhen.'

Ling Qi paused in the process of stepping over a rotting chunk of goat ribs. "Ah... excuse me?" She asked. "I know we haven't spoken much but... did I do something wrong?"

Cui turned her head to face her, tongue flicking out to taste the air disdainfully. 'You hurt my Sister. She still wastes her time upon your affairs, and yet, you do not even appreciate it. I, Cui, do not like you. Open the door.'

Ling Qi grimaced. She had been aware that Cui had stopped speaking to her, but she supposed she had never quite connected the dots. She opened her mouth to speak then thought better of it. Meizhen was right. This wasn't the time for conversations like this. She moved toward the entrance array, and after a bit of examination, she activated it.

There was a deep grinding that sent vibrations up her spine as seams formed in the shape of a door around the array and the newly made portal ground open. Meizhen and Zhengui awaited her on the other side. Zhengui bulled forward immediately.

'Big Sister!' he greeted her excitedly. Ling Qi couldn't help but smile and reach down to pat him on the head.

Meizhen sidled past him gracefully, wrinkling her nose as she took in the mess that the storeroom had become. "You were successful then?"

"Yes. None escaped. You're sure he won't be able to detect this?" Ling Qi asked, giving Zhengui a stern look as he trundled in and looked about to take a bite out of a stack of plants she didn't immediately recognize.

Meizhen gave her a long-suffering look. "The charms we are using occlude our immediate area as well, and you should have been able to tell that these beasts were unbonded." She crouched as she spoke, allowing Cui to slither back up her arm. Not a drop of the water on the serpent seemed to touch her.

Ling Qi nodded. "I know. We should still hurry though. I imagine he's gotta check in on what he has left fairly often." It would hurt to leave so much loot behind. Actually, they should probably just burn most of this...

She blinked as Meizhen flicked her sleeve, and an entire stack of crates and a bushel of faintly glowing bamboo vanished. Her friend caught her expression and raised an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

"I didn't expect you to bother with that kind of thing," Ling Qi said sheepishly, even as she hurried to follow her friend and pick up some choice bits in her own ring. "It's..."

"Beneath me, yes," Bai Meizhen acknowledged, continuing to consume entire piles of goods with a gesture. "That is the purpose of this endeavor though, is it not?"

"Yeah," Ling Qi agreed quietly. "Thank you again, Meizhen."

"... Whatever our disagreements on the method, this is for you," Meizhen replied just as quietly. "Let us not dally any further."

Ling Qi nodded fiercely and set about looting Yan Renshu to the bone, leaving the warehouse empty of all but corpses.

## **Chapter 145 - Finishing Moves 6**

"May I ask what your original plan for this was?" Ling Qi asked, glancing over at her friend from her perch among the tree branches. They were at the edge of the lake which Yan Renshu's central base was in. They had hurried here, knowing that even if their opponent couldn't see exactly what had happened, he was likely aware that *something* had happened.

"I had intended to collapse the structure," Meizhen answered. She stood on a thin branch, which somehow held her weight without bending. "Then trace the trail of his escape method if he had one."

Ling Qi grimaced. "Wouldn't that have good odds of, well, killing him?"

"A terrible tragedy indeed," her friend said dryly without looking away from the lake. "I, of course, had intelligence indicating that he was elsewhere at the time. But even if he weren't, a cultivator of the earth element would be hardier than that." Her tone told Ling Qi she found the question ridiculous.

Even if death was an unlikely outcome, Ling Qi found the flippancy with which Bai Meizhen referred to another disciple's death to be disheartening. She didn't doubt that her friend could get away with an excuse like that should it come to that. The Bai were on the outs with the Imperial court, but in the end, the Sect wouldn't risk giving insult to a founding house over someone like Yan Renshu. The more she learned about Imperial politics, the less she liked them.

"So... will I be sneaking in via a tunnel again?"

Bai Meizhen shook her head slightly, white hair swaying in the wind. "I will approach the front gate and use a Siegebreaker Rod. While polished, his formation arts lack sufficient safeguards against being overloaded."

"... What is a Seigebreaker Rod?" Ling Qi asked, morbidly curious. Within her dantian, Zhen seemed to be curious, perking up at her thoughts of explosions.

"It is a somewhat antiquated tool of warfare but suitable for our purposes. It breaks low ranking arrays within a certain radius in a manner which leads to their invested qi exploding." She glanced at Ling Qi. "There are safeguards against such things, but they are beyond the resources of a common Sect Disciple."

Ling Qi grimaced as they dropped down to the ground. "How much are you spending on this?"

"It does not matter. A few baubles are no concern to me," Meizhen evaded. "He will either flee or prepare to confront me. In the latter case, remain hidden until we are engaged."

"Sure, I have your back," Ling Qi replied without hesitation, putting aside her concerns for the moment as she faded back into the undergrowth. "Be safe, Meizhen."

"Of course," her friend said, stepping smoothly out of the shadows and onto the surface of the lake. The dim light of the moon overhead shone on her hair and white gown. Meizhen made no effort to hide herself, standing out like a candle on the dark surface of the lake. She strode forward across the water, seeming to flow across the rippling surface as she approached the rocky island in the center. There was

no response from Yan Renshu that Ling Qi could see, but she remained tense all the same. Ling Qi could make it across the span of water in a single dash if she tried, and she readied herself to do just that if necessary.

Soon, Meizhen approached a recess in the sheer cliff, and Ling Qi's sharp eyes caught the appearance of the black rod in her hand as she strode imperiously toward what Ling Qi assumed to be the entrance. Leaning forward, she watched as her friend reached the cliffside and stretched out her hand.

She felt it then, a flare of jagged, sharp-edged qi as the rod touched stone. A sharp crack followed like a sledgehammer striking a boulder, then a blinding flash and the sound of shattering rock. When Ling Qi blinked away the spots, she saw a yawning crack running straight up the cliff face and the crumbled remains of a hidden door. With the smoke and dust rising from the passage beyond, she could just barely see fires flickering inside.

For Meizhen's part, she stood where she had been before, a thick, glittering sphere of water slowly retracting into her hooded mantle of black water. She stepped into the shadow of the ruined door without further pause, and Ling Qi took that as her cue to cross the lake. Meizhen certainly had Yan Renshu's attention now.

Ling Qi blurred, becoming little more than a flitting shadow as she crossed the distance in a single fluttering bound and landed on the cracked cliff face.

"- tire of your cowardice, Yan Renshu." Ling Qi heard her friend say as she ducked inside, using the cracks left in the walls and ceiling to creep along above and behind Meizhen. "Emerge and surrender, or suffer further ruin." Meizhen, she had to admit, had "imperious disdain" down to an art form.

Meizhen walked ahead of her, her steps not disturbing the water steadily flooding in from the shattered doorway. The narrow hall was lit by unnatural firelight, and the remains of formation arrays burned and sparked on all sides, carefully shaped characters melting the stone they were painted on or chiseled into. Meizhen passed the side halls that branched off with nary a glance, and Ling Qi followed, keeping a careful eye out for any intact formations or hidden puppets.

As they neared a large circular room filled with mirrors, Ling Qi saw the damage from Meizhen's first use of the rod had tapered off. Her friend came to a halt, golden eyes glowing faintly in the darkness. Cui coiled around her shoulders, hissing softly as her mantle rippled.

"Do not think that I cannot sense you further within, worm. Do you imagine that your burrow can still hide you?"

For a moment, as Meizhen's voice echoed down the hall, Ling Qi thought that Yan Renshu would continue to ignore her. But when Bai Meizhen raised the hand holding the Siegebreaker Rod again, she was proven wrong. The walls and ceiling rippled like water, and pillars of stone erupted to crash down on Meizhen's position.

Strands of metal sang, and two pillars were shredded to gravel as Meizhen expressed her weapon and flicked her wrist. A third exploded violently, showering the hall with pebbles when a thick heavy blade appeared over Meizhen's shoulder and smashed it apart with thunderous force. The rest, Meizhen simply avoided, twisting out of the way with impossible grace.

From within the mirror room, hidden alcoves opened, a half dozen black iron puppets emerging with a variety of weapons forged onto their limbs. Formations flared to life on the walls, and characters burned on the surface of the puppets, blazing with empowering qi. Yet, compared to the last time, their numbers were meagre.

Then the tip of the black rod in Meizhen's hand touched the frame of the doorway, that terrible jagged qi erupted again, and the room exploded. Ling Qi winced, pulling back back as a cacophony of shattering glass and shrieking metal reached her ears. When she opened her eyes, she saw the room ahead reduced to shambles, dust and dirt drifting down from the cracked ceiling as the entire structure shuddered. The puppets lay in shattered fragments on the floor.

Meizhen's talisman was crumbling, drifting like ash from her fingers, its power spent. The sight made something clench in her gut. What had to be months of work by Yan Renshu had been ruined in an instant by Bai Meizhen, just like what had happened when Cai Renxiang had made her move. This was what it looked like for someone of mortal background to face a scion of the old nobility bent on their destruction. Yan Renshu's final defense, his last respite, broken by some trinket from Meizhen's clan vaults.

... It made her glad that she had made the friends she did.

"I have had enough of your toys and your minions." Meizhen's cold voice rang out, distorted by the water shroud still rippling around her. "Fight, flee, or kowtow. My mercy is coming to its end."

Ling Qi felt Yan Renshu's presence, a deep earth-tinged and sickly qi like a sucknig mudpit, before she saw or heard him.

"I have seen the mercy of your type." His distorted voice echoed from the far hall. "It is not worth much." The boy's voice was full of hate as he stepped out of the smoking hall across from Meizhen. "You will break what you will, take what you will, and call yourself kind for leaving behind a few scraps."

Ling Qi frowned as she peered at the figure wrapped in thick violet mist, barely visible at its center. Within her dantian, Zhengui was almost vibrating with excitement; he wanted to help her beat the bad guy. She quelled him with a quiet thought as she crept closer.

"Your estimation is incorrect, but only as a matter of degrees," Meizhen admitted as she casually stepped forward into the ruined mirror chamber. "You have joined our game. The fault for being underequipped lies with you." The sword hovering over Meizhen's shoulder shot forward then, the air screaming in its wake.

In response, the violet mist erupted, boiling outward to consume the room. A disc of dull metal emerged to block the strike from Meizhen's flying sword with a sharp crack. Sparks erupted where they met, and the flying weapon spun away while the disc fell to the ground in shards. There was a rumble from the entrance as water swept in, pulled by a flaring of her friend's qi, and the lakewater that flooded into the room on a wave failed to touch her.

Ling Qi kept her eyes peeled, flattening herself against the ceiling in a literal sense as she became a shadow, flitting from one patch to the next as she waited for her moment to strike. Water and acidic

mist clashed, and she saw worms erupt from the ground, much bigger than the sentries they had slain before. Cui lashed out, coiling around and biting one. Another shrieked as Meizhen's whipping ribbon blades tore it apart.

As she waded into the mist, Ling Qi finally caught a glimpse of her opponent. She dived, slipping through the shadows of the many worms boiling from the earth. Even in her distorted senses, the oily feeling of his qi was unpleasant.

She finally saw Yan Renshu clearly then. He was a stocky young man with a shaved head wearing a dark green and black robe, but his back was bent and his right shoulder twisted by some damage. In his hands, he wielded a staff of dark wood. He glared hatefully at Meizhen, a snarl on his scarred face.

Yan Renshu did not stride on the ground but slithered, moving via a carpet of writhing, slimy black worms that poured from the hem of his robe. The violet mist clung to him like a cloak, compressing to near solidity here and there like plates of writhing armor. Before him floated a slab of black rock curved like a shield. Power radiated from it, and she recognized the stony shield as a domain weapon.

So, it was only when Meizhen's flying sword screamed through the air and the shield blinked upward to block it that she made the final jump, diving into Yan Renshu's shadow. Immersed in it, out of touch with the physical world, the verbal barbs the combatants traded were blurred as if she were listening from underwater.

Immaterial still, Ling Qi drew back the string of her bow and let wind and lightning flow through her arms. Ling Qi felt the twitch of awareness pass through her opponent's qi, but it was too late.

Ling Qi emerged from his shadow, the sparking head of her arrow barely an arm's length from Yan Renshu's back, and *loosed*.

The explosion of lightning rocked the cave. Ling Qi was already dodging backward, skipping meters back to regain her distance and avoid the spinning staff strike that whistled through the clinging acidic mist. She was less prepared when a massive shape rose from the writhing worms, a rounded head and a circular maw lined with teeth, ringed by beady black eyes and wet with slime. She had just a moment to remember the lightning that had chased her from Yan Renshu's first lair as sparks danced in the beast's maw.

Lightning erupted, and Ling Qi raised her arm to defend, flaring with emerald qi.

'Bad man!' Twin voices roared as a shape materialized in front of her, a high spiky shell and a sinuous serpent, rearing back to strike. Her eyes flew open in alarm as the lightning struck her little brother, and he cried out in pain.

There was a thunderous crack as Meizhen's domain blade impacted Yan Renshu's shield again, its supernaturally sharp edge gouging the stone and leaving a fissure across its surface. Meizhen advanced behind it with ominous steps, fully cloaked in her Abyssal mantle. Her golden eyes gleamed from the shadows as metal ribbons and lake water alike carved a bloody path through the tide of worms. Water trailed from the hem of her gown like a serpent's tail.

A smoking wound scored Yan Renshu's side where her arrow had drawn blood, and his face was drawn in a grimace of pain and growing desperation as the hungry tendrils of violet mist that sought to engulf Meizhen were carved to drifting shreds by the flash of metal ribbons.

Ling Qi didn't care. Wind surged through her spine and lightning sparked from her bow as she fired three arrows in rapid succession. Yan Renshu's worm beast roared in irritation and pain as arrows sprouted from its stony hide.

To her relief, Zhengui shook himself, rising back off of the floor with sparks still dancing across his shell. His blunt claws dug into stone, and she could feel his qi spreading roots that drew vitality from the earth to repair his wounds. Zhen reared back, spitting again and again, charring and burning swathes of the smaller worms that tried to swarm them.

"Enough dregs." Meizhen's voice was an icy hiss, and it was only her many sessions training with Meizhen that allowed her to not freeze up as a wave of primal terror rippled out from the girl's golden eyes. Its icy claws dragged at her mind, washed the colors from the world, and vibrated the very air.

All around her, worms spasmed and died, their hearts, or what passed for hearts, failing under an inundation of supernatural fear. Yan Renshu's brow was marked by sweat, but he stood where his summons and minions died.

Ling Qi had to concern herself with his spirit beast. The worm lunged for Zhengui, meters of oily flesh emerging from the rock as her little brother withdrew into his shell. He fell to the floor with a stony thump as the beast coiled around him, hammering and gnawing at his shell with its toothy, acid-dripping maw. Zhen struck and bit at the beast, but his fangs failed to find purchase on the rubbery hide.

Breathe. Draw. Release. An arrow loosed, a crackling bolt that hissed and spat as it ricocheted, leaving only a glancing wound. Again. The arrowhead bit a shallow gouge into black flesh.

Again. Again.

Arrow after arrow she fired into the putrid thing, that tempestuous rhythm of a released bowstring playing out as fast as the materialisation from her ring would allow. A frustrated stamp of her foot against the stone floor sent a pulse of wood qi towards her little brother, Hundred Ring's Armament blooming over his shell.

Across the room, Meizhen and Yan Renshu dueled, and even at this distance, she could feel the wind and pressure from their weapons. Of their duel, she could only see a blur of violet mist, whitecapped water, steel and wood. This... This was the difference between the second realm and the third.

As Zhengui let out a yelp of pain, Ling Qi's lips drew back in a snarl, and she dropped her bow with a clatter. By instinct, her flute found its way to her hands. She had no musical techniques or arts that did harm directly. She didn't have time to wear the beast down with her mists.

But she had spent the last few months learning song from Zeqing, a spirit of ice and death. She had learned that there was more to music than mere physical sound, that emotion could scar the world as easily as a sword. Ling Qi raised her flute to her lips and played a single stanza of hate.

Over the clash between Meizhen and Yan Renshu, over her spirit's cries, her music rang out, and the beast attacking him recoiled. Ling Qi stepped forward, wood qi armoring her body and limbs, and played another stanza. She felt it this time in the senses she had only recently begun to properly develop and saw the gash appear in the beast's aura. It screamed, uncoiling from Zhengui to spit lightning, and Ling Qi snarled back in defiance, layering Deepwood Vitality atop Hundred Ring's Armament.

It shattered, forcing her a step back, but she was unharmed. She played again. This time, the creature's spirit tore, and in the physical world, its flesh burst open, toxic green blood oozing down its side.

Zhen's fang's dug into the worm's open wound, pumping liquid flame into exposed and vulnerable flesh. The worm screamed, and its powerful coils flexed, hurling Zhengui at her and tearing the fangs from its flesh. Ling Qi dodged aside on a flow of shadow, and wove again the armor of Deepwood Vitality around Zhengui. She was burning quickly through her qi reserves. It was only made worse as she played another bar, the sharp notes cutting deeply into the beast's aura. She knew she was wasting qi with this unrefined, untrained attack, but nothing else had been working.

There was a crack then. Yan Renshu's shield had cracked into two broken pieces. The boy screamed as Meizhen's poison-edged ribbons carved through armor and robe to scour his chest. He kicked out to knock away Cui, who had sunk her fangs into his calf, and leapt back.

"Choke on your victory then," he snarled. His beast dissolved into oily black smoke. There was a faint shimmer as something materialized in his hand, a ceramic sphere that glowed with a complex web of formations.

Before she could do more than begin to prepare herself to defend, Bai Meizhen moved. She blurred in Ling Qi's vision, and a pale white hand snapped out to grasp Yan Renshu's wrist. Violet mist erupted, sizzling as it engulfed them both, dissolving stone and rock. Ling Qi cried out, forcing her depleted qi to ripple out and armor Meizhen too. Her friend's eyes burned in the darkness.

"No escape. No tricks." The words echoed as if from underwater. There was an ugly, painful crack, and Yan Renshu howled in pain as his mist dispersed. The talisman he had drawn fell from his hand, and there was a flash of green as Cui lunged from the water underfoot to snatch it from the air and swallow it down.

Yan Renshu had fallen to his knees before Meizhen, and his hand hung limp. His wrist was bent and twisted in her grip, purple and bleeding flesh bulging between her dainty fingers. Even then, he struggled to rise before potent, venomous qi pulsed from Meizhen's hand. Then he stilled.

It was only Ling Qi's enhanced senses that let her see that he was still breathing. His expression, still twisted in pain and fury, twitched violently. He was paralyzed.

'*Did... did we beat the bad man?*' Ling Qi was distracted as Zhengui limped up beside her, gravel from the crater he had made in the wall still falling from his shell.

"Yeah, we did," Ling Qi said quietly, reaching down to pat his head. "Good job."

'... That's good. Gui is tired,' he mumbled.

"You can both rest then," Ling Qi said, and with a tug on their bond, he dematerialized, returning to her dantian.

"You are carrying this," Meizhen said bluntly, releasing Yan Renshu's broken wrist. She gave her bloodied fingers a disgusted look. Here and there, Bai Meizhen's skin was reddened with mild burns, and her lower lip was split, but that was the only sign of the fight.

Ling Qi grimaced, looking at Yan Renshu. "I guess we need to get him to Cai Renxiang."

"Unless you wish this venture to have been a waste," Meizhen replied with a sniff, turning away to exit.

Ling Qi eyed the paralyzed boy's expression and the boiling hate she could feel behind his eyes. She wondered if she was making a mistake.

## **Chapter 146 - Finishing Moves 7**

Ling Qi stood uncomfortably behind Cai Renxiang with the rest of the gathered council. She still wasn't used to this, being the one with authority. However, with Yan Renshu kneeling on the ground, his hands bound and his head down in front of them, she could not deny that there was a certain satisfaction to it.

He had been healed, his wrist no longer twisted and broken, but the manacles on his wrists suppressed his qi, rendering him effectively helpless before his peers.

Cai Renxiang's expression was impassive. "Do you have any words to say in regards to the charges leveled against you?"

"Would it matter if I did?" Yan Renshu sneered. "Do as you will."

Beside her, Fu Xiang pushed his eyeglasses further up his nose, lenses glinting in the light cast by Cai Renxiang. . "You have seen the evidence and the records prepared, my lady. The case is clear."

The heiress closed her eyes briefly before she pronounced, "You are guilty, Yan Renshu, of poison and sabotage used against one of my subordinates. You are guilty of a truly staggering amount of blackmail and false contracts. You have refused all offers of honorable surrender."

Yan Renshu remained stonily silent.

"This is the Sect, so your actions are mitigated by the nature of our competition, but you must still be punished," Cai Renxiang continued after a beat. "You will remain under house arrest until the end of the year. You will be observed at all times, and your work scrutinized by experts to ensure compliance. Your remaining funds will be divided and given to those whom you defrauded. That is my judgment."

"Oh, I will still be allowed to work and cultivate. How generous," Yan Renshu said darkly.

"Indeed," Cai Renxiang said with narrowed eyes. She glanced at the enforcers flanking him. "You may return him to the Medicine Hall."

Ling Qi watched as her enemy was led away, and Cai Renxiang turned to them to speak. The full council would be having a proper meeting soon, and Cai Renxiang would have something to announce at that time. However, it was hard to worry about that as she caught Meizhen's eye.

They needed to talk. As the others left, Ling Qi approached Meizhen. "Do you want to do this now?" she asked quietly.

"... Yes. It would be best to put any further misunderstandings behind us," Bai Meizhen said stiffly.

"Up to the pool, you think?" Ling Qi asked carefully.

Meizhen gave a shallow nod. "I think so."

They changed their course without further conversation, the two of them lost in their thoughts as they ascended the mountain. Neither of them found the climb a strain any longer, and soon, they arrived at the dead end which contained the still, frozen black pool, far from prying eyes or ears.

Ling Qi came to a stop at the edge of the pool while Meizhen continued on, gliding steps carrying her across the slick ice. "How do you want to do this? I know I suggested it, but I'm not entirely sure what we're supposed to say to each other."

Meizhen turned to face her, the pale girl's blue and white gown billowing in the icy wind. "I would have you attempt to make me understand why you think my methods wrong," she said plainly. Ling Qi watched her raise her hands, falling into the loose stance she took on those occasions she fought unarmed.

"Meizhen, you know I can't beat you. I don't think that's going to help," Ling Qi said, crossing her arms.

Her friend closed her eyes, letting out a long suffering sigh. "Qi, do not be such a mortal. We may speak and spar at the same time," she explained, not moving from her stance. "If your hands cannot reach, then you must simply give greater thought to your words."

"This is one of those things I don't quite get yet, isn't it?" Ling Qi asked rhetorically, nonetheless falling into the simple unarmed stance that Elder Zhou had taught them at the beginning of the year upon seeing that her friend would not be moved on the matter.

"Conflict is the core of all things," Meizhen said quietly. "Not many truly recall that in these modern days. We are born from it, live it, and in the end, die from it."

"Unless you ascend, of course," Ling Qi joked as she eyed Meizhen's defenses. There were no real gaps to exploit. There never were. She brought her foot forward and stepped, snow bursting up behind her as she snapped out with a palm to strike Meizhen in the stomach. Her hand was deflected easily by Meizhen's own. It seemed that they were sticking to basics for this.

"Even spirits are not eternal, as we understand such things," Meizhen replied. Ling Qi rolled to the side of the retaliatory knife hand that struck through where her shoulder had been. "But that is not the conversation we came here to have," she continued as they traded blows.

"No," Ling Qi admitted as their spar worked a slow circle around the surface of the pool. Meizhen was still taking it easy on her; she simply wasn't the girl's match in unarmed combat, even using the more refined movements taught in Argent Current. They continued in silence as she gathered her thoughts. "I don't know if I can say you are wrong. But for me, I want you to be. I told you before, didn't I? I ran away from home. I left my Mother behind, convinced of my own righteousness, but it just left me alone."

"I do not understand the connection in what we speak of," Meizhen replied, not unkindly, as she nearly sent Ling Qi tumbling, her foot having almost caught Ling Qi's ankle.

"It matters because it wasn't the only time that I made a choice like that," Ling Qi shot back as she regained her footing and counterattacked, finding herself perfectly deflected each time. "I don't know how much you can understand what it's like, living like I did. In that situation, you're barely better than an animal. You scrabble and fight just to live, throwing aside everything that doesn't help you in the immediate present. You betray and you hurt and even..." She cut herself off, letting out a ragged breath as she fell back a step to recover her stance. "I want to be better than that."

"You will have a difficult path then," Meizhen said. "I will admit that I cannot understand what you speak of," she continued as she stepped forward, shifting into offense, a probing jab whistling past Ling Qi's ear. "I have known hunger, pain, and privation, it is true, but only within the context of survival exercises." She paused thoughtfully, although she didn't let up physically. "Some part of me knew that no matter how harsh Grandfather might be, he would not let me die in such a pathetic way."

"Pathetic, huh," Ling Qi snorted as she wove through her friend's deliberately slowed offense, sneaking in ineffectual counterblows. "That's a good word for it."

"I meant no insult," Bai Meizhen said evenly.

"I didn't take it as one. It's accurate. I do not want to be pathetic anymore though," she said stubbornly, offering up a feint. This time, anticipating the deflection, she twisted her wrist, managing to grasp Meizhen's own and pull her out of guard.

Ling Qi whipped a short, open-palmed hook towards the momentary opening, only to grimace as Meizhen twist-stepped in time with the motion, sweeping her ankle out from under her with casual grace and catching the striking arm in her grasp. The girl's pale fingers locked around her forearm, and she seamlessly followed through with the rotation, a combination of raw strength and the momentum of her own strike yanking Ling Qi from her feet. She managed to right herself in midair from the throw, landing on her feet behind Meizhen, who was already pivoting to face her.

"I don't want to *have* to treat everything like a matter of survival. I don't want to have to *kill* someone just because we are in conflict."

Meizhen spun away from her charge, graceful steps carrying her across the ice. "Even if it causes you more harm in doing so? I do not ask that you become some petty tyrant, but you have no reputation. Before you may grant mercy, you must make it known that you are capable of doling out consequences, else it will rightfully be seen as weakness. You will be exploited."

"Why are you pushing this so hard?" Ling Qi asked irritably. "Do you really think a conflict in the Outer Sect is worth that much escalation? To violate the rules of the Sect? To put into jeopardy the relationship with Cai Renxiang?"

"I think teaching my best friend the value of proper action is more valuable than the life of some craven miscreant!" Their physical actions receded in importance as they continued speaking, strike and counterstrike happening more by rote than conscious action. "And Cai Renxiang would understand," Meizhen tried.

Ling Qi could not help but scoff at that, and Meizhen grimaced.

Meizhen was quiet for a time. "I do not want others thinking that you may be trampled upon so freely."

"Nothing he was doing was outside the Sect rules. I was handling his sabotage," Ling Qi replied in exasperation.

"You should not have had to!" Meizhen answered, anger in her voice. "Escalating small matters to the death is foolish, but what you did to him was no small harm! Your luck will not hold indefinitely, Qi!"

Ling Qi fell back, pushed by both words and physical blows. "I'm not just lucky," she snapped. "It's not like I was planning to let it go forever!"

"No, you would have simply dithered about, getting distracted by new things like a magpie in a gem mine," Bai Meizhen said in frustration. "You cannot treat a vendetta so lightly."

Ling Qi replied through gritted teeth, "Let's say you're right and I was being too flippant. Why does it matter so much to you?"

Meizhen's golden eyes glared at her as they broke apart. Neither of them was breathing hard, but they were tense. "Because I understand what happens when one's reputation for retaliation is damaged," she said finally. "You recall what that wretch Kang Zihao said that day he ambushed us?"

Ling Qi eyed her friend warily, staying in stance as she thought back. "... Something about a clan member of yours being executed," she replied, a cold feeling settling in her stomach.

"My Mother, Bai Meilin," Meizhen clarified stiffly. "She was executed for the assassination of the Sixth Prince. Her name was struck from our clan rolls, and Grandfather was forced to denounce her. No one would have dared make such an accusation if we were still feared as we should be."

Ling Qi stared at her friend before words escaped her, prompted by her friend's word choice. "... *Did* she do it?"

"Grandfather would not have wasted his youngest daughter's life on a known wastrel," Bai Meizhen said contemptuously. "We had nothing to gain from such a death, nor would Mother have been caught if so. She was our best..." Meizhen looked away, finally falling out of her combat stance.

"... I understand," Ling Qi said finally, straightening up herself. The bruises from their spar were already fading. "But I think you are projecting in this matter. And what could I possibly do to become as feared as the Bai anyway?"

"Maybe I was," Meizhen admitted. "You can't do anything to become as feared as the Bai, but that does not mean that you should not try. Be merciful, if that is your wish, but make your example first. Prove that crossing you is not to be lightly done."

"I won't let anyone trample on me, but please let me do things my own way," Ling Qi said. "Next time you think that I'm overlooking something, tell me instead of acting behind my back."

"I will do so," Meizhen said. "But I will also inform you when I believe you are acting in error."

"And I will try to listen," Ling Qi replied, bowing her head in thanks. "Meizhen, thank you for everything you have done. I can't put into words how much I appreciate it."

Meizhen looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "Honestly, Ling Qi, there is no need for that."

Whatever else could be said, Ling Qi was glad that Meizhen was her friend.

## **Bonus Chapter - Ancestors Sublime**

Foundations are the key to all success.

The Celestial Empire is a land built upon this principle. Whether we speak of the code of laws which have governed us and maintained order since time immemorial or the cultivation which empowers her armies and rulers without the imprecision and waste of earlier forms, it is the foundation which enables the advances which come after.

Sublime Ancestors represent this truth in its most primal form.

Spirit beasts do not cultivate as humans do. They do not choose their Way nor seek Ascension. Spirit beasts are bound to the material world in a way that humans are not, and so, when they achieve the peak of power, they do not disappear from this world and ascend to the next. Instead, their corporeal shells remain, and mind and spirit goes to wander.

This form of Ascension is lesser than what can be achieved by humans and spirits. Spirit Beasts cannot join the ranks of the Great Spirits, cannot alter the fundamental workings of the world. However, there is one advantage. Unlike Great Spirits, who are bound to not reach directly into this world, spirit beasts, anchored by their bodies, may awaken in this world for a time with power far exceeding the limits of this realm's cultivation.

The Sublime Ancestors are those spirit beasts who have reached beyond the White realm and have some form of ties to humankind. In the Empire, we are blessed to be host to a number of them.

All hail to the Celestial Dragon, guardian of the Empire and the Imperial City, whose resplendent golden scales can be glimpsed on clear days, whose coils stretch one thousand kilometers and more yet cast not the slightest shadow, and whose lightning strikes down the usurper and the failed dynasty. Hail to the guardian and adopted Mother of the glorious Sage who united us all.

All know the tales of her power: the tale of the wrath which reduced wide stretches of the Western Jungles to ashen craters in which even the foul fecundity of that place could not reclaim; and the tale of the Usurper who, in the final blasphemy of the Strife of Twin Emperors, sought to burn the Imperial City and to deny it to the true claimants, was slain along with his army in a single instant by a rain of lightning for his hubris. The ashen shadows of he and his generals adorn the Hall of the Dragon Throne to this day.

Greatest though she may be, the Celestial Dragon is not the Eldest among them. This great honor is disputed, argued by the scions of Bai and Zheng. The truth of the primacy is unknown but largely irrelevant; both are ancient beyond reckoning.

Grandmother Serpent was the spawn of the Dragon God of Rain and the Mother of Still Waters, born in the days when Great Spirits were not yet wholly barred from the material world. An entity of deep waters and lakes, a serpent of unrivalled toxicity, and master of weather and rain, Grandmother Serpent was a beast of terrible power even in the days of her awakening. Appearing as a vast White Serpent, larger even than the Celestial Dragon, it was only the stoic persistence of the great Yao, called the Fisher, which brought her to the side of humankind. With her power and the sacred metals found on the

bed of lake Hei, Yao the Fisher forged a kingdom where there had only been squalid and squabbling tribes. Their union bore the eight half-spirit daughters from which the extensive Bai clan claims its lineage.

It was later, during the rise of the Sage, that Grandmother Serpent would act for the last time. In an echo of the legend of Yao, the Sage chose to withstand a single flick of the ancient serpent's tail. The bay this formed has been the center of Bai naval power since.

Her contemporary, the Reveler, has no known lineage. Some tales say that he was born in the waning days of the dragons' empire from a round stone at the heart of a mountain, the last child of the nameless Mother to match the Sun and Moon. Some tales claim he was a mere monkey whose prodigious talent allowed him to match Beast Gods and take their power for his own. There are as many tales as there are storytellers, and the Reveler encourages this, telling ever-changing versions himself.

What is known is that in the wake of the dragons' fall, a stone ape took up in Water Curtain Cave and taught a band of students, both human and ape. The names of most are lost to history. Only the last student, who surpassed the Reveler and struck down the last of the Dragon Gods, is known. This last student was Zhi the Conqueror, first Matriarch of Zheng.

The Reveler is a curious creature and the most active of the Ancestors. Although his true form, a great black furred stone ape twice the height of a man, meditates beneath the Ebon Rivers' capital, it is common for the Reveler to manifest lesser forms and interact with his kin or simply wander the province. It is from this practice which the Ebon Rivers' rules of hospitality arise. Ware to the lord which refuses a weary, wandering warrior a drink for he could be the Reveler in disguise.

The Reveler is a benign entity, unless driven to rage by bad manners. It is said that the Sage Emperor's rapid and bloodless conquest of the Ebon Rivers was due to a week-long drinking contest after which the Reveler declared him a brother and honorary Zheng.

There was once a third Ancestor of similar age, but the Horned Lord of Emerald Seas has long vanished from this world. The Horned Lord is said to have abandoned his descendants, the Weilu clan, in disgust at their decadence. Little is recorded of this beast in the archives of the Imperial City, save for his form, which was that of a mighty stag which towered over the treetops.

The remaining Sublime Ancestors are less ancient, but if they are less powerful, the difference is largely academic.

Two of the "younger" generation are, like the Horned Lord, gone from the material world. The Grandfather of Tides once walked the shores and shallows of the North, and his descendants, the Jing, ruled there for a time, but the great crab's form was recorded as dissolving into seafoam a short time after the Unification. Few records remain of it after the Jing departed the Empire in a city-ship for parts unknown, leaving Alabaster Sands without a ducal clan until their vassal, the Jin, was raised to the seat.

Of the Purifying Sun, we need not speak for her death and the Cataclysm that followed in the Golden Fields is the stuff of legends, known to even the meanest peasant.

We then come to the Living Isle, Ancestor of the strange and reclusive Xuan clan of the Savage Seas. The home of the Xuan is a mighty Serpent-Tortoise upon which the rulers of the Savage Seas make

their home. Unlike the other Sublime Ancestors, it was a step below what we now call the White realm during the time of the Sage Emperor. It is, however, only one of two Ancestors to engage in true, lethal battle during Imperial history.

In the days of the second dynasty, the barbarians of the far northern isles arose in force against the noble men and women of the Savage Seas. These barbarians even went so far as to awaken the great demon of the depths which they worshipped, a monstrous and hideous creature best left undescribed. In response, the Xuan had no choice but to awaken their Ancestor to combat it.

The resulting storm tsunamis and earthquakes reduced much of the province to rubble and shattered ports further inland in the Alabaster Sands. In the end, the Sea Folks' demon was slain, and the Empire was victorious.

The last and youngest of the Sublime Ancestors is the Herald of Endings, the white owl who roosts upon the mist shrouded peaks which surround Mount Tai. The Herald is the Ancestor of the Mu, the third and greatest of the Imperial dynasties. The Mu is the first dynasty not to be beholden to one or more of the provinces, and they held the Empire together during the turbulent decline and fall of the second. The Herald is young however, having surpassed the mortal realm only a few millennia ago.

However, the Herald's wisdom and mastery of death is not to be looked down upon. In the wake of the terrible invasion of the southern barbarians, the then-Prince An sought wisdom from his Ancestor in bolstering those parts of the Empire which had begun to fail. Upon her advice, Prince An established the Ministry of Integrity shortly thereafter, reinforcing our great Empire and ensuring further millenia of prosperity.

It is upon these foundations which the Empire prospers. Sublime Ancestors form the bedrock of the power which brings us unity and superiority over the barbarous tribes and beasts which surround us. And in those places where those foundations have failed, new ones are laid.

In the ruins of the Golden Fields, the Guo rule from Grandfather Fortress, the mobile capital which allows them to rule that scattered realm. A titanic scorpion who carries all of the residents and his descendants on his back, the beast is not one to tangle with, even if he is not yet Sublime!

In the south, the Duchess Cai has gone further than any before in the creation and enhancement of object spirits. She weaves ever mightier works, and it is suspected that she might be the first to create a Sublime Ancestor that is an object spirit.

Even in loss, even in hardship, the Empire prevails, growing stronger and stronger.

- Preface to Ancestors Sublime, a text penned by Imperial scholars shortly after the beginning of Empress Xiang's reign

## **Chapter 147 - Finishing Moves 8**

It had been some time since she had actually seen the full Outer Disciple Council together for a proper meeting, Ling Qi thought as she took her seat at the far end of the table. She had attended a few meetings out of politeness and when shadowing Cai Renxiang, but it had become fairly rare for everyone to get together once things had started running smoothly. Hopefully, Cai Renxiang's announcement wouldn't be the start of more trouble. Ling Qi wanted to resolve her most pressing social concerns then settle in to attempt to break through this week.

Yet here they all were. Xuan Shi sat to her right with his hands folded in his lap and his head tilted down, his wide conical hat shading his face. He had broken through at some point since the last time she had seen him, but it wasn't complete yet; his physical cultivation lagged his spiritual.

On the far side was Huang Da, who she hadn't given a thought to for months. She still felt a hint of revulsion when she looked at him, but it was a fleeting thing. He was solidly in the middle of the second realm with his spirit just on the edge of late, putting him firmly in the position of having the lowest cultivation on the council, a fact he was no doubt aware of given the signs of stress in the blind boy's body language. He was tense and on edge.

Across from them were Han Jian and Fu Xiang. Han Jian seemed to be in a better mood than usual, perhaps because his cultivation had finally gotten to the late second realm or because Xiulan had been restraining her temper better. Fu Xiang, on the other hand, had the same blandly pleasant expression that he always did. He seemed to have gotten new robes, deep emerald green ones with embroidered scrollwork resembling eyes on the hems.

Fu Xiang met her eyes briefly, and she became uncomfortably aware that she had made no effort to repay his favor yet. He didn't seem bothered by her delay, but when did he ever? She gave him a polite nod and turned her eyes back to the head of the table. Meizhen sat beside her, eyes closed in low level meditation as Cai arrived, Gan Guangli at her back.

The heiress strode up the steps into the pavilion with the same unwavering poise that she always did, but her expression was different. The set of her features remained stern, but there was a hint of pride there, usually absent.

"Thank you all for gathering here upon short notice," she announced as she reached the top of the stairs and Gan Guangli stepped forward to pull out her seat. "I would not see any of you left out of this announcement."

Ling Qi looked at her curiously, as did everyone else, but no one spoke up. It was obvious that the heiress was simply allowing a beat of silence for effect as she took her seat.

"Princess Sun Liling has surrendered to my authority, effective as of one day ago." Cai's words cut through the expectant silence of the pavilion. Ling Qi leaned back in her seat, surprised and a little suspicious; she didn't take that girl for the type to give up. And why would they trust her word anyway?

She glanced around at the other council members, whose expressions conveyed varying levels of surprise as well... except for Fu Xiang, who simply seemed a touch more smug than usual. Had he already known?

There was some murmuring among them, but it was Meizhen who spoke up first. "If I may impose a question. What assurances have been given for her surrender?"

"The princess has agreed to make a public concession this evening at the front square. She will give her word, on her family's honor, that she will not seek to oppose my authority or seek vengeance upon myself or my subordinates for the remainder of the year."

Ling Qi didn't miss the emphasis Cai put on the word "family." She understood enough about how this worked to know that including that kind of caveat made things more serious. From Meizhen's look of satisfaction, she thought the assurance was enough as well.

"There will be the traditional material concessions as well, of which you will all receive a part."

"That's good," Han Jian interjected next. "What happens to her subordinates in lock up?"

"They will be released into her custody at the end of the week," Cai said calmly.

"We are just going to let that beast Ji Rong run free?" Huang Da said unhappily. As loathe as she was to do it, Ling Qi found herself agreeing with Huang Da, but she wouldn't have put it the way he did. Capturing Ji Rong in an ambush like that wouldn't happen again. "You would allow an unrepentant bandit to potentially steal the place of one of your supporters in the Inner Sect?"

Han Jian didn't look terribly happy either, but he remained silent. Cai Renxiang, on the other hand, frowned at the outburst, and Huang Da's expression briefly became sheepish.

"I did not begin this endeavor for solely selfish purposes," the heiress said frostily. "Ji Rong's banditry has been punished, his ill gotten goods confiscated, and his ransom paid. He will compete as fairly as any other."

"That is not to say that you cannot still challenge him yourself, Sir Huang," Fu Xiang said lightly. "Duels are still allowed. We must simply all operate within the rules."

"The rules change, but conflict remains. Such is the world," Xuan Shi said, sounding unworried.

"... It's not that bad a thing - to give him the same benefit that anyone else in lockup would get," Ling Qi said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Past the initial dislike and worry at having her position in the tournament threatened... wasn't it good that he wasn't going to be disproportionately punished?

"As Miss Ling says, Justice must be even-handed," Gan Guangli supported.

"I agree on this, but why not let Lady Cai finish?" Han Jian said politely, his expression once again smooth. "I am sure she is aware of the full implications of her actions. There is no need for clamor over it."

"Thank you, Sir Han," Cai Renxiang said. "Our war has not ended without gain. Even if one does not value peace and order within the Outer Sect, I am not without means. I understand the true worry that without constant harrying, the Princess and her remaining followers will grow stronger than they might

have." She paused, looking around the table to meet each of their eyes in turn. "Let them, I say. I shall not fail to provide similar opportunities to my own."

Meizhen cocked her head to the side, a look of interest in her eyes. "The matter we discussed before?"

"Indeed," Cai said. "My lady Mother is satisfied with my progress, and as such, she has granted me a boon. I have elected to request the use of one of our clan's White Rooms for the remainder of the year. It will be prepared by next week."

Ling Qi glanced around, noting that everyone else seemed to know what that was. She met Meizhen's eyes briefly, and she gestured subtly, indicating "later." Ling Qi nodded slightly; she wouldn't have to interrupt the meeting to ask and appear ignorant. Given the way the meeting turned to discussing how the time in the place would be divided, it seemed like it was some kind of artificial cultivation site.

Other than that, there was only attendance to Sun Liling's surrender to discuss. It wasn't mandatory, but Cai Renxiang strongly indicated a desire for their presence. Ling Qi did not intend to miss it.

Still, she did not speak up again until she and Meizhen were heading away from the council meeting. "... So, White Room, huh?" she asked casually once they were well on their way. "Is that as fancy as the name would indicate?"

"Quite," Meizhen said evenly, keeping her gaze straight ahead as they walked side by side. "They are cultivation aids in the form of medicinal spas contained within pocket spaces. They were the Cai's primary income source before their ascension to a ducal house. Lady Cai Shenhua would rent their use to powerful cultivators reaching bottlenecks. It is an unusual opportunity for mere second and third realms to be able to use one. I suppose it is a return to norm for Cai Renxiang herself, as the Cai Manor maintains one of the two permanent Rooms."

"The Duchess must be pretty happy with Lady Cai then," Ling Qi mused. "I admit, it'll be pretty nice to see Sun Liling eat crow in public."

"Very much so," Bai Meizhen agreed, a slight smile curving her lips. "As much as I might wish to see her further hindered, this is the best realistic scenario."

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In the end, Sun Liling's surrender to Cai Renxiang was both satisfying and not, Ling Qi thought. She and the rest of the council stood behind Cai in orderly ranks with a number of enforcers spread out further behind them. Overall, it was a big, ostentatious display of strength, and Ling Qi had a feeling that some poor low ranked grunts were probably pulling double duty to make up for their superiors' absence.

Cai stood at their head with Gan Guangli by her side as the Princess' significantly smaller procession approached. Sun Liling had only two individuals with her, Lu Feng and Kang Zihao. The Princess was dressed more femininely for once, wearing a clingy green dress worked with floral embroidery. Unlike most gowns Ling Qi had seen here, the sleeves were not long and billowy nor did the hem trail behind her.

Kang Zihao had cropped his hair short and acquired a suit of polished armor with breastplate, bracers, and greaves forged from pale white steel. He had also, Ling Qi noted sourly, reached Bronze, if only recently going by the slightly erratic feel to his qi. Lu Feng, on the other hand, still wore plain, dark red robes with only thick leather bracers as a concession to defense. He was fully in the late second realm now.

Cai Renxiang watched the three of them approach silently, no trace of the victorious smile that had touched her expression at the council meeting present on her face. Sun Liling and the two boys with her came to a stop a respectful distance away, giving every appearance of not noticing Cai's train or the "audience" of other Outer Sect disciples observing from a safe distance.

... Which was apparently a good hundred meters away. Fair enough.

"Princess Sun, I have received your missive and agreed to offer you truce in order to speak." Ling Qi refocused her attention as Cai Renxiang began to speak. "You have my assurances of safety until the cessation of negotiations." Ling Qi supposed they were putting on a show even though the terms had already been decided as part of the deal.

"You are too generous, Lady Cai," Sun Liling replied, her usual drawl mostly absent as she offered a short but visible bow. It was bizarre seeing the redhead acting so formally. "I was in error to doubt your abilities." Ling Qi glanced at Meizhen, who looked exceptionally pleased at what she was witnessing. Relatively. She still maintained her emotionless and solemn expression, but Ling Qi could see the signs.

"I was unproven at the time. I can understand your doubt," Cai said generously. "Princess Sun, you too have acquitted yourself well."

"But not well enough," Sun Liling said, and Ling Qi liked to imagine she could hear the gritted teeth behind that statement. "I have come here today to offer my concession. Although our conflict was not a simple duel, I hope you will accept my surrender." She could definitely hear the bitter anger in the redhead's voice now.

Ling Qi tuned out as the two began to bandy terms back and forth, looking over her fellow council members and their audience. There were a lot of whispering and meaningful looks going around in the observers, but mostly, she saw weary resignation as they looked upon Cai and her supporters. It looked like the time of open conflict really was ending.

The amount of spirit stones Sun Liling paid in reparations was enough to make her atrophied sense of greed flinch. Even her part of it was more wealth than she had ever had in her possession at once. She might have to start looking into what could be ordered from crafters outside the Sect in preparation for the tournament, especially once she broke through.

#### Interlude - Ji Rong

His fist slammed into the wall, and just like the last dozen times, there wasn't a single mark or crack in the smooth, featureless stone.

Letting out a frustrated snarl, Ji Rong spun on his heel and returned to pacing the tiny cell he had been stuffed in. Barely a dozen paces across in any direction, the hollow cube was driving him nuts. At least when that scaly freak had sealed him the first time, he hadn't been aware of the time passing. This was worse.

He couldn't recover his qi and try to blast his way out of here. Any time he tried to draw in qi, the damn bone collar around his neck would heat up and drain it away before he could do anything. He couldn't even cultivate!

#### That damned Cai!

He slammed his fist into the wall again, breathing heavily as he leaned against the flat surface, the stone cool against his forehead. He wanted nothing more than to beat that smug expression off her damn face.

When he'd still been playing along with her stupid rules, Xuan had come up to him, warbling some cryptic bullshit about breaking trust and corruption, and he knew he'd been had. Inviting him had just been a trap. Something to give her an excuse to put down the uppity commoner.

They were always like that, mortal or immortal. Nobles that sneered down at the people below them like so much trash. He was so damned sick of it, but it seemed that it was impossible to escape.

In the end, he still wasn't strong enough. He was sure that he could beat that Gan guy in a straight fight. Getting stomped on by four goons and that tricky girl as well? No shit he couldn't beat that. That Ling Qi girl alone was trouble, but backing up a guy like Gan? No, he'd need more than some Sun faction fodder to match that.

Ji Rong grunted as he dropped to the floor, seating himself against the wall. That wasn't right either. If he hadn't gotten jumped unaware, he could gotten out of that. Chu had given him a talisman just for that.

He shifted uncomfortably at the thought of the older girl. She made him feel weird. From the day she'd saved his ass from those spirits on the upper mountain, she'd treated him like a dumb kid. It would have pissed him off normally, getting pitied like that. Being looked down on.

Maybe it was just the way she did it. She treated him like a stupid little brother, tripping into trouble.

Pale and still, lying on the straw mats in their ruined home, blood dried on her lips. Just one more victim that no one gave a shit about.

The collar around his neck burned painfully hot, and for an instant, sparks crackled around his bare fists. Fucking Huangs. The fact that Cai had invited that scumbag should been enough to tell him she wasn't any different. He'd bought it though.

Justice was bullshit, as always. At least Sun Liling didn't pretend to be anything but what she was: a bigger thug.

He could remember the predatory smirk on her face as she broke him out of the time lock formation and made her offer. It had been music to his ears, furious as he was. Even now, he didn't regret accepting. They had almost beaten that damned Cai in the first big fight against Cai's council.

Chu Song had tried to warn him away after that, but he couldn't bring himself to listen. She thought that Liling was leading him around by the dick, but that wasn't true.

Well. Not entirely true. He could admit that Sun Liling was easily the most attractive girl he had ever seen. He wasn't made of stone.

But he followed her because he knew she was right. She only bothered with all the bullshit about face and niceties when she had to. She was just as cruel as any other noble, but it was an honest, direct cruelty. He'd be lying if he said he didn't find it exciting.

He couldn't picture the bloody princess skulking around preying on mortals. Tigers didn't hunt mice.

She would get him out of here. He was confident in that. He was still strong, stronger than anyone else following her. Kang, the stuck-up ass, had been failing to break through for weeks now, and he hated following her besides. It was obvious to anyone who spent five minutes in that jackass' presence. He resented all of them.

So she'd come for him, one way or another, and then...

He jerked as the wall across from him rumbled, shooting to his feet as his hands rose into a solid guard stance. The stone rippled like water, flowing apart, and the fresh qi from outside struck him like a wave. He breathed it in, feeling the collar heat. Was this his chance...?

"Yo. You look like shit."

He came up short as he caught sight of bright red hair and heard a familiar voice. Sun Liling stood before him at the entrance to his cell, her arms crossed under her chest. She was flanked by two of Cai's enforcers, who stood stiffly and warily behind her.

"You look like you just came from a tea party," he responded dryly. She was wearing a dress. He'd never seen her wear *any* dress before. It was a fancy-looking thing covered in floral embroidery without the wide sleeves and trailing hem that other girls on the mountain seemed to prefer. He preferred those clingy silk pants she usually wore, if he were being honest.

"Don't remind me," Sun Liling said sourly, her face scrunching up in distaste. "Get outta there. We need to go."

"They on the take?" he asked, gesturing to the enforcers, even as he hurried to step out of the cell lest it close with him in it.

"As if I'd stoop so low," she retorted, stepping aside smoothly to give him room, smirking at the glowering enforcers. "Nah. This is all nice and legitimate."

He scowled. Had he misjudged her that badly? There was only one way this kind of thing got settled "legitimately." Combined with the dress, that only pointed to one thing. His expression made his conclusion obvious.

"Do not say a word." The statement was as cold as her eyes, lacking any of the drawl that she usually affected. "Get the collar off of him," she added, her gaze flicking back to an enforcer who shivered under her gaze. Wimp.

He stood stiffly as the boy did something with his collar. It clicked open, freeing him from its weight. He managed to keep his silence until they were well away from the isolated building he had been kept under. It was quite a feat given the anger boiling in his stomach.

"I can't believe you just gave up!" The words exploded out of him. "I thought you were better than that! What happened to all that big ta-"

Stars exploded in his vision as the back of her knuckles met his lips, and he flew backward, slamming painfully into one of the trees that lined the path and sliding down.

"The guy who got stuffed in a box doesn't get to talk like that." He groaned as she spoke, blinking away the spots in his vision to find her looming over him. He grunted as her foot impacted his chest, pinning him to the tree.

He shuddered at the bloodlust he could feel thrumming in her qi as she stared down at him like a beast ready to tear him apart. She hadn't gone soft then, he thought through the ringing in his skull.

"... Why then?" he asked defiantly at the beautiful red-haired monster.

"I'm done playin' her game, that's what," Sun Liling replied, her eyes narrowed. "I'm done wasting resources on something pointless."

"So you gave up," Ji Rong pointed out flatly.

"Man, d'you like getting your ass kicked?" Liling asked. "We're pulling back till we have the advantage."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" He spit blood from his split lip to the side.

"It means we're focusing on the tournament," she replied, lifting her foot away. Some part of him felt vaguely disappointed. "Let Cai play house for a few months. We'll break them in the ring where they can't run," Liling said darkly as she turned away, "in front of the eyes of all the Empire."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked as he stood unsteadily.

"There's gonna be a lot of important folks watching this year's tourney," Liling said lightly. "Even Gramps is gonna send a simulacrum. I'll be needing your help to make sure Cai and all of her little minions are humiliated. I can't be in every bracket myself after all."

"I still don't like it," he said mulishly. "We're still letting them win now."

"And that's why you'd be a shitty commander," Liling said flatly. "If you can't even accept making a feint to win the overall fight, I don't have any use for you." She turned back to face him, staring him down.

It burned, but... she wasn't wrong. As things were, he was just hurting himself. He was close to breakthrough, but if he kept letting himself get set back...

"Fine," he ground out. "What do we do then?"

"You? You're gonna get a little 'training from hell." Liling's smile sent a chill down his spine. "And when you get your chance in the tournament ... don't disappoint me."