

# FORGE OF DESTINY - Volume 1

**Author:** Yrsillar

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In the Celestial Empire, a land ruled by Immortals and stalked by Spirits and Beasts, a young girl from the slums of an unimportant city is found to have the Talent that may allow her to become an Immortal herself. Sent to the storied Argent Peak Sect to harness her talent, she must work desperately to catch up to peers who have been preparing to walk the Way for years. The Sect grants new students only three months to prepare and grow before the true challenges begin and the disciples are freed to battle each other for resources and strength. Contending with tests, strange teachers, unfriendly peers and her own ignorance, Ling Qi must not only defeat many obstacles, but find those willing to stand at her side when the truce ends. Can she learn to not only survive, but thrive on that journey? Inspired by ancient folklore, modern martial arts and Xianxia, this fantasy novel offers a mixture of life and action while developing a world both fantastic in setting yet familiar in the humanity of its inhabitants.

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# Prologue - Smelting

The carriage was impossibly fast, Ling Qi thought, as she stared out the tiny window at a landscape that was little more than a green and brown blur. She knew she should be excited, maybe awed; she was witnessing the power of Immortals after all. It wasn't something a girl like her could have ever expected to see.

Instead, she simply felt numb. Absently, she brushed a strand of unruly black hair out of her eyes. She had let it get too long again, hanging down below her ears as it was. She was being taken to the Wall, the impassable mountains that formed the southern border of the Emerald Seas province. The carriage was bound for the Argent Sect that resided there, and it was all because a terrifying man in a porcelain mask had said that she had the talent to become an Immortal.

It was why she sometimes heard voices no one else could hear, why she could feel strange presences when she ventured out to the outskirts of the city where the wards against the spirit beasts were porous and weak. She had always assumed she had been born a bit crazy.

Boyish, inelegant, crazy Ling Qi, who ran away rather than play doll for her mother.

It had grated when she was younger, listening to her mother's complaints about her appearance and demeanor, hearing the frustration in the woman's voice when she talked about her. Ling Qi was too tall, too thick of limb, her skin too dark, and her features too long and lacking refinement.

She couldn't say she regretted leaving. It wasn't as if Mother had tried very hard to find her in the four years since she had run off. Ling Qi blew the stubborn strand of hair out of her eyes again and turned her thoughts away from the past. It was pointless now; she would never grow up to be like her Mother, and so, she had left. She was free, even if it meant facing hunger and cold. Even if it meant she had often been hurt or frightened. She might be ugly, be poor, but she was herself, did as she wanted, which to her was all that mattered. It had to be.

Which was why this grated on her.

She should have been ecstatic, the only commoner from her city that had the talent... Would any other denizen of Tonghou be able to raise their heads in front of her by the time she was done training? Would even Mother be able to criticize her? No, of course not.

She still wasn't happy though, because once again she found herself without a choice. She had no money, no resources. Even if she had gone back to Mother, the woman wouldn't have been able to pay the fees described by the recruiter, and if she had refused to go along to the sect, her talent would be removed. She hated the idea of something that was hers being taken away even more.

So once she was done training, she would owe the Empire eight years of military service instead. Not very long at all in an Immortal's lifespan, she had been assured. Really she couldn't say that the idea of facing off against the wind riding mountain barbarians like a figure out of a story didn't excite her.

She just hated not having a choice.

Ling Qi shook her head and turned away from the blurring landscape outside the carriage window. The carriage was eerily quiet. More magic, she supposed, and despite her misgivings, she couldn't help the spark of excitement she felt at the thought.

Still, it had been hours since they left, and she was bored. Even at this speed, it would still be some time until she arrived. So rather than continuing to mope about the past, she decided to turn her attention to the leather satchel sitting on the bench across from her. It contained her meager possessions: a few coins, some clothing, and an old wooden flute that she had liked to play on occasion. Mother's music lessons had been one of her happier memories.

It also contained what she had been provided by the recruiter. Reaching over, Ling Qi picked up the bag and flipped it open. Peering inside, she ran her fingers over the bundle of grey cloth that sat on top. She once again marveled at the smooth softness of the material. Her disciple's uniform, the man had said. Something provided to less well off disciples, since normal clothing would have difficulty holding up to the rigors of training.

There were a few other things too: a hand mirror, a comb, and a sewing kit, among a few other miscellaneous items. She supposed the implication was that she should make herself presentable before she arrived. She glanced down at her rather ragged brown shirt, pants, and muddy sandals. Not exactly the most impressive outfit.

This was the first time in a long time that it might matter though. She hadn't had much time before she had been shuffled into the carriage. If she was going to make an effort, she should do it now. Ling Qi glanced toward the locked door on the other side of the carriage, then back toward the window. There was enough space at least; it really seemed like the carriage was meant for several people. After another moment

contemplating the contents of the satchel, she drew the shutter down over the window and got to work changing.

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Some time later, Ling Qi sat back down with a frown on her face, idly smoothing the wrinkles out of the amazingly soft gray fabric of the outfit she now wore. It was... nice, but she hadn't worn a dress in years. At least it didn't pinch and cling like the ones Mother used to try and make her wear.

It was layered and cut on the bottom half to allow for easy movement, but annoyingly loose around her hips. She had had to bunch up the sash and tie it twice. At least the wide, billowy sleeves would be good for concealing her hands. She could also hide things inside them pretty easily with a bit of work. The embroidery of clouds and stylized wind currents were kind of nice too.

She still felt uncomfortable though. It felt strange to wear something that probably cost more than a month of a laborer's wages. Well, maybe whatever this was made of was the Immortal equivalent of sack cloth? She glanced down at the mirror in her hands. There weren't any cosmetics provided thankfully, so apparently they didn't expect her to dress up that much.

There had been a few hairpins though, made of some kind of painted bone. She thought they went well with her bright blue eyes. That was her best feature in her own opinion. No one else in her hometown had eyes that shade. Not that her effort at pinning up her hair in some resemblance of order had prevented the strands from falling back into her eyes. Maybe she could learn some kind of magic to manage that, she thought idly.

As she put the mirror away and reached for the clean sandals that had been under the uniform, the carriage suddenly jerked, almost sending her tumbling headfirst into her bag. Snapping a hand up to grab the frame of the window, she managed to steady herself.

"Be ready. We're nearly at the entrance plaza," sounded the voice of the man who was driving the carriage. He had seemed... less formal than she would imagine an Immortal to be, greeting her kindly as she had passed the two adults to enter the carriage.

Curiously, she lifted the shutter that she had pulled down over the window. They were now moving along at a much more normal pace while traveling up a meandering mountain path. Somehow, the inside of the carriage remained level despite the slope.

"I will be ready shortly," Ling Qi called back after a moment's hesitation. Whatever had been blocking the sounds from outside was gone, she noticed with a start. She could hear birdsong and the sound of the horse's hooves again as well.

"H-how long do I have?" she asked tentatively a moment later, frowning at the hesitant stutter that had come out despite her best efforts. She was nervous, but she couldn't let them see that. One thing she had learned quite well by now was that the appearance of confidence was important.

"Oh, you've got a few more minutes more," the man called back in a lackadaisical tone. "The Sect doesn't like us speeding on the mountain, at least for those of us stuck on the ground anyway."

Ling Qi blinked. Was he implying that some would be arriving by flight? She had heard stories... but had thought that mostly the domain of the mountain barbarians.

"Thank you. I'll just be a moment." It felt strange to revert to the speech Mother had taught rather than the more relaxed kind she had gotten used to in the last few years, but it felt like a good idea. If there was one thing Mother had been right about, it was that first impressions mattered.

Shaking off such thoughts for the moment, she reached down for the sandals, a determined expression on her face. She would need to be ready.

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When the carriage finally came to a stop, Ling Qi felt she was as prepared as she could be, given that she didn't precisely know what was coming next. The driver hadn't said anything else, and neither had she, preoccupied as she had been with trying to focus and keeping the nervous thoughts that kept flitting through her head from showing.

There was a thud from outside and the sound of footsteps walking around the carriage as she stood, self-consciously smoothing the wrinkles in her new uniform. Shortly thereafter, there was another click and the door opened, revealing the driver.

It was difficult to read his face, or anything really, given how well covered he was. He wore a strange, wide brimmed hat from which hung paper slips covered in odd symbols. It left his eyes barely visible in the gaps between the slips. The high collar of his deep blue robe rose to meet the hangings, concealing the rest of his face. Somehow, he managed to give the impression that he was smiling.

"Need a hand getting down?" he asked pleasantly offering a gloved hand to her.



"I'll be fine, thank you," Ling Qi responded with confidence she didn't quite feel, hesitating only a moment before picking up the now lightened satchel and stepping down slowly to avoid tripping on the hem of her dress.

As she reached the bottom of the steps, she finally got a look at her surroundings. The two of them stood on a wide stone plaza built upon a plateau carved into the mountainside. She could see the steep road they had traveled to get here wind past the ornate gate that broke the stone fence encircling the plaza and vanishing into the mist below.

There was only a single building here, a large two story structure with a high peaked roof that reminded her both of a temple and the scholars' testing hall in Tonghou City. The plaza was dotted with small, tastefully arranged gardens centered around tall peach trees. There was still a trickle of people going into the building dressed in similar uniforms, as well as several other similar carriages, each with their own eclectically dressed driver.

"Hey, might not want to stand around staring too long." She startled as the driver's amused voice jolted her from her thoughts. Ling Qi glanced over at him and then back to the central building. He was facing away from her, working to free the odd, blue furred horses from their harness.

"You're in the last group of arrivals so one of the elders will be down soon to lay out the rules. You're assigned to hall one by the way." He patted one of the horses on the neck, drawing a snort from the beast, as he turned back to face her.

Ling Qi still hadn't gotten a proper look at his face, but somehow, the tilt of his head gave the impression that he was examining her, making her straighten her posture unconsciously.

"Thank you," she responded after a moment. "And... where is hall one? And is there anything else I should know?"

"In the front door. Just follow the signs," he responded dismissively, crossing his arms. The act tugged the long sleeves of his robe up, showing that his gloves extended to at least his elbows. He paused, once again giving her the feeling of being appraised.

"The Elders will lay out the rules. Just be respectful," he added in a lazy tone. "But... find some friends and be quick about it. Loners tend to have trouble. You can't watch your back all the time, you know?" His monstrosity of a hat tilted to the side, and she got the impression that he was smiling again. "Call it advice from a senior who was in a similar spot."

She... had never been particularly good at making friends, much less keeping them, but she could take friendly advice with good grace.

"Thank you again. I should be on my way though." Her voice was more hesitant than she would have liked. She turned to head toward the building then stopped.

"Might I know your name?" she asked. It seemed silly to not at least introduce herself to someone who seemed helpful.

"Dong Fu," he responded easily. "You're right. Get going. You don't want to be late, and I already know your name."

Ling Qi dipped her head in his direction and set off, hurrying along as fast as she could manage in her new clothes.

The Sect's central building loomed ahead. Somehow, she knew, things would never be quite the same again once she crossed that threshold.

## Smelting 2

As it turned out, Dong Fu was correct. The signs were quite clear. Only a handful of other silver robed youths remained in the wide open entrance hall as she entered, and none of them paid her any more than a passing glance.

The rear wall of the entrance hall was taken up by a massive board of ebony wood. A banner was strung up on the board, clearly delineating directions for new disciples. The spotlessly clean wooden interior of the building was honestly a little unsettling. It was unnatural; the floor was so polished that it was practically a mirror, and she couldn't see a single scuff or mark anywhere, let alone a speck of dust.

She couldn't give that too much thought, however, because she was one of the last ones in. As she arrived at the sliding doors marking the entrance to hall one, she could hear the murmur of a large number of people speaking quietly within.

Peering inside, she could see that the large room was built with a series of long desks placed on descending tiers, broken up by shallow steps going down to the pit where the lecturer's podium stood. The desks were almost completely full, and as she stepped inside, Ling Qi caught more than one curious, dismissive, or assessing look from the crowd of chattering fourteen year olds already present. It made her hackles rise; the feeling of condescending dismissal was an almost physical thing.

Giving herself a shake, she forced herself to ignore it and search for empty seats.

The most obvious and first to draw her eye was a whole section which lay empty centered on a pale girl. The girl had snow white hair that fell freely down to the middle of her back and was everything Ling Qi was not: petite and dainty with almost supernaturally pale skin. She was whispering into the sleeve of her uniform, which had been personalized with a scale-like pattern in the embroidery. She seemed to be paying very little attention to her surroundings, yet she sat alone in an otherwise packed room.

The girl raised her head then, looking toward Ling Qi. Ling Qi felt her blood run cold for as she saw the other girl's eyes, golden and slit pupiled. A shudder of animalistic fear rippled up her spine. The moment ended when the other girl broke eye contact and returned her attention to a bright green snake which had just poked its head out of her sleeve.

What was that? She had felt like a mouse in front of a serpent, yet the girl's expression hadn't even been hostile nor condescending, just indifferent.

Ling Qi quickly turned her attention to the other possible seats. There was another girl who had a seat open next to her. She was leanly muscled with sun-darkened skin and bright red hair woven into a single braid. The splash of color stood out amidst the rest of the room.

Strangely, she was wearing a partial boys uniform: a pair of baggy pants rather than a robe and a silken sleeveless shirt. Ling Qi might have thought her a feminine boy if not for how... stretched the shirt she wore was. Unlike the others, who were seated with meticulous posture, she sat with her feet propped on the desk in front of her and a bored expression on her face. Her gaze briefly flickered Ling Qi's way before the laid back girl seemed to dismiss her as unimportant.

Further down, there was an open seat adjacent to the steps next to a tall boy, tall enough that she wouldn't be looking down at him if they stood face to face. He was... well, a little handsome Ling Qi could admit, in the classical way, with noble features and good proportions. But not girlish, the way some nobles and wealthy sorts could get.

Mainly, her attention was drawn by the gold furred tiger cub curled up on top of his head. She stared for a moment, but no one else seemed to think it odd. When he noticed her look, the boy gave her a friendly smile and a slight nod that made the cub on his head growl unhappily.

The last available seat was in the room's far corner next to a short young man with with shaggy brown hair and a rather nasty burn scar extending across his right cheek, down his neck, and under his shirt. It was quite ugly, and it took a moment to pull her eyes from the scar to look at the rest of him. He was of middling height and compact build. Just from a glance, she would guess him to be one of the few others in this room to be of the same... social class as her. He certainly looked as out of place and uncomfortable as she felt.

When he met her eyes, his gaze was measuring and wary. Her eyes skittered away immediately. He reminded her too much of Tonghou, and wasn't she going to leave that behind?

Ling Qi glanced between the open seats, but in the end, the choice was obvious. Dong Fu's advice still echoed in her ears, and... if she was honest with herself, she wanted to follow it.

It came down to loneliness in the end. If there was one thing Ling Qi's effort to remain unconstrained had failed to give her, it was friends. Given Mother's occupation, that pool had always been limited to begin with and living as she had for the last four years had not allowed her to spend a long time in anyone's company.

With that in mind, she chose the option that at least seemed friendly. She began to make her way down the stairs toward the handsome boy with the tiger cub at a sedate pace. Even if his friendliness was a facade, it was better than indifference or hostility.

That seemed to trigger most of those who had been looking at her askance to go back to their own conversations. Now that she had the opportunity to study them, Ling Qi could see that there seemed to be several cliques among those seated here. She was no socialite, but she could see that there was no room for someone like her there.

As she came to a stop next to the desk where the boy was seated, she did her best to put her doubts and worries aside, but it was a difficult thing.

“D’you mind if I sit here?” The words escaped her before she could really think about it, and she clenched her fists under her sleeves. She had been trying to remember to speak formally, but it wasn’t something that came naturally to her anymore. Now he was going to think she was...

“Sure thing.” His laid back words cut off her internal panic. The boy shifted in his seat, moving over a bit to give her more room. The easy smile he gave her absolutely did not make her heartbeat speed up.

“You were kinda cutting it close though, weren’t you?” He had a slight accent that she couldn’t place, which combined with his laid back attitude, seemed to draw his words out oddly.

Ling Qi hastily seated herself before too much attention could be drawn to her embarrassed flush. Not that most were likely to care, her more reasonable side would point out. She glanced up to find him regarding her with something like amusement.

The tiger cub curled up atop his head seemed to be sleeping again, and she briefly wondered how it hadn’t fallen when he’d turned his head to look at her.

“My carriage only just arrived,” she responded, more defensively than she would have liked. She suddenly remembered that she hadn’t introduced herself yet.

“I am Ling Qi by the way,” she said quickly. “If.. ah, you were wondering, I...” She hated the way her voice trailed off into awkward uncertainty. Let her slip through a busy street dipping her hands into pockets or stand up to a fence trying to swindle her, and she could be confident. Apparently, friendly conversation could make her composure crumble in moments.

Worst of all, her damn hair was working its way loose again. She already had a few unruly strands drifting in front of her eyes.

For his part, the boy gave her an odd look out of the corner of his eye as she hunched her shoulders, feeling stupid.

“Han Jian,” he said after a moment. “Nice to meet you. Can’t say I recognize the name. If your carriage just got here, you must be local so that makes sense. My tutors always complained about me not paying enough attention.” He says the last with a self-deprecating smile.

His easy acceptance eased the tension Ling Qi felt and allowed her to sit up straighter. Doing so made her notice that aside from Han Jian, she just might be the tallest person in the room. So much for standing out less.

Still, the implied question made her feel awkward. Was he only being polite because he thought she might be someone of noble birth like him? He seemed almost too casual to be a noble though.

“My family isn’t very important,” she decided to hedge. “Where are you from? I’m, I mean, I am not familiar with yours either.” She stumbled over the words more than she would have liked, but she felt that it was still a decent deflection.

He laughed, and Ling Qi felt the corners of her lips quirk up. It was hard to stay tense around him.

“Guess we’re both a couple of slackers then,” he responded, sounding amused. “The Han family is from the Golden Fields province.” He seemed really amused but also... almost relieved?

Golden Fields... the name was vaguely familiar as if she had heard it once a long time ago. It came to her then. Golden Fields was the easternmost province of the empire, and more importantly...

“Oh, the Grave of the Sun. I didn’t think someone would come from so far away.” She trailed off as she noticed that his smile had gone rather stiff.

Did she say something rude? The story of Lu Guanxi and his final stand was famous. He was one of the Empire’s greatest heroes. She couldn’t really think of a reason why mentioning the hero would offend him. Maybe his family had sent him away and he didn’t like being reminded of how far away he was?

He gave a slightly forced laugh. "Yeah, that's the one. I guess most people only remember us for that old story these days."

Ling Qi looked away awkwardly, pursing her lips. What had she said? She cast around for a change of subject to hopefully end the uncomfortable silence. Eventually, her eyes settled back on his pet, which she noticed had now opened its eyes and was staring down at her with the sort of imperious disdain that only a feline could manage.

"So... where did you get your pet? I've never seen one like that." Truly, she was a master of conversation and that wasn't stilted at all.

Why did it feel like the little tiger cub was glaring at her now?

He blinked, but accepted the subject change. "I was introduced to Heijin by my Grandmother a few years back when I managed to awaken my qi. He's not really a pet though, more like a little cousin."

What was that supposed to mean? Ling Qi had heard of some people treating their animals like family, so maybe he was just one of those. She was about to ask for clarification when a muffled boom cut through the buzz of conversation in the room.

Like the others in the room, her attention was drawn to the source of the sound. It came from below where a tall, thin man had appeared at the lecturer's podium. He was even now lowering his hands back to his side as if he had simply clapped for their attention.

Ling Qi frowned as she studied the man. There was something about him which set her on edge. Perhaps it was his almost unnaturally bland and thin features, clean shaven down to the eyebrows, or the slightly gray tone of his skin. If she didn't know better, she would think him ill.

...Or maybe it was the eye searing shades of pink and lilac he was garbed in. It was bizarre seeing what looked like the robes of a high minister in such an undignified shade. How had someone wearing such loud colors gotten past her like that? There was no door down there, so he must have come through the same entrance she had.

She glanced over at Han Jian, but he didn't seem particularly surprised. She forced herself to relax a bit. It was some form of magic obviously, and not something which anyone else seemed concerned about though a few of the students had been startled out of their seats.

"Welcome to the Argent Peak Sect, children," the strange, bald man said as he clasped

his hands behind his back. His expression was one of careful neutrality, but she thought she could see amusement twinkling in his grey... no, green, no... in his eyes, which seemed to rapidly change colors.

"I am Sect Elder Sima Jiao, Head of the Talisman Department, and it seems that it is my turn to greet our new arrivals." So this man was the one in charge of creating talismans like the spirit repelling totems placed around villages and cities? He must be incredibly wealthy. No wonder he could get away with dressing so outlandishly.

Then she remembered the ridiculous hat her driver had worn. Perhaps becoming Immortal compelled one to dress strangely? While Ling Qi pondered the fashion sense of cultivators, Elder Jiao had clasped his hands behind his back and was giving her and the other students an assessing look.

"I am terribly busy on the best of days so I will not ramble on. To be honest, it is likely that the majority of you will never amount to anything beyond the outer sect where you stand now, and are thus... not particularly worthy of my time." His blithe dismissal drew a grumble from the gathered students, Ling Qi among them. Han Jian's serene expression didn't change though. Perhaps he was simply that confident. Seeing that, Ling Qi let out a breath, reigning in her irritation.

"It is simply reality. Nothing to be ashamed of," the Elder continued, not unkindly. "In any case, your first years here will serve the purpose of separating those with only minor potential from those with true talent. This is why no one will be allowed to leave the sect grounds during the first year, nor will any correspondence be allowed in or out in the first three months."

That seemed to surprise some of the other disciples, setting off a wave of whispers, though no one dared to openly question the elder. It didn't bother Ling Qi though. What did she have outside this place? Perhaps she would enjoy a stroll through her original home when she had made something of herself, but until then, why bother?

"Be silent," Elder Jiao said then, pulling her attention back to him. "You will have time enough for mortal concerns later. Today and in the future, you are disciples of the Argent Peak. The foundation you lay in the first steps of your path will shape the rest of your lives. There is no need for distractions from the outside world." His odd, color-shifting eyes swept over the room as his stern expression softened back into the same easy amusement he showed at the beginning of his speech.

"The only other rule is that you may not kill or permanently maim your fellow disciples nor may you damage or steal sect property. In addition, there is to be absolutely no violence between you newcomers for the first three months. Conflict is important for



your growth, but it would not do to allow potential to be cut off before it can even begin to bloom.”

His words, delivered in a light tone still sent a chill down Ling Qi’s spine. It seemed things wouldn’t be so different from home after all. She found herself eyeing her fellows in a new light, as possible enemies and obstacles.

Ling Qi was brought up short only when she saw Han Jian giving her a reassuring smile. Only then did she noticed that her hands resting on the desk in front of her had clenched nervously. She did her best to return her current companion’s smile, but the expression was a little wan.

It was unlikely that she could rely on someone whom she had only shared a brief conversation with. She managed to calm herself after another few moments; worrying for her safety was nothing new. Besides, the Elder was speaking again, and she needed to pay attention.

“Each of you will be granted an allowance of five red spirit stones per month and access to the Argent Soul Art,” he continued, confusing her. She had no idea what either of those things were.

“For those of you not aware,” he added, “spirit stones are the currency of the Immortals, more valuable than gold or silver.” Ling Qi was suddenly all too aware of the way his unsettling gaze rested on her before passing to a handful of other students in the room.

“Cultivation requires the consumption of the energy in said stones, at least until one masters certain other arts. I would suggest frugality. As for the Argent Soul Art, it is the beginners form of the Sect’s cultivation art. It is exceptional for early growth, if somewhat less effective for mature cultivators.” The older man rolled his shoulders then and glanced toward the door.

“All of your mortal necessities will be provided in the Sect at no further cost. Behind this building are two paths leading to the residential areas. You will be segregated by gender, of course.” He smiled as if amused by some private joke. “I would not suggest trespassing in the wrong zone. Rooming arrangements will be up to you, but expect to room with at least one other disciple. For the first three months, two Elders will be on the mountain to provide beginner’s training in, the physical and spiritual aspects of our arts respectively. I suggest you seek them out because you will need to earn such elder attention later.

"All else will be up to you, your skill, and your talent." He unclasped his hands and brought them back up to rest on the podium, but they were no longer empty. Instead, he held a large jewelry box made of dark green jade. "Now, if you would file up in an orderly fashion, I will be handing out your first month's allowance."

As she stood, preparing to join the forming line below, Han Jian spoke up quietly from beside her. He was now standing as well, and Ling Qi noted that she had been right. He was actually taller than her; it felt strange to look up at someone her own age. Heijin, his tiger cub had migrated from his head to his shoulder, clinging to the fabric with his...? little kitten claws. The tiger cub was still giving the impression of glaring at her.

"Do you need a couple of pointers on getting started?" he asked, sounding a bit awkward. "I couldn't help but notice you aren't actually awakened yet. You just seemed a little on edge, you know?" He followed Ling Qi as she stepped out into the aisle to join the line.

"Thank you," Ling Qi responded after a moment. He had seemed friendly enough, and it wasn't as if she had anything he could possibly want.

"How would I contact you though?" Ling Qi asked.

He hummed thoughtfully as the line shuffled forward. "Hm, I'll wait out in the front plaza here around noon tomorrow. That sound good? I'd rather not end up with last pick of the housing today."

She supposed she didn't have much choice in the matter. She nodded her assent and fell silent. Making conversation was more tiring than she thought.

She soon received her allowance of spirit stones and a scroll case containing her new 'cultivation art'. No one had come out and said it, but she thought it likely that it was necessary for 'awakening' since they were giving it out to everyone. She would have to read it later, and practice. Perhaps she could surprise Han Jian come tomorrow? The thought was oddly pleasing.

For now though, Ling Qi thought as the line moved forward, she had to make sure that she would be able to keep these 'gifts'. The first step to that would be seeing to her housing.

## Smelting 3

The glittering red stones were almost entrancing to look at, Ling Qi thought. Each one was the size of her thumb and had an odd warmth that was very pleasant. She stowed them away almost immediately.

Having what felt like such valuable precious stones on her person made her nervous. She really wished the gown she had been given had hidden pockets to it. Still, the Elder had forbidden all violence for the next three months, and while that normally wouldn't be enough to make her relax, in this case, she had a feeling that it would actually be enforced.

Filing outside, their group was quickly joined by the disciples from the other two lecture halls. The disciples moved toward the two mountain paths that lay behind the main hall. Each path was flanked by a pair of large stone pillars carved with many symbols centered around a single large character. The right hand set had the character for man; the left hand set had the character for woman. The meaning was rather obvious, and it seemed that no one had a desire to test the elders' words today.

Walking between the pillars gave Ling Qi an odd tingling sensation, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was unpleasantly like being watched, but thankfully faded as they moved further from the pillars. For now, she walked silently somewhere in the middle of the crowd of quietly chattering girls, clutching the strap of her satchel tightly and feeling terribly out of place. There were a bit over a hundred people in the group here. That meant that she had quite a few people to compete with if the implications of Elder Jiao's statements were true.

She recognized a handful of the girls from her own lecture hall, mostly the two she had considered sitting with. The red haired girl strolled along at the head of the group, hands behind her head and looking for all the world like she was leading them despite simply walking in the same direction. The white haired girl was noticeable simply because of the 'bubble' of clear space around her as she walked with her head down toward the rear of the group. Many of the other girls had grouped into little chattering cliques already.

Reaching the crest of the hill, Ling Qi caught her first glimpse of the residences. Built at the bottom of a small ravine in the mountainside, the homes were set out in a neat grid with wide clean streets between them. At the far end was a veritable mansion, like something she would glimpse over the wall that separated the inner city from the outer back home. Smaller, but still nearly palatial homes with flowering gardens came next.

Then came the stone homes that lacked gardens but looked like something a successful craftsman might own. Past that, there were tiny round hovels with straw roofs, barely big enough for two people.

Ling Qi peered over the residences with a determined look. To be frank, having a home at all was a luxury beyond her means so the quality didn't necessarily concern her. However, given Elder Jiao's words that she would likely end up rooming with someone, it meant there simply weren't enough free homes.

Ling Qi took a calming breath as they began to make their way down the steep path that led to the residences. She was going to be in danger here once the brief period of enforced nonviolence ended. She would need to make an effort to keep herself safe.

One way was to gain strength herself, which was strange to think of as it had never really been an option before. A second method was following her driver's advice and finding 'someone to watch her back'. Han Jian... well, while she hoped he would turn out to be genuine, even if he was only pitying her, he couldn't help her here on the girl's side.

She really wasn't good at this sort of thing. She had never joined any of the street gangs at home; she had no illusions about what her 'role' in such a group would have been. If she wanted that, she would have just stayed with Mother and at least made a living out of it.

At the same time, she didn't really have anything to offer at the moment though. Casting a surreptitious glance around at the other girls, she found it doubtful that she would be able to involve herself in any of their cliques. There were a few who seemed like they came from less wealthy backgrounds, including a strange girl with dirty smudges on her face and wearing some kind of odd fluffy belt of fur around her waist. They wouldn't be able to help keep her safe though because they had the same problem of having nothing to offer yet.

So her gaze went back to the two girls she had shared a lecture hall with. The white haired girl was a better choice to approach first she thought. A look around at the others showed that she was ostracized for some reason whereas the distance kept by the others around the red headed girl seemed more... respectful? Fearful might be a better word.

Another glance at the white haired girl solidified her resolve to approach. She had no real position so any approach was a gamble. She may as well try for someone who clearly had some kind of power but who wouldn't have other options.

... And honestly she felt a little bad watching the girl trudge along with her head down. She could recognize the defensiveness in the set of her shoulders.

Ling Qi began to drift closer to the girl, sidling through the gaps until she reached the empty space around the other girl. As she 'broke' the bubble, she noticed several of the girls nearby go quiet and one or two look her way.

Ignoring the nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach, she pressed on until the girl she was approaching noticed her presence and looked up. She got a better look at the other girl's face then.

She was unnaturally pale and had the fine features of a porcelain doll framed by silky white hair that fell down to the middle of her back. However, her thin lips were unpainted and bloodless, barely standing out from the rest of her skin, nor did she appear to be wearing any other cosmetics.

Mostly, it was her eyes that drew Ling Qi's attention. The slit pupils and wide golden irises were unnerving, but despite the thrill of terror when their eyes met, Ling Qi did not look away or retreat as the fear made her want to do. It helped that the top of the girl's head didn't even reach Ling's Qi's shoulder. Instead, she nodded to the other girl and fell in beside her a few polite steps away.

"Hello, I am Ling Qi." Her voice was stiffer than she would have liked. Several beats of awkward silence followed as the white-haired girl stared at her expressionlessly without blinking. It was very off putting.

When the girl didn't respond, she asked, "May I have your name?"

That seemed to prompt the other girl to blink thankfully, though her expression was unchanged. It was difficult to read her, but she didn't think the other girl was wary of her so much as... nonplussed at her presence.

"Bai Meizhen of the Thousand Lakes province," the girl responded by rote. "Why did you not finish introducing yourself?"

Ling Qi glanced to the side, aware that she and the other girl were being surreptitiously watched. "I did," she responded awkwardly. "I mean, I suppose I am from the Emerald Seas province," she added hastily.

It seemed like trying to maintain formal speech patterns really was a lost cause. She doubted she could deceive the girl for any length of time anyway given her lack of

knowledge about noble families. Was there a noble Ling clan?

Her response ended in another painfully awkward silence, and Ling Qi shifted from foot to foot as the other girl stared at her. She really wished the other girl would blink more often.

Finally, Bai Meizhen spoke again, a hint of confusion coloring her mostly toneless voice. "I... see. What is it you require then? I am afraid I have not been granted allowance to hire a maidservant."

Ling Qi could not help but grit her teeth at the dismissal and the soft titter she caught from one of the closer girls... but she managed to calm herself. She had been insulted before and after the initial wave of irritation, she could see that there was no malice in the other girl's words. It was more like she was just... completely lost on why else Ling Qi would be talking to her. So she pushed down her anger and put on a smile. She would just be blunt then.

"I was actually thinking we could be friends. We're both cultivators, right?" Cultivation was supposed to supersede bloodline and such, even if it seemed that might not be how it worked in practice. "You seem like you could use a friend, and we have to pair off for housing anyway."

The odd girl tilted her head to the side slightly, her pace slowing as she observed Ling Qi with an odd intensity. Then her eyes shifted to the side as she frowned, pursing her lips as if listening to something. No one was talking to them as far as Ling Qi could tell.

"I suppose that is acceptable," Bai Meizhen responded after a moment longer. She didn't seem particularly pleased or displeased with Ling Qi's assertion of friendship, but that might have been the unsettling lack of emotional cues the girl gave.

"I will warn you however. Do not approach me while I sleep. It is likely that you would die." The white haired girl delivered that line in the same cold, even tone as the rest of her speech.

Ling Qi stared at Bai Meizhen trying to work out if that was meant as a threat, a warning, both or something else entirely. After a moment's consideration, she forced herself to laugh. "I'll keep that in mind. That would be pretty unfortunate, wouldn't it?"

The other girl just dipped her head very slightly in acknowledgement. "It would be unpleasant to lose my first friend to something so avoidable," she responded agreeably.

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes at the other girl, trying to work out if she was mocking her, but quickly gave up. Turning her eyes ahead as they resumed walking, she saw that they were a bit over halfway down the path.

"I was thinking we might talk someone else into joining us. Safety in numbers, you know? Would you have a problem with that?"

Bai Meizhen seemed to consider that before briefly glancing down at her left arm. "It would likely be difficult to convince another to share a space with me. I do not object in principle though. Did you have someone in mind?"

Ling Qi glanced at the nearby girls, noting with a somewhat heavy heart, the disdainful looks she received in return. Cozying up to Bai Meizhen had earned her some residual dislike. Keeping her voice low so as not to carry, she nodded toward the front of the group. "That girl, the one with red hair, She's alone too."

For the first time, she saw something like actual emotion surface on Bai Meizhen's face as her perfect eyebrows drew together in a look of bafflement. "You... wish to share a roof with her?" she asked, sounding somewhat incredulous.

She looked back and forth between Ling Qi and the redhead before something seemed to occur to her and make her consternation disappear. "That is the eldest great-granddaughter of Sun Shao, Sun Liling" she explained patiently, as if to a child.

Ling Qi bristled at the condescension, but she was fairly certain that Bai Meizhen meant well by it. She was hardly going to jeopardize her success at this juncture.

"...Who?" she asked as politely as she could.

The other girl frowned at her, irritation flashing in her eyes. "The Butcher of the West." Her frown only deepened at Ling Qi's lack of recognition. "The Scarlet General. King of the Western Territories."

Well, that wasn't ominous at all. She was at least aware of the Western Territories. It was a swathe of land on the western border of the Celestial Empire that had been conquered under the reign of the previous Emperor. As far as she knew, it was barely civilized and constantly under siege by barbarians.

"What is someone like that doing here?" Ling Qi asked cautiously. Han Jian was from a far flung province as well, but he wasn't a direct relation of the province's ruler either.

...He wasn't, right? She might have to start learning more about this kind of thing.

"I do not know. Her presence here is bizarre," Meizhen replied simply.

Ling Qi felt oddly gratified to know her first thought on the matter was not entirely off base. "Still, is there a particular reason not to approach her?" If she were to approach her, she would need to do so soon as the group was nearing the entrance to the residential area.

Bai Meizhen shook her head. "Yes," she replied flatly. "However, I will not stop you if you wish to go to her." The pale girl gave her a measuring look, and something she couldn't quite manage to read flashed through Bai Meizhen's eyes. "You may have a chance, I suppose," Bai Meizhen added impassively before turning her attention back to the path ahead.

"Well, I'm at least going to try and talk her into it," Ling Qi said stubbornly. She stole another look at her companion, but the girl just nodded, her expression blank again. Ling Qi dipped her head to the other girl and strode forward, picking up her pace to move through the crowd.

It was a bit harder than before as she found herself blocked by seemingly oblivious girls, even jostled once or twice 'accidentally'. She refused to rise to such bait for the moment. More uncomfortable was the way she could feel Bai Meizhen's unwavering gaze on her back. Still, they weren't walking particularly fast so even with such distractions, it didn't take more than a minute to get up to the front of the group. She soon broke through the crowd, and after a moment's hesitation, she continued forward toward the red haired girl.

"You can stop right there." Sun Liling's voice brought her up short several steps away. The tanned girl had a pronounced rough accent, though thankfully, it didn't make her words too difficult to understand.

"Whaddaya want?" The other girl hadn't even looked at her yet.

Up close, Ling Qi could see the corded muscle in the other girl's bare arms and the torn cloth where the redhead had ripped off the sleeves of her uniform. The girl was taller than most, only a few centimeters shorter than Ling Qi.

More importantly, Ling Qi got a better look at the way the girl moved, and it reminded her of the most dangerous people on the streets back home, the murderers and gang enforcers. Sun Liling had a grace that even they lacked however.



"I was going to ask if you had decided who you were pairing up with for housing," Ling Qi responded tentatively.

Finally, Sun Liling deigned to turn her head slightly, not lowering the arms held behind her head. The pose made it difficult to ignore the fabric strained to near breaking across her chest. Ling Qi managed it with only a minor spike of irritation, returning her attention to the other girl's face.

It was disturbing to note that the other girl's eyes were the color of freshly spilt blood. The most attention grabbing feature was the three, thin white lines that traced down across her nose and lips. It looked like something had raked it's claws down her face.

"The snake blow you off then?" She asked abruptly.

The other girl was making no effort to keep her voice down, and Ling Qi just managed not to squirm at the silence from the girls closest to them.

"I... no." She still stumbled over the words though. "How did you..."

"I wanted to see what had the geese back there squawking," Sun Liling drawled lazily. "I guess I gotta give you points for ambition if nothing else." Ling Qi felt uncomfortable at the other girl's intent study of her.

"You don't look completely soft. You might be worth something if you work at it."

Indignant, Ling Qi's next words slipped out before she could think about it. "Don't say that as if it's praise," she snapped.

"I was..." Ling Qi's eyes flew wide open wide as a scar nicked fist suddenly stopped a hair's breadth from her nose, the blowback enough to make Ling Qi's flyaway strands flutter from her face. The others behind them stopped dead in their tracks as well. She hadn't even seen Sun Liling move into position. Sun Liling's crimson eyes were hard and cold.

Then, Sun Liling withdrew her fist and chuckled. "Made ya flinch," she said in a voice laced with amusement. "But seriously, if you survive the inevitable backstab from the snake, I'll still be around."

As the girl turned away and kept walking, Ling Qi glared at her back, hating the flush of embarrassment that she knew was rising on her face. This time, she managed to control herself. Her heart was still pounding in her ears from the fear she had felt in that bare second when she had thought the other girl was going to strike her. She wasn't an

experienced fighter, but... she was quite certain she would be in no condition to walk anywhere if the girl had followed through.

Ling Qi fell back through the crowd, ignoring the looks she was getting and returned to Bai Meizhen's side. There was a trace of... concern, maybe, on the pale girl's face before vanishing.

"Are you well?" the other girl asked evenly.

"Fine," Ling Qi responded tersely. With an effort, she fought down the indignation and anger she felt and let out a long breath. There was no point in it right now.

"So," she began with false cheer, "what kind of residence do you want to take?"

Bai Meizhen stared at her unblinking before dipping her head slightly, apparently acknowledging Ling Qi's desire not to talk about it.

"I do not feel the need to enter conflict over the more luxurious housing. However, the outer hovels are unacceptable."

At least that was one thing she didn't have to worry about. Ling Qi would have been happy enough to take one of the smallest homes if she were alone, but given the other girl's words regarding the consequences of disturbing her rest, Ling Qi wouldn't want to risk being in such close proximity when sleeping.

"Somewhere in the second block then? That's more than enough for me," she replied, keeping her voice cheerful.

Ling Qi had suffered far worse than a threatened fist, and she had been foolish to let her emotions get the better of her. She couldn't allow herself to forget the caution that had kept her alive for the past four years, no matter where she was now.

# Smelting 4

Things grew rather more hectic as they reached the bottom of the path and the group splintered, various groups rushing off to secure their claims.

For Bai Meizhen and Ling Qi, things went rather smoothly though. For all that the other girls seemed to dislike Bai Meizhen, they also seemed reluctant to confront her directly and certainly not over one of the homes in the second section. So it was with some ease that the two of them managed to secure a fairly luxurious space for themselves, or so Ling Qi felt.

The second worst homes in the Sect were still a step above any accommodation Ling Qi had ever lived in. The squat stone building was only a single story, but in addition to a fairly spacious front room with a well kept hearth, there were also a pair of bedrooms, a tiny kitchen, and a third empty room laid out with thick mats. It wasn't furnished with any particular luxury: simple pallets and roughly carved chests for their belongings were the only contents of the bedrooms. It did have a small backyard filled with freshly trimmed grass.

Ling Qi separated from her new roommate to head into her bedroom and luxuriate in the fact that she *had* a personal bedroom. While she feared what might come in the days ahead, for the moment, she let herself enjoy the feeling of luxury.

It did not take long to put her things away. The chest in one corner of the room was big enough to hold all of her meagre possessions - but she took the time to put it all away neatly and give herself a chance to process everything that had happened today.

Eventually, she found herself in the front room of the house with the sun setting outside. Ling Qi had discovered a sheet of paper on the kitchen's countertop, which stated that food and drink would be provided from a storehouse at the center of the district. Having retrieved and cooked a simple meal, she was sitting in front of the fire while Bai Meizhen quietly tended to the tea she was brewing in the clay pot they had found in one of the kitchen cubbies.

With her now empty bowl set on the floor beside her, Ling Qi had the scroll for the Argent Soul technique open in her lap. She tried to decipher the odd diagram and the text around it, but it seemed no more than a collection of breathing exercises interspersed with flowery philosophical nonsense. It didn't help that her ability to read was... rusty. She was beginning to feel irritated; she knew she was missing something, but couldn't quite understand what.

She was pulled from her thoughts by the whistle of the tea kettle. As much as she wanted to figure this out on her own... she should probably ask.

Bai Meizhen had made no indication that she was willing to help her, but after spending most of the afternoon together to collect necessities for their home, Ling Qi felt that she was beginning to get a feel for the taciturn girl. Asking for help was probably against Bai Meizhen's nature, as was offering help on her own initiative, but Ling Qi could ask.

"Bai Meizhen, do you know what this part means?" she asked, pointing to a block of characters next to a line pointing toward the navel of the human figure covered in lines and squiggles in the diagram.

The other girl took a moment to look up from the brewing tea, looking faintly surprised that Ling Qi was speaking to her. She didn't really engage verbally unless prompted. She did lean forward, narrowing her creepy golden eyes to study the scroll, which Ling Qi helpfully turned to make easier for her.

"It is describing the state of mind one must reach to begin absorbing spiritual energy into one's dantian," she responded a bit condescendingly. "It is the initial step in the simple exercises for the first stage of the technique once you have mastered the first breathing method."

Ling Qi let out a breath, not letting the other girl's tone bother her. The other girl didn't mean any harm and was being helpful.

"What is a dantian exactly?" Ling Qi asked, keeping her tone even. She hated even more that she felt she earned the condescension with her ignorance.

Bai Meizhen frowned, pausing as she poured herself a cup of the newly brewed tea. "It is the seat of a cultivator's power, the core from which you channel energies through the meridians in your body. Filling the dantian is required to awaken and begin production of your own Qi." She paused for a beat to stare at Ling Qi. "Qi is the energy which allows us to do... everything beyond the ability of mortals."

"I know that much," Ling Qi responded defensively. "But how am I supposed to feel something inside of me like it says? It's not like I can sense any of my other organs."

The pale girl pursed her lips in consideration. "Give me your hand," she said brusquely, holding out her own left hand.

"Why?" Ling Qi glanced at the girl's hand suspiciously. She could see the movement of the small snake she had glimpsed in the girl's sleeve a few times by now.

"I will inject a spark of Qi into you," Bai Meizhen responded impatiently. "It will hurt, but it will allow you to feel your dantian until it fades. You will need to practice in the future to avoid the need for such crutches though."

"How much pain are we talking about?" Ling Qi asked warily, even as she raised her hand. She knew everything depended on her being able to gain enough strength to defend herself by the end of three months. She was still suspicious and some part of her railed against so easily trusting the girl in front of her not to hurt her... but could she afford that right now? Leaps of faith were all she had.

As her housemate took her hand, Bai Meizhen answered, "It is painful, but my Aunt did this for me when I was eight years old. It should be no trouble for you."

Ling Qi was about to respond when she felt a sudden heat in her palm, followed by an explosion of pain in her gut. It felt as if a burning knife had stabbed into her and then violently twisted, and she couldn't help but double over clutching her stomach. A slight whimper escaped her lips as she felt her eyes beginning to water. She didn't know how long it was until the burning pain faded to a knot of heat behind her navel, throbbing like a second heartbeat. Was this the 'dantian' the other girl had mentioned?

Speaking of Bai Meizhen, she was observing Ling Qi quizzically over the lip of her teacup, and Ling Qi noted absently that a second cup had been placed before her. Letting out a shuddering breath, Ling Qi sat up, one hand still held over her stomach.

"That... that was more than painful," she rasped, glaring at the other girl.

"Was it?" the pale girl asked, seeming genuinely surprised. Ling Qi didn't know if she was misreading the other girl's cues though.

"My apologies. You can feel the dantian now though, correct?"

"I can," Ling Qi admitted grudgingly.

"You should drink your tea then meditate while it lasts," Bai Meizhen said evenly.

"Otherwise, it will have been for nothing."

Ling Qi slugged back the tea in her cup, grimacing at the gross, bitter flavor of it then moved to stand, loosely clutching the scroll in her hand. She was still irritated and wary

that she was being messed with. Sun Liling's words echoed in her thoughts. For now, she was determined to at least try and reach this 'awakening'.

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It had been strange.

Ling Qi had never liked sitting still for too long before, but after she had shut the thick door to the meditation room and sat down to practice breathing as the scroll instructed, she found that her mind did not wander nearly as much as she expected it would. Rather, she seemed to fall into the pattern that the scroll described with ease as if she had been doing it for years.

When she felt she had it down, she removed one of the glimmering red stones from her pocket and held it in her hands clasped in front of her stomach. She focused on the warmth of the stone and the throbbing pain in her abdomen and cast away her thoughts.

The heat was all that mattered. Her body, the cold stone room - none of it mattered. Just the pulse of pain in her belly and the heat in her hands.

She was still empty.

Painfully so. The heat of the stone was her only hope for filling the void she could now feel.

She focused on her breathing and began to pull in time with her breath. The energy in the stone began to move, cresting and ebbing in time with her breath, until finally, it began to flow inwards. It trickled into the slowly fading knot of pain Bai Meizhen had given her.

Slowly, she replaced that unpleasant sensation with a comfortable warmth. It was frustrating; something was blocking the energy from entering her body and much of the energy dispersed into the air instead of being absorbed.

When she opened her eyes and found the room dark, she felt oddly refreshed. She didn't think she had 'awakened' yet, but she could feel the warm steady pulse of the spiritual energy now. In contrast, the stone in her hand had turned gray and lifeless. Rubbing it between her fingers thoughtfully, she watched as it crumbled into dust.

She stood and stretched then quietly left the room. She felt better than she had in years, and despite some initial setbacks... she felt like she could do this.

# Bonus 1: Commencement Day

The streets of the town below seemed almost like rivers of fog from the balcony Minister Xiao stood upon. The damp mist which tended to engulf everything at this time of year was certainly not the best feature of this far-flung province of the empire; it had a certain aesthetic beauty. A rustic charm to make such an isolated place feel worth it, he supposed.

...As long as one could quickly return to the dry warmth of their hearth and the comforts therein. He doubted those who had the misfortune of needing to be out and about today could appreciate the beauty. The weather would certainly not help shake off the current lull in trade, either. The Argent Peak Sect would be holding its introduction for new disciples today after all, as well as the advancement tests for the older ones, which meant the the shops and stalls run by the Sect's more business-minded disciples would be closed. As a silver lining, at least it meant the various ruffians would be out of town as well. Half the inhabitants would likely be out gawking at the new arrivals and guests. He had heard there were several high born candidates this year, and his people did certainly buy into the propaganda of the heroism and virtue of the nobility. He supposed that was as it should be, but as the one who interacted with them directly...

Minister Xiao only hoped that those children would remain in the Sect and leave the troubles of the Imperial court back at their homes. He was quite pleased to have been given the opportunity to leave that viper's nest behind, despite the greater physical danger he faced here on the frontier. He'd take the simpler and more easily understood threats of the frontier over the deceptively polite plotting back home, thank you very much.

Shaking off sour memories, the Minister sighed and returned his thoughts to the likely low revenues for the day. Running his fingers through the luxurious, if greying, strands of his beard amidst his musings, he turned away from the view of the city to go back inside. He supposed he could not begrudge the Sect its ostentatious behavior. After all, it was due to their efforts that his town could even exist so close to the border. That said, the younger disciples had a terrible habit of breaking things at times. At least the Sect Elders were dependable in regards to paying restitution... though they were often irritatingly condescending in doing so.

He had greater concerns in any case. His gaze flicked to the side as he re-entered his manor, where one of his attendants stood with a stack of ledgers in his arms a few steps away from the balcony door, and silently gestured for the younger man to follow him.

No, the real concern was that this day would also bring an inspection from an agent of the Ministry of Integrity. Their agents were... unsettling at the best of times, and could not be offended at any cost. The previous week had been spent going over his records, double and triple checking the accuracy of his accounts. He had never allowed truly large indiscretions in the decade since he had been appointed to this post, and he would not allow that to change this year.

Still, there was always some young fool of a clerk who thought it possible to get away with skimming from the coffers meant for the Imperial Court. Xiao had one such unfortunate young man in the towns cells now, ready to hand over to the Agent when they arrived. It was unfortunate for such a talented young man to meet his end over such a trifle, but corruption was not tolerated in the slightest by the current Imperial Court. It was certainly a far thing from the light hand disciples received for all but the most serious crimes. He was assured by the Elders that punishments for such things were a serious matter, but he sometimes doubted that given some of the repeat offenders over the years. Of course, there were things even a Great Sect could not protect a disciple from, such as the assault or murder of an official like himself, or other serious crimes.

Hopefully there was nothing which had escaped his notice and the Agent could quickly be on their way without any other members of his bureaucracy needing to disappear.

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Zhu Qing strode down the misty street, hands clasped behind her back, never needing to so much as slow her steps to avoid the early morning foot traffic. The sight of her plain black and silver gown, white streaked hair fluttering in a nonexistent breeze, and the featureless white jade mask was enough to cause all those before her to give way with a hasty bow and a murmured apology. All was as it should be.

She was fairly pleased with this town. Since she had been assigned as its inspector by the Ministry, not once had she been forced to take any truly drastic action. The mortal bureaucrats were hard working, honest, and obedient to the edicts of the Imperial Court, and its governing minister was a virtuous man.

Meanwhile, the nobles and ministers of the more central provinces assumed far too often their prosperity and position granted them the right to defy Imperial law. Perhaps the difficult life on the border did not afford the time for such indiscretions, or perhaps the policies of the new ruling clan could be credited.



The Agent smiled behind her mask. Not that the Cai were without flaw. No one was, mortal or otherwise.

She knew the minister had caught a thief already, due to the informants she had in his manor, and she was pleased to know that Minister Xiao was as proactive as ever. She would still need to inspect everything personally, of course. The man was only mortal, and he would miss things. She was confident that he need never feel the touch of her Reaper though. The man was too sensible for that.

The thought caused the spirit bound within her to stir, its icy qi pulsing through her spinal meridians for a moment and intensifying the phantom breeze that blew around her person. A man who had the misfortune to be passing by her at that moment shuddered, face paling. He took one look at the frost forming in the wake of her footsteps before quickly hurrying away from the Agent. For her part, she did not spare the mortal laborer a glance, quickly quelling her spirit with ease of long practice. Death aspected spirits were nearly always the most difficult to control, and binding the Reaper had been among the most difficult tests for entry into the Ministry.

Zhu Qing's gaze drifted to the mountains that towered over the town as she recalled her own days as a disciple of the Argent Peak Sect. It had been an enjoyable time, full of youthful indiscretion, and she still thought fondly of it even now. It was one reason she was glad for the sensibility of the local minister. She would hate for her yearly return to be stained by anything truly... unpleasant. The accountings required for major purges were terribly tedious and time consuming after all.

As it was, she looked forward to completing her inspection so that she could visit her junior sister for tea. It had been too long since she had seen the other woman, who was often out at the more far-flung border forts fighting barbarians. She had been assured in their last correspondence that her friend would be home this year though.

After that would come the meeting with the Sect Head, which she was looking forward to substantially less. He would likely be less than pleased with the response to his funding request, but sadly as much as Zhu Qing wished to see her old home prosper, she knew that the Empress' opinion differed on this matter.

The Argent Peak was a major sect in this region, but at court, it was considered to be one of the less crucial points in the empire's defense. With the stirring of the barbarians in the north and west, and the difficulty in reining in the western lords themselves, it simply was not the top priority. Perhaps if the Sect had managed to produce a good crop of Ministry or Imperial Guard candidates, she could have spoken to her superiors on the matter.

There was little to do about it for the moment, though. Zhu Qing knew her duty must as always come before personal feelings.

# Chapter 1 - First Steps 1

Ling Qi began her first morning as a disciple of the Sect blearily rummaging through the tiny kitchen for something simple to eat. She was quite happy that they had stocked up the previous night; she would hate to have to trudge out to the storehouse before she had a chance to properly wake up.

Honestly, it still felt a little bizarre to think that she no longer had to worry about where her food would come from. Her musings served as ample distraction while she finished preparing breakfast. She was a bit surprised to note that Meizhen's door was still closed, and there was no sign of the other girl waking up yet. Ling Qi hadn't really read the girl as being the type to sleep in like this.

A quick glance out the window as she sat down to eat showed that it was a good hour past sunrise. Even after she had finished eating and gone back to her room to make a futile effort at taming her hair and cleaning up for the day ahead, her roommate's door remained closed. Ling Qi considered knocking, or even cracking the door open to check on her, but the other girl's warning lingered in her mind.

Instead, she decided to spend her morning continuing to work on the exercises given for the Argent Soul technique until it was closer to noon. Sitting cross legged in the darkened meditation room simply breathing was oddly relaxing once she had managed to still her thoughts, and Ling Qi quickly found her tiredness fading.

Without using a spirit stone, she didn't feel any increase in the fragile flicker of warmth remaining from last night's meditation, but it still felt good to sense it 'breathing' along with her. For the first time in recent memory, she felt like she was genuinely good at something. She knew it was probably just wishful thinking on her part, but she allowed the thought to linger anyway.

When she emerged from the meditation room, she found that Bai Meizhen had finally awakened. The girl was seated by the hearth sipping from a cup of water, looking just as immaculate as she had the day before. Ling Qi felt a twinge of jealousy at the seeming ease with which the other girl maintained her appearance. She had long since resigned herself to her own peculiarities.

More importantly, the pale girl was different in one major way; the snake she had seen hints of was now fully visible, looped loosely around Bai Meizhen's neck. It was an eye catching thing with bright green scales that reminded her of expensive jade. It was also quite small, only being about as wide as two fingers held together.

The snake and girl looked up with eerie synchronicity as Ling Qi emerged, and she couldn't help but notice that the little snake's eyes were the exact same shade as Meizhen's. Before the silence could become awkward, Ling Qi looked back up to her roommate's face.

"Oh, you're up then. Good morning." She didn't feel the need to try and speak better around the other girl, who seemed to have no reaction to it either way.

"Good morning," Bai Meizhen responded evenly, not breaking eye contact... or blinking. Ling Qi really wished she would blink more often. "Did your cultivation go well?"

Ling Qi shrugged, feeling a bit self conscious. She liked to think so, but she had nothing to compare it too. "I think so. I mean... I don't think I managed to 'awaken' but I think I can feel something in my 'dantian' now?" Ling Qi stumbled over her words more than she would have liked.

The pale girl simply nodded slightly in response, setting down her now empty cup. "That is expected. It would be highly unusual for you to have broken through to the Red Soul stage in a single night of cultivation without significantly greater resources." She reached up to idly stroke the tiny spade shaped head of her serpent with one finger as she spoke and the reptile pressed itself against her touch.

"I cannot imagine you will fail to achieve it by the end of the week should you put the effort in," she added. Her tone was as bland as ever, but Ling Qi thought she was going for encouraging. Maybe. She also might be putting an ultimatum down; it was hard to tell.

Despite that, Ling Qi had a feeling that this girl's views on natural progression speeds might be a bit skewed. "I know I'll manage it," she responded with more confidence than she actually felt. "I have to go out though so I'll see you later." She'd like to ask more about some of the things the other girl touched on, but she'd be late if she did.

Bai Meizhen responded with a small nod as Ling Qi turned to go, turning her full attention back to the serpent around her neck. The last sight she had of them was the bright green snake raising its head and hissing in Bai Meizhen's ear, almost as if whispering to her.

It was a clear, bright day, though the autumn chill was quite strong. Ling Qi was relieved to find that her disciple's uniform was warm despite the fact that it was hardly winter wear. It really was the nicest set of clothing she had ever owned. She still wanted to modify it a bit, if only because of the poor fit. Perhaps she could see about breaking in

the sewing kit she had been provided.

Such thoughts were kept to the back of her head as most of Ling Qi's focus was on ensuring that she didn't run across trouble on the way to the plaza. She didn't know if her 'friendship' with Bai Meizhen would be enough to invite real reprisal, but she didn't feel the need to take chances.

With no one actively looking for her and the lack of real crowds, it wasn't difficult to simply take a circuitous route to the edge of the area. Once there, she skirted around the perimeter until she reached the entrance path carved into the mountainside. She kept her head down and slouched subtly to hide her height, making it out without trouble.

It would get harder as time went on, but for now, her little tricks for avoiding notice were sufficient. Luckily, there were few people on the path to the plaza, and those that were traveling it were fairly scattered and too occupied with their own thoughts to pay her any mind. The plaza itself was more populated, and it was here that she first saw older disciples. There were even more of them than students her own age. Where had they come from?

She stuck to the edge of the plaza for a time to observe but eventually relaxed. None of the older disciples seemed to have any interest in those from her group. In fact, they seemed to be almost pointedly ignoring them as they went about their business. Most headed into the large lecture building, but others simply stood around in groups chatting or heading off down the other...

Those hadn't been there yesterday. There were now four other gates - two on the eastern side and two on the western side - marking paths that wound up or down the mountain. Ling Qi shook her head at the sight. More magic. She really was out of her league. The confidence she had felt last night and this morning was ebbing quickly. Eventually, she moved out of the shade of the gates and begin searching for Han Jian.

She knew it was foolish, but between her embarrassment with Sun Liling and her roommate's... taciturn nature, she really was looking forward to some simple, friendly interaction. She couldn't really bring herself to be suspicious of the handsome boy.

This was the only reason she paused rather than leave entirely when she caught sight of him already having a conversation with another disciple. It was another boy, shorter by a head than the two of them, but significantly broader at the shoulder and wider at the waist. If anything, he seemed almost Han Jian's opposite: squat and brawny with

fierce features and spiky black hair.

She wasn't close enough to hear them over the low murmur of sound from the rest of the plaza, but she did see that the shorter boy was doing most of the talking, gesturing wildly. He seemed to have a rather bombastic personality at first glance.

Han Jian's smile seemed pretty fixed. Han Jian met her eyes then, noticing her where she had stopped in the shade of one of the scattered peach trees. For an instant, Ling Qi saw something like relief in his eyes. That was enough to get her moving again. Once she had gotten closer, Han Jian raised a hand, interrupting the other boy.

"Ling Qi! Over here! Glad you could make it." That was one way to excuse oneself from a conversation though she wasn't too pleased about the attention it drew to her. For his part, the shorter boy turned quickly in the direction of Han Jian's gaze, an eager expression on his face... only for it to fade as soon as his eyes landed on her.

Ling Qi suppressed her frown and instead nodded politely to Han Jian as she closed the distance.

"Good morning, Han Jian. I'm sorry if I was late." With him, she felt she should at least make an effort at politeness.

Ling Qi glanced at his companion. He was frowning unhappily at her. What was his problem? "Who might your-"

"Really, Jian?" the shorter boy interrupted, giving the other boy an incredulous look. "When I heard a heartbreaker like you was coming out to meet a girl, I thought I would have a chance to meet a beauty, not a stick with pretensions!"

His words were loud and coarse, even discounting their content. Ling Qi felt her expression freeze on her face even as Han Jian winced almost imperceptibly. If she hadn't already noticed his discomfort with the other boy, she might have done or said something unfortunate. As it was, she held back, but only just, by clenching her teeth. In the silence that followed, Han Jian managed to rally.

"...Yu, isn't that a bit much? There's no call to be rude to another practitioner. Besides, I told you that it wasn't anything like that."

"That was definitely more than a bit much," Ling Qi interjected sourly, glaring at the shorter boy, and ignoring the unpleasant twinge that Han Jian's words brought for no reason that she would acknowledge.

'Yu' simply waved a dismissive hand at her words, making her temper flare further. He didn't even look at her. "She's just a commoner, Jian. You can tell by looking. Are you really going to waste time on this?"

Ling Qi didn't bother saying anything this time though her expression grew darker. She couldn't do anything about this now, but she would certainly remember the insult. Han Jian's expression was wary as he responded.

"I'm not going to break a promise, Yu." It was probably the least friendly thing she had ever heard him say.

The shorter boy snorted in response. "Fine. I suppose I won't begrudge you your tastes, Jian. Just try not to waste too much time. I won't stand for a brother of mine falling behind!" He stomped off on his own as his words faded into the morning air, leaving the two of them standing in awkward silence. Well, Han Jian seemed awkward. Ling Qi was seething internally.

"So... brother?" she asked dully, fixing Han Jian with an unimpressed expression.

He winced, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. It was only then that she noticed the tiger cub was nowhere to be seen. "Not by blood. It's just..." he trailed off, seemingly searching for words. "Have you ever had a peer that your parents pretty much ordered you to make nice with? It's like that."

Ling Qi hadn't ever had that experience, but she could understand what he meant. She had 'made nice' with less pleasant people during her time living in the streets. She felt her temper cooling. It wasn't Han Jian's fault.

"Heartbreaker?" She quirked an eyebrow.

Now, the handsome boy just looked tired and exasperated.

"It's a stupid joke that started a few years back because of a friend's sisters. Yu just takes it too seriously because..." He trailed off and gestured helplessly at his handsome face.

Ling Qi thought he sounded sincere, but she couldn't help but be a bit more wary now. Although if she were being more reasonable, it was a little silly for a fourteen year old boy to be considered a 'heartbreaker'. "So, what happens now?"

He sighed. "I can give you a few tips on starting your cultivation, and if you would like, and I can help you practice a bit like I said I would," he responded sincerely. "I'll be

going to the classes the Elders are holding in the afternoon though.”

“So will I,” Ling Qi said, feeling a bit relieved. “Will this be a one time thing then?”

“I figure I can spare an hour or two every few days if you’d like.” Han Jian really did seem almost too nice. His ass of a friend did have a point though. She was just a commoner; why was he willing to spend time on her? She would like the answer to be that he simply liked her, but she wasn’t sure she could believe that.

“I would like that.” Ling Qi considered just asking him, but she couldn’t risk offending him and losing his aid. She needed every resource she could get right now. She felt a little sad that the encounter with the other boy had made her suspicious, but it was for the best.

“Where should we start?” she asked. “My roommate helped me get a feel for my dantian, and I think I have the first breathing exercise down.”

“Oh? That was fast,” Han Jian said, eyebrows rising. “I assume you mean the Argent Soul exercises,” he continued, to which she nodded. “I’ll leave finishing that to the Elder later. If you understand your dantian...”

“I’m not sure I do,” Ling Qi admitted. “She kind of... brute forced it. I get that it’s your spiritual center and where you store qi, but...” She trailed off, spreading her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

He gave her strange look, leaning back against the trunk of the peach tree they were standing under.

“...Right, that is the gist of it. The dantian’s not a physical organ like your heart or your stomach, but exercising and expanding it is at the core of improving your ability to hold and use qi. Think of it as the heart of your spirit.”

Ling Qi was aware vaguely of the body’s organs, from a half remembered diagram in a physician’s text that she had stolen and pawned off last year. She wracked her thoughts for information from a text she had only flipped through in a moment of idleness while waiting for a fence.

“Does that mean that once I awaken it, it will start moving qi through the rest of my body?”

He smiled, and despite herself, she felt a little warmer.



“Yeah. But unlike your physical veins, you will have to open your meridians manually. It’s... pretty difficult and painful, but you’ll need to bear with it because your qi won’t be able to affect the world without any open channels.”

Cultivation wasn’t easy it seemed. Ling Qi took a seat on the bench beneath the tree as they continued to talk, discussing the basics of cultivation.

There were a very large number of potential meridians in the human body and which ones she chose to open would affect which techniques and arts she could learn. Arts were what cultivators called their magic, and techniques were individual spells within an art. Much of it went over her head, but she thought she understood the basic idea.

Han Jian had wind-aligned meridians open in his legs, as well as fire-aligned meridians through his heart and spine. A practitioner essentially had a limited amount of space in their body to use for channeling qi, which allowed the use of arts. A meridian could only channel a single type of qi at a time, limiting the number of arts a cultivator could use. As one grew in power, their body could withstand the opening of more meridians, allowing them a greater breadth of techniques.

It did mean that Ling Qi, who was just starting out, would be limited to a single art at first. That was troubling. If the classes turned up nothing on the matter, she might have to ask Bai Meizhen for advice.

For all that she did enjoy the time she spent with Han Jian, it couldn’t last forever. After an hour or so, she had a slightly better handle on things, and he had corrected some mistakes she was making with the Argent Soul exercises. It was with somewhat restored confidence that she walked alongside him to the lecture hall as the sun dipped past its zenith and the time for the afternoon lessons began.

## Chapter 2 - First Steps 2

The lecture hall was much busier than it had been yesterday. The large board which had held the welcoming banner was now covered with notices written on its polished surface. Even as Han Jian and Ling Qi searched the board for the information on the Elders' lessons, some notices vanished while others seemed to write themselves. It was an impressive bit of magic.

It seemed that the two Elders who had made themselves available had scheduled their lessons such that it was impossible to attend both on the same day. It was a bit frustrating to Ling Qi, but she supposed they must have a reason for it.

For now, she chose to head to the spiritual cultivation course. Han Jian had mentioned during their chat that physical cultivation could not be properly started until a potential cultivator's qi had been unlocked. Presumably, the spiritual lesson would teach her how to unlock her qi.

The lecture hall they were directed to had perhaps thirty students in it, a far cry than the number in the one she had entered on her first day. Another difference made itself apparent when a sharp female voice stopped her dead in the doorway.

"Unawakened disciples on the left. Awakened on the right."

It seemed the instructor was already here. The Elder was a short woman with gray hair done up in a simple and utilitarian bun. She stood behind the lecturer's podium with her arms crossed over her chest, a no nonsense expression on her severe features. Her tone brooked no disagreement so Ling Qi split from Han Jian there with the boy mouthing a silent 'good luck' to her as they did. She appreciated the sentiment as she found a seat with her back to the wall and no immediate neighbors.

Once she was settled in, she studied the instructor. The Elder's appearance was a bit strange. She seemed like an old woman in demeanor, and her barked orders and severe expression would fit right in with the elderly women from her hometown. Yet, despite her grey hair, her face had an ageless quality to it - not unlined, but certainly not old either - and her full figured body did not give the impression of being withered with age.

Considering what stories she had heard about Immortals, that would make sense, she supposed. It was a bit exciting to see proof of the slowed aging that awaited her with success as a cultivator.

A few more students trickled in over the next few minutes until at last, the matronly elder made a sharp gesture with her right hand and the door snapped shut.

“Consider this my first lesson. Lateness will not be tolerated,” she said crisply, sweeping the room with an intimidating stare. “If you are late, you will not receive my instruction that day. There will be no exceptions. Nor will I allow interruptions. Any purposeful disruption of my lesson will result in your immediate expulsion from this room. You will not be allowed back.”

The few whispers and sounds from the students presented ended immediately. The Elder regarded them silently for a beat. “Good. You can follow instructions,” she said with a small amount of satisfaction.

“I am Elder Hua Su. I am the Head of our Medicinal department. You will refer to me as Elder Su, Physician Su, or Instructor, and nothing else. You are here because you have had no instruction in the spiritual arts for whatever reason.” There was no judgement in the Elder’s words, only a statement of fact.

“Or because you desire expert advice in setting your foundation. In that case, I applaud your humility. All cultivation is rooted in the spiritual. One cannot begin to improve the body with qi before that qi itself is unlocked, and the concepts necessary for all cultivation are by their nature, ephemeral.” Ling Qi leaned forward slightly in her seat, not wanting to miss a single word.

“But before we begin, it would be best to split the class as I Intended.”

Ling Qi blinked in confusion as the Elder flicked her wrist, drawing forth a silver needle and pricking the thumb of her opposite hand. She didn’t understand what the older woman was doing until the bright droplet of blood that fell from her thumb swelled and grew on its way to the floor. It shifted through a kaleidoscope of colors as it did and seemed to pull in heat from the room going by the sudden chill. Within seconds, an identical copy of the Elder stood at her side.

“And now, to avoid distraction.”

It was odd hearing two identical people speak in perfect unison as both raised their left hands and gestured again. The room filled with cloying mist which quickly congealed into a barrier right through the center of the room that blocked Ling Qi’s sight of the other side. It also left them once again with only one instructor. The original, she thought, though she wasn’t certain.

“Qi is the root of a cultivator’s power,” Elder Su began immediately, easily pulling Ling Qi’s attention back to her.

“When you awaken it, you will begin the path to shucking mortal concerns. Food, drink, sleep... All of these can be replaced with qi given sufficient cultivation,” she said evenly, panning her gaze over those left in their half of the room. “And a good thing it is. Walking the path of cultivation does not afford us the time to spend on such things every day.”

“That is not to say that mortal pleasures should be abandoned entirely,” she continued. “That is a common misconception and a foolish one. Your qi is colored and shaped by your experiences and personality. Those who abandon everything in the pursuit of power will find their path to be a narrow one indeed.” Her lip curled slightly, a display of contempt that seemed out of place on the woman’s stern face.

“Of course, such narrowness does not mean a lack of power, and I expect some of you will fall to the temptation.”

She paused then as a thin girl with light blue hair raised a trembling hand near the front of the room. Ling Qi was surprised at the girl’s boldness. Elder Su regarded the girl silently for several moments, but the girl’s hand did not lower. The Elder’s stern expression cracked and she smiled. “Yes? What is your question?”

The girl lowered her hand, the line of her back shoulders suggesting startlement.

“Ah... I just wondered if you could expand on what you meant? I never - I mean - Your instruction is... different than what I have heard before,” the girl stammered.

“What is your name, girl?” Elder Su asked neutrally

The girl shifted uncomfortably but answered. “Li Suyin, Instructor.”

“I see,” Elder Su responded thoughtfully. “I had intended to expand on the point regardless, but as Miss Li has shown, I am willing to allow questions... should you not be disruptive in the asking.

“There are distinct elements to qi and how easily one can channel a given type is largely dependant on the individual and their mindset. It is all too easy to say that a clear and emotionless mind is for the best as it provides a fair baseline for many elements, but one loses something in this practice.

“Heaven, lake, fire, thunder, wind, water, mountain, and earth... These are but a few of the many aspects qi can conform to. Each element is associated with several concepts, emotions, and effects.

“Those who devote themselves to the well being of others find the qi of the earth flowing more easily. Forget joy or pleasure, and your lake qi will grow sluggish. “Such things are beyond the scope of this introductory lesson. Should you wish to learn more, I strongly suggest you continue attending,” she said sternly.

“More importantly, those who forget the mortal world entirely too often hole themselves up in caves. This does no good for anyone; hermits are hardly a boon to the Empire.” There was a touch of humor in Elder Su’s voice, but while Ling Qi laughed politely along with the others, she had the feeling there was more to the older woman’s words than the light explanation given.

“Now, more relevant to newcomers are the stages of cultivation. All of you are, in effect, still mortals although I see that some of you have begun to awaken your qi.” Ling Qi fidgeted in her seat as the instructor’s gaze briefly rested on her.

“The first stage of spiritual cultivation is the Red Soul realm. This realm is then divided into early, middle, and late stages. The next two realms beyond are the Yellow and Green realms. For most cultivators, the Green realm is the limit of what they can achieve. Advancing beyond it requires a great deal of talent and dedication, as well as significant physical cultivation to survive the strain such large amounts of qi put on the body.”

The lesson went on like that with the older woman helping greatly in expanding Ling Qi’s understanding of just what she was doing when she filled her dantian and how to more efficiently guide the energy from a spirit stone to her dantian.

With her eyes closed and concentrating on her internal energy, Ling Qi could almost feel what she thought were her meridians. It was as if her dantian had dozens of veins branching out from it, but every single one was clogged by... something. The weak energy within her couldn’t even begin to shift the blockage in the meridians.

She still felt refreshed, her energy bolstered, by the time the lesson let out. She felt thoughtful as she returned to the little stone home she shared with Bai Meizhen and settled in to cultivate for the evening. Thinking of how much of the previous stone she had wasted turned her stomach.

This time, when she clasped the stone in her hands and closed her eyes, she settled her breathing into the correct pattern and drew only tiny threads of the stone’s warm

natural qi with each breath to trickle into her slowly filling dantian. Time faded away until only the flickering warmth in her hands, her breathing, and the growing seed of power within her existed.

Her candle burned out and Ling Qi did not notice.

The sun set and Ling Qi did not notice.

The moment she broke through, Ling Qi did notice.

As the energy circulating within her dantian pulsed unaided for the first time, everything changed. Her breath was the wind, her bones were the earth, her blood was fire, and she felt like her thoughts could expand to cover the heavens.

She felt complete like she never had before. Her dantian burned with energy, and although the stubborn obstructions prevented her from drawing the energy out, the warmth and comfort she felt from simply having it was all too real.

Then the exhaustion hit, a bone deep tiredness that nearly made her fall asleep where she sat as her dantian hungrily drew on her body's energy. She staggered to bed and blacked out.

## Chapter 3 - First Steps 3

Ling Qi awoke the next morning feeling full of energy despite her exhaustion the night before. She did need a change of clothing as she had fallen asleep in her uniform. She had a few additional sets so she didn't have to worry about laundry just yet. She would have to find a place to bathe soon though.

...Was it strange to be concerned about something so mundane when she had just taken her first step into the world of Immortals? Ling Qi thought so, but hadn't Elder Su said yesterday that neglecting mortal concerns entirely was a bad idea? Ling Qi finished changing and left her room. Bai Meizhen was awake and already seated cross-legged by the hearth, sipping from a cup of water again. There was no sign of a breakfast tray or any other food.

In retrospect, Ling Qi had never actually seen Bai Meizhen eat. Perhaps the other girl was using her qi to suppress her appetite? Elder Su had explained that it was possible to expend qi to suppress or even satisfy the body's need for food and water. Ling Qi didn't think she could manage to do so for very long yet. She didn't want to stand there staring so she stepped out and nodded to the girl.

"Good morning," she greeted cautiously.

Both Meizhen and her pet looked up in unison, and the pale girl dipped her head in response. "Good morning, and congratulations on your awakening. I take it your lesson was fruitful?"

Ling Qi seated herself across from the other girl. "It was. I guess you didn't need the lesson? I didn't see you there," Ling Qi responded, idly smoothing the fabric of her uniform as she got comfortable.

"I attended Instructor Zhou's lesson," Bai Meizhen said calmly. "It was... intense, but I feel I benefited from it." The little snake coiled loosely around Meizhen's neck twisted its head to look up at its owner, flicking its tongue out several times. Bai Meizhen glanced at it with a slight frown.

Zhou... that was the name of the instructor for physical cultivation, Ling Qi recalled.

"I don't know if it's rude to ask but... what stage are you at?" Ling Qi asked after a few moments of companionable silence. The question had occurred to her later in Elder Su's lesson, and it hadn't quite left her mind.

“Second Sin Shedding,” Bai Meizhen immediately answered. She must have noticed Ling Qi’s confusion because an expression of chagrin crossed her face. “... Middle Yellow stage spirit cultivation,” she amended. “I am not yet used to using the... standardized terms.”

Bai Meizhen was very far ahead then. Ling Qi was a little discouraged to know she was so far behind.

“Are most of the other disciples that advanced?” Ling Qi asked, somewhat dreading the answer. “And what do you mean by standardized?”

“No. Those in the Yellow stage can be counted on the fingers of one hand,” the pale girl responded dismissively. “Most of our peers are no higher than the middle of the Red Soul Stage.

“Old families such as mine have their own traditions and terms for cultivation. The terms disciples are taught to use here are only a handful of millenia old. The standard terms were coined during the establishment of the current imperial dynasty.”

Ling Qi nodded, feeling relieved that she wasn’t trailing quite as far behind as she had feared. Her roommate was simply... unusual. It seemed strange that someone as strong as her would be ostracized. She would think that everyone would want to be friends with the most powerful people. She didn’t want to press the other girl for information on something that might be personal though.

“Is that why you came here with a spirit beast already?” Ling Qi asked, searching for a thread to keep the conversation going. She could sense the qi in the little snake now. “I’ve seen a couple others who have them too. Do your families give them out?”

Bai Meizhen frowned harshly at her, and the snake’s head twitched toward her as well, leaving Ling Qi subject to two baleful and unblinking stares. What did she say? After a moment, the other girl sighed, glanced at her pet, and made a brief, soft hissing sound, reaching up to stroke the serpent’s bright green scales.

“I will forgive the insinuation since you are not aware. It is partially my fault as well for not introducing her properly.” Bai Meizhen fixed Ling Qi with a serious look.

“This is my cousin, Bai Cui. Please do not refer to her as if she was a pet.”

Ling Qi stared blankly at her.



"How does that even -t - She's a *snake*. How is she your *cousin*?" Ling Qi asked incredulously.

The snake - Cui, Ling Qi reminded herself - hissed softly in what could almost be mistaken for laughter.

"I know it is not an approved practice anymore, but really, how can you not know such things?" Bai Meizhen huffed in annoyance. "She is my cousin because our Sublime Ancestor is the White Serpent of Lake Hei. We are from two branches of the same family."

Ling Qi closed her eyes, trying very hard not to picture the... mechanics of such an arrangement. Did that mean that Han Jian too... she couldn't help but picture the tall boy with a pair of fuzzy cat ears atop his head.

"I... right, sorry?" Ling Qi eventually managed. "You just don't really hear about that kind of thing in the little city I came from," she finished a touch lamely.

Bai Meizhen simply nodded, not appearing to hold it against her.

"I think," Bai Meizhen began slowly, "I should attempt to educate you on a few matters if only to ensure you do not offend someone unintentionally in the future."

Ling Qi blinked in surprise, even as she felt a hint of dread at having to learn a bunch of information not even related to her cultivation. Still, she had been intending to spend time with the other girl this week. Despite her unsettling presence, Bai Meizhen had already helped Ling Qi once.

"That could be useful," Ling Qi hedged. "What did you have in mind?" Ling Qi did not have the luxury of being choosy when it came to friendly contacts.

"Nothing complex," the other girl assured her. "Just a bit of history and some knowledge about the nobility. Enough to prevent you from making a fool of yourself." Ling Qi did not trust the way Cui appeared to be doing the serpentine equivalent of laughing aloud.

"That sounds fine..." she responded despite her better judgement.

Really, how bad could it be?

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Quite bad, she thought gloomily as she trudged across the plaza to her first lesson on physical cultivation. Bai Meizhen was not a gifted teacher. Her diction was dry, and her dispassionate tone made it all too easy to nod off. Still, she couldn't say the information was useless. Despite the dryness of the lessons, Ling Qi found herself remembering most of it, which was strange. She had never been particularly great at academic learning before.

Maybe it was a side effect of her awakening? Her thoughts had felt clearer since she had broken through, and it felt much easier to recall information. She could ask Elder Su tomorrow. For now, she had a lesson to get to and she had no intention of being late.

Once again, she was walking alone. Bai Meizhen had declined to come along, citing the need to perform some kind of personal meditation. Ling Qi slipped through the crowds with practiced ease and soon found herself on a new path. It spiralled up the east side of the mountain and ended on a smaller plateau with a number of wide fields divided by posts and rope barriers. Each field was equipped with racks full of practice weapons, weights, and other equipment reminiscent of the guardsmen's drilling yard back home writ large.

She saw various older disciples scattered about, performing exercises, running, and other slightly incomprehensible things. Was that boy balancing himself on the point of one finger? Why? Shaking her head, she hurried past to the field at the end where a crowd of disciples her age were waiting. There, she saw the boy with the burn scar she had noticed the first day, as well as that loathsome 'Yu' fellow.

Peering into the morning fog as she got closer, she searched for the instructor. She saw the silhouette of a taller figure standing beyond the crowd. She stopped dead as she got a good look at him. The first thought and indeed the only thought that came to Ling Qi was... muscles. The man standing with his arms clasped behind his back was shirtless and looked like he had been carved from a block of solid bronze. His biceps were easily as thick as another man's thighs, and she had no idea that it was even possible to have that many clearly defined abdominal muscles.

Ling Qi flushed scarlet and averted her eyes when she noticed that she had been staring in a rather undignified manner at her instructor. Luckily, no one seemed to have noticed her losing her composure. When she looked back, she focused on his face. He looked as she would expect: stern expression, a wide square jaw, and short, evenly cropped hair tied back in a top knot. Still feeling slightly ashamed of her initial break in composure, Ling Qi did her best to fade into the crowd and not draw attention to herself until the lesson started.

She did not have to wait too long. Only a few other students filtered in to join the murmuring crowd standing before the utterly silent instructor. She might have thought the man a statue were it not for the rise and fall of his chest. She wasn't staring. She wasn't.

Then he spoke, and the disciples quieted immediately.

"Those who were here yesterday. Begin running." His voice held an authoritative tone that brooked no argument and set Ling Qi's instincts on edge. A good two thirds of the students immediately began to move away, toward the well beaten dirt track around the edge of the field.

"Those of you who remain," he continued without once looking their way. "I expect your full effort for the length of every session. Disciples consistently giving less than that in tasks I assign will be expelled from the lesson. I will not provide second chances."

Ling Qi was feeling a bit of déjà vu at the similarity to the other Elder's speech.

"I will not mince words. I am only here at the direct request of Master Yuan, the Sect Head. Most of you will never serve in my unit on the border. Most of you do not have the resolve to be a part of the Empire's Bulwark. I train those who act as the wall which keeps the Cloud Tribes from our towns and cities. A single failure of attention can bring ruin to entire settlements.

"I am not in the habit of training those who only intend to be here long enough to gain some piddling strength to establish themselves in court or clan."

Several disciples shifted on their feet, and Ling Qi saw some angry and indignant expressions, as well as worry and other emotions. The Instructor pushed on, as implacable as a glacier.

"I am Zhou the Indomitable, commander of the Sect military, and for some reason, the Sect Head thinks you have the potential to be taught by me," he barked, voice carrying over the field. "I expect most of you will disappoint him."

One or two of the crowd were looking rather mutinous, but Ling Qi noticed that those who had been here the day before had their eyes firmly fixed ahead, not reacting to his words as they ran. She caught a mutter from one of the boys in front of her, one of a handful of young men standing in a loose group near that bastard Yu.

Of course, if she heard it, she was not surprised that the Elder heard it as well.

“Repeat what you just said, boy,” the instructor commanded, moving for the first time to point an accusing finger at the speaker. The boy immediately went pale, looking around for support only to find his companions conspicuously turning their faces away. He swallowed, but seemed to find his spine a moment later.

“I said... I said that fighting nomads was not so impressive,” he said miserably. “They are just... just barbarians, you know. Any decent imperial soldier should be able to crush them.”

“Is that so,” Zhou responded blandly. Pivoting on one foot, he reached over to a nearby weapon rack and tossed one of the blunted practice spears on it at the boy. To his credit, the boy caught it with barely a fumble.

“You have a mid-gold rank physique. As I understand it, that is roughly average for most interior cities’ guard officers. Correct?”

The boy nodded with a hint of pride.

“Very well. Strike me.”

The boy blinked. “Sir...?”

“Did I stutter, boy?” Zhou asked coldly, taking a step forward. “I said: strike me. Strike as if you were trying to kill.” The boy continued to hesitate and Elder Zhou took another step forward.

“Strike. Now. Or I will have you expelled from the sect.”

That seemed to break the boy’s hesitation, and he stabbed forward toward the instructor’s throat. It appeared like a skilled strike to Ling Qi’s inexperienced eye. Zhou made no effort to dodge, stepping forward to meet it. The iron tip of the spear struck against Instructor Zhou’s neck and bent for an instant before the pressure snapped the wood haft, and the instructor’s hand swept out in a blur.

The next thing she knew, the boy was rolling across the field a half dozen feet away, whimpering and clutching a rapidly swelling cheek. Zhou looked as impassive as ever as he withdrew his extended hand.

“I did not use my qi in any active way,” he explained clinically. “Nor did I strike with even a fraction of my strength.” He fixed a glare on each of them in turn as he continued.

“I have met several nomad Khans who could match me in combat. I have met more still who could at least put up a fight. To underestimate the Empire’s enemies is to invite death to our people. Am I understood?”

Ling Qi found herself nodding, along with the other disciples present. Not a single one hesitated when he commanded them to run and to not stop until he commanded it. What followed were the most miserable and grueling hours of exertion that Ling Qi could recall. Instructor Zhou was utterly without pity for any of them, but at the same time, he seemed to have a preternatural sense for when they genuinely couldn’t be pushed any further.

Those that had reached their limits with more conventional exercise were set to meditating under his watch, while being instructed to... ‘diffuse’ their qi throughout their bodies. This would allow the qi to soak into their flesh and bones rather than gathering in their dantian. They were to practice the qi exercises until the instructor decided they had recovered enough to resume the more physical exercises.

Unlike her earlier efforts at cultivation, Ling Qi felt that her progress was quite slow. She could definitely feel something happening, but it was frustrating feeling most of the qi she attempted to diffuse simply wasting away into the air. Her mood wasn’t helped by the soreness of her muscles as she trudged back home for the evening. Yet despite her exhaustion, Ling Qi found herself feeling a bit of wonder.

By cycling her qi according to the freshly mastered first stage of the Argent Soul Art, she had been able to run faster and longer than she could have managed even just days ago. When she stumbled and fell, her qi flared instinctively to shield her palms against the scrapes she would have normally received. If she was already capable of this after only two days of cultivation, just what wonders would the future hold?

## Chapter 4 - First Steps 4

It was very easy to fall into a routine. Wake up, cultivate, share a few words with Meizhen, attend lessons, and spend time with Han Jian here and there. After just a week, it felt like she had been doing this forever.

Her newfound ability to retain information really was a boon. She could not imagine actually remembering most of the minutiae Bai Meizhen discussed with her or the dense lectures of Elder Su without the clarity of thought cultivation had brought her. She shouldn't have been surprised; Immortals were supposed to be superior to mortals in every way.

Her rapid awakening had actually brought a brief smile to the strict Elder Su's lips. It was the first time in years that Ling Qi had felt genuinely proud of herself.

Now Awakened, she was able to join the other half of the class. Han Jian was a great help in getting her through the material she had missed; most of it was an expansion on what he had been teaching her in their brief meetings.

The second half of the spiritual class was focused on the opening of meridians.

"I'm not sure I understand," Ling Qi admitted. "What exactly is an impurity?" she asked Han Jian as they rested on the bench beneath one of the plaza's trees after a lesson. Despite her earlier resolve, she still lacked the confidence to ask questions in the lesson itself.

"You could probably debate a scholar about that for weeks," Han Jian said with a chuckle. "Basically, it's all the toxins and impure materials that poison our bodies and spirits. We're born with them, and they only get worse with age. Everything in the world has impurities in it, but the closer you come to the peak of cultivation, the less you have."

That explained why she felt like she had been crawling through a sewer pipe after a long afternoon trying to work a meridian open, Ling Qi thought sourly.

"So meridians are actually in the body?" She asked. "Because last week, we learned that our dantians were wholly spiritual."

"Your meridians are what bring your qi into the physical world so they exist both physically and spiritually. But you can't physically interact with the channels themselves except with the aid of certain arts or talismans. Where you carve the channels in your body also decides what type of energies they can carry."

"I suppose that makes sense." Ling Qi sighed.

As they parted ways, his words echoed in her thoughts. Ling Qi had advanced to the point where she would have to choose what kind of meridian to work on opening, and that would affect what arts she would be able to use at first.

Meridians were defined by the part of the body their exit points manifested in. Meridians in the legs were primarily used for movement techniques, while arm meridians were best for energy projection and techniques focused on direct harm. Spinal meridians were primarily used for techniques which enhanced or modified the self, and the heart meridians were best used for techniques which created various effects in a field around the user.

One could also open meridians which emerged from the head and affected the senses or those from the throat, which were associated with the lungs, and allowed the creation of qi constructs. However, Elder Su had warned the disciples that head or lung meridians were poor choices for their first because a misstep in opening those could cause major harm.

It was just one more concern among the others that were piling up.

Even with her quick advancement, Ling Qi was still among the weakest people on the mountain. She had never really been strong, but in her home town, that hadn't mattered much. There were enough people that she could always slip away and vanish into a crowd, and few people - aside from the owner - really cared if several loaves of bread or a bag of rice went missing. Here, there was just over a thousand people on the outer sect mountain.

Only one resource, the spirit stones, mattered. Ling Qi herself was beginning to feel the pinch of their limited supply. True, if she didn't foolishly glut on the energy held within like she had the first night, a single stone could provide for a week of cultivation... but she knew instinctively that she could advance faster with a greater supply. More than once, she had found herself considering if she could acquire more, at her peers expense.

Of course, she wouldn't consider doing that to Bai Meizhen. Despite the taciturn girl's 'friendliness' toward her, there was always a feeling of danger around the other girl. No, she wouldn't even dare to place herself within Bai Meizhen's personal space without a direct invitation.

On the other hand, some of the other girls she passed on her circuitous route out of the residential area were sloppy and inattentive in the same way that the wealthier inhabitants of her home town could be. She was fairly certain she could filch from them without being noticed.

However, it wasn't a step she wanted to take without thought. If she did get caught, the consequences would probably be unpleasant. At the very least, it would earn her a bad reputation, and her standing wasn't exactly very high to begin with.

Her standing was something else that did little for her mood. Even here, she was mostly sneered at and ignored by so-called peers; only Han Jian and Bai Meizhen treated her politely. It was beginning to bother her in a way that she had a hard time articulating.

Those thoughts returned to her again the next day as she sat beside Han Jian in the plaza gardens. She had been working on stabilizing her cultivation, smoothing out the few imbalances that her rapid growth had left in her energy.

As the two of them meditated under the eaves of one of the entry plaza's scattered trees, she found her thoughts bubbling with a simple question. Why was he doing this? She couldn't really offer him anything, and yet he was helping her anyway. It was suspicious. He hadn't even alluded to her owing him, which only increased her wariness.

She glanced over at where he sat cross-legged in the grass, hands on his knees and eyes closed. The tiger cub Heijin was with him today although the lazy feline was asleep in his lap as Heijin was most times they did this. Finally, she could stand her own distraction no more.

"Why are you still meeting me?" Her voice broke the tranquil silence. She wasn't good at subtlety when it came to this kind of thing. "I appreciate the help, but it doesn't make sense."

Her words pulled Han Jian out of his meditation, and he cracked open an eye to regard her curiously. "What brought this on?"

"I've seen you around. You never lack someone to talk to or to partner with in exercises," Ling Qi responded, doing her best to avoid sounding accusatory. "You have higher cultivation than me as well. So - why are you helping me?"



She didn't exactly stalk him, but she had... hung around after their meetings a few times and kept a surreptitious eye on him during lessons. It seemed Han Jian knew many people, and most of them were if not friendly, then at least accepting of his presence.

He relaxed from his stiff mediation and leaned back against the tree trunk behind him.

"Do I need a reason?" he asked lightly, reaching down to scratch Heijin behind the ears. "You aren't totally unpleasant to be around, you know?" he added with a hint of teasing.

Ling Qi frowned, watching him out of the corner of his eye. There was something slightly off about his expression.

"No one does something without a reason," she replied stubbornly. "I know I am not... popular, and I lack the power to make up for that. Spending time with me must degrade your own reputation too."

Ling Qi saw a flicker of something angry in Han Jian's expression, a crack in his friendly demeanor, but it disappeared too fast for her to be sure she had even seen it.

"I think you're underestimating yourself. You broke through to the first stage in less than a week. That earned you some positive attention," he said. Ling Qi didn't miss the deflection in his words. "Besides, everyone can use a little down time, you know?"

She considered his words for a few moments. "So, I'm an excuse to get away from others?" She might not be the best at social interactions, but she liked to think she was reasonably perceptive.

He sighed, glancing up at the sky. "Don't read too much into things, Ling Qi," he responded tiredly. "It doesn't do any good to get hung up on the little stuff."

He was right on that much, and she was better than this. She hadn't lived as long as she had by moping about silly things even if she wished that he had said that he enjoyed spending time with her.

"Right," she said, not quite agreeing but unwilling to argue with him over it. "Ah, I had almost forgotten. There was something I wanted to ask you about that Instructor Zhou seemed to leave out of his lectures."

Han Jian smiled, relaxing now that she had changed the subject. "What's that? He's pretty thorough."

“He never explained what the levels of physical cultivation are,” Ling Qi responded with a frown. “There was some mention of a Gold rank, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Ah, I suppose that makes sense. He probably mentioned it the first day and simply didn’t bother repeating it the second,” Han Jian responded reasonably, eyeing Heijin as the tiger cub bounded off of his lap to chase after a passing butterfly.

“The progression is Gold, Silver, and then Bronze. There are realms after Bronze but like the spiritual realms after Green, we don’t need to worry about that for awhile.”

“Isn’t that backward? Why is Gold the lowest realm?”

“Let me see if I can remember how my tutor put it,” Han Jian said, humming thoughtfully to himself.

“Gold is a malleable metal, easily shaped, just like a young cultivator. Yet it is also soft and easily damaged.” He put on a slightly mocking ‘serious’ voice as he recited the words, causing Ling Qi to smile slightly.

Returning to his normal voice, he added, “It’s also the least valuable metal for Immortals. It isn’t particularly good for talismans, and accumulating a mortal fortune is pretty trivial for any Immortal with decent skills. It just isn’t important to us in the same way as it is for mortals.”

Ling Qi nodded thoughtfully, her smile fading. It made sense she supposed. She still couldn’t see herself turning down a pile of gold coins. She had other things she needed to ask though.

“Thank you. On another note, would you mind if I asked you for advice on clearing a heart meridian as well? Now that I’ve reached the first stage, I want to be able to actually use my qi.”

Surprised, Han Jian raised an eyebrow. “You’re going for heart? Most people go for an arm or the spine for the first meridian.”

Ling Qi gave him an unsure look. “Is there something wrong with opening the heart first? You have heart meridians open too.”

“Well yeah, but I’m expected to lead,” he responded easily, wincing as Heijin returned to nip at his fingers. He glared down at the kitten before continuing.

“I didn’t take you for the leader type.”

Ling Qi hunched her shoulders a bit. She didn’t really feel like she was a leader either, but she was not going to catch up in raw strength any time soon. Increasing her value as a support-type would make it easier to keep Bai Meizhen’s goodwill - or some other group’s if it came down to it.

“I have my reasons,” she responded stubbornly.

Han Jian regarded her quietly for a moment but then shrugged slightly. “Well, alright. First thing to keep in mind is that you need to time the qi pulses to your heartbeat. If you don’t, you’ll risk making your heart seize up. The more precise the timing, the better off you’ll be...”

Ling Qi leaned forward, listening intently. She would do this, and she wouldn’t fail.

## Chapter 5 - First Steps 5

Ling Qi's next few days were marred by long periods of exhausting meditation interspersed with frightening brushes with mortality when control of her qi slipped and sent her heart beating erratically. Carving open a channel for her qi was a painstaking task.

Completing it meant that she could begin learning to attune it to an element and practice the simplest arts. Time spent in lessons and in private cultivation blurred together as she focused on her goal.

Her breakthrough finally came during the last of Elder Su's lessons that week. With the lecture over, the class was allowed to cultivate under the Elder's watchful eye. In her seat at the back of the room, Ling Qi slowed her breathing and continued to push her qi through the slowly opening spiritual channel.

At first, things proceeded as normal, her qi pulsing in time with her heartbeat. Suddenly, her breathing hitched as she felt something within her crumble. With no more spiritual detritus blocking its way, her qi gushed outward. Engrossed in the sudden feeling of soaring freedom, she was only vaguely aware of startled gasps and the sound of rushing wind from around her.

Ling Qi opened her eyes, blinking in wonder at the new feelings. She suddenly felt so... aware. She could feel the smooth material of her uniform on her skin and the tiny motions of the air around her. She could hear the sound of rustling cloth as the person on her right side shifted away from her and her own clothes flapping in an invisible breeze.

"Please settle yourself, Disciple Qi."

She was startled from her contemplation by the sudden presence of Elder Su in the aisle to her left. Even with her new awareness, she hadn't been able to feel the Elder approaching. Her cheeks coloring slightly at the mild reprimand, she did her best to follow the instruction, trying to reign in the flow of her qi. The phantom breeze weakened but did not die as she worked to regain control.

The Elder continued up the steps of the aisle, stopping as she came to stand beside Ling Qi's seat.

"It seems your natural qi has a tinge of wind to it," the older woman said quietly. In the silence of the room, her words rang out clearly. "Do you require a moment outside to

compose yourself?”

Ling Qi felt uncomfortable as she felt the attention of the other disciples settle on her. At the same time, she felt pride from the fact that Elder Su was addressing her directly and unprompted at that.

“No, Elder Su.”

The matronly woman fixed Ling Qi with a gaze that seemed to peer through her.

“I see. You have been doing quite well so far.” The older woman flicked her sleeve, and Ling Qi blinked as an odd jade token appeared on the desk in front of her.

“Take this to the archive. The supervisor there will allow you to take a copy of one of the arts from the first floor.”

Archive? She had no idea where that was. She had no idea there even was an archive, but Elder Su was already moving away. She didn’t want to make herself appear foolish by having to ask so she remained silent. As pleased as she was to be given this, she was well aware that any chance she had of muddling along beneath notice had just vanished.

“Thank you Elder,” she managed to say, lowering her head in respect, even as she carefully hid away the jade token she had been given. It looked mundane, but she wasn’t about to risk losing it.

The rest of lesson proceeded normally. Ling Qi used her remaining time to practice getting used to the feeling of qi flowing through her open meridian. As Ling Qi hurried to disappear into the crowd of disciples leaving the lessons, she was brought up short.

“Ah... Miss Ling! Miss Ling, can you please wait a moment?” An out of breath female voice called from behind her.

Ling Qi glanced behind herself warily and slowed down. She had made it out to the plaza and there were many people around so it was unlikely that someone was going to try something. What she saw when she turned her head was a girl she recognized from her lessons with Elder Su. Li Suyin, if she recalled correctly.

Li Suyin had long, light blue hair and the sort of slim, petite figure that most of the female disciples did. She was rather plain though, much like Ling Qi herself. The girl lacked the obvious cosmetics or accessories that the wealthier girls used to show off, but Li Suyin was still too pale and unblemished to be a commoner.

She was also red faced from exertion. It looked like she had run to catch up with Ling Qi, and she didn't seem very fit physically.

"What do you need?" Ling Qi asked. The other girl had never been rude to her or jostled her in the halls so she could afford to be polite.

The other girl seemed relieved that Ling Qi had stopped. "I am glad I caught you today. You always disappear so quickly after lessons," Li Suyin said between breaths, smoothing her gown nervously with her hands. "I... well. I was hoping you might consider helping me?"

Ling Qi stared at her. What could Li Suyin want help with? The other girl had awakened earlier this week so Ling Qi wasn't exactly far ahead of her.

"I don't see how I could help," Ling Qi replied bluntly.

Li Suyin fidgeted under her gaze. "W-well... You have advanced so quickly. It took me a month to reach this point. I was hoping that we could discuss the differences in our methods, and that I could observe your cultivation in private." Her voice seemed to get smaller and smaller as she went on. By the end, Li Suyin wasn't even looking her in the eye anymore.

"...I'm sorry. I'm aware that that is a very rude request."

Ling Qi felt awkward about being asked for help. She was also more than a little suspicious. She couldn't imagine that she would be much help to the other girl either.

"I'll think about it," she said. "Give me a few days to consider."

"Of course," the other girl said hurriedly. "Um - well, if you want to, we can meet after lessons." She glanced back up at Ling Qi's skeptical face for a moment before her shoulders slumped a little. "I will... stop bothering you. It's obvious that you are very busy."

Li Suyin began to hurry away, leaving Ling Qi to wonder if the girl's nerves were truly genuine. It didn't feel like a deception. She couldn't see herself benefitting from the discussions either, but... her thoughts returned to Han Jian, where the situation was reversed.

"Li Suyin," she called out. "I'll make some time in a few days, alright?"

The nervous girl, having stopped at her call, beamed at her, offering a hasty but grateful bow. "Thank you very much!"

When Ling Qi returned home, she was surprised to see the light of a lit hearth in the window. Bai Meizhen kept erratic hours. Sometimes, Ling Qi would never even see her arrive at their shared home in the evening.

Bai Meizhen also had strange habits. Ling Qi had never once seen the girl eat a single grain of rice or so much as sip from a bowl of soup for example. Even when Ling Qi offered to share her meals, they were refused.

...She had seen the other girl with a trickle of blood on her chin on one late morning, but Bai Meizhen had wiped it away moments after meeting Ling Qi's stare. Ling Qi had not felt brave enough to ask about it given the other girl's frosty expression.

Oddities aside, Bai Meizhen was... helpful in her taciturn and condescending way. As Ling Qi settled in for the evening and finished her simple dinner, she ended up speaking with the girl, resuming their 'lessons' on the boring minutiae of noble etiquette.

"I'm still not really sure I understand, but... are you saying all noble families have a 'Sublime Ancestor'? Is that some kind of tradition? That someone has to... marry a spirit to make their line noble?" Ling Qi's expression was strange as she tried to parse Bai Meizhen's explanation on how ranking and position among noble clans worked.

"All of the truly well-established families have or had such a non-human ancestor. Only an exalted few can claim to have a Sublime Ancestor," the pale girl explained with a hint of impatience.

"I do not understand why you have such trouble with the idea," Bai Meizhen added irritably. "A few Sublime Ancestors have died or disappeared, but this should still be common knowledge. The relationship between a powerful cultivator and their bound spirits has always been close."

Ling Qi had found that Bai Meizhen had strange ideas on what constituted common knowledge.

"What do you mean by bound spirits?" Ling Qi asked, eyeing the green scales visible just under the neckline of Bai Meizhen's gown. "Is that why Cui seems like she shares your qi?" She still wasn't very good at feeling other people's energy but she was around the two of them often enough to feel the oddity.

“When a cultivator reaches the second stratum... the Yellow realm, it becomes possible to bond with a spirit whether beast or pure. This serves to strengthen both parties, allowing them to cultivate together and share growth to a degree. It also serves to humanize the spirit, making it easier for the spirit to interact with and understand us.”

Ling Qi nodded thoughtfully, reaching out to warm her hands at the hearth. It was beginning to get cold in the evenings. She didn't follow everything Bai Meizhen had just said, but the gist was simple.

“Oh. So he's at that point...” she murmured to herself, thinking about Han Jian. She hadn't thought he was that advanced.

“That boy is not yet bonded with his familial partner,” Bai Meizhen's voice shook her out of her contemplation. “He yet remains at the peak of the Red realm.”

Ling Qi blinked, turning back to Meizhen. “How did you know who I was thinking of?”

The other girl's unsettling gaze slipped to the side. The silence quickly became awkward.

“... I have observed you with him once. It seemed obvious who you were thinking of,” Bai Meizhen replied eventually.

Well, it wasn't like she had cause to complain. She had done some shadowing too.

“Right... Anyway, you were telling me about how noble families rank against each other? Is it just who has the strongest ancestors or is it determined by Heavenly Mandate like the Imperial Seat?” She might be an uneducated peasant but even she was aware of some things.

Bai Meizhen's lips curled in disdain. “I forget sometimes the prevalence of imperial propaganda,” she muttered more to herself than Ling Qi.

“The clan holding the Imperial Seat is chosen by who can hold it against their rivals. The current dynasty's hold is maintained by their control of the supply of spirit stones in the great mines of Mount Tai, as well as the web of alliances the mines have given them.”

Ling Qi's eyes widened at the casual and disdainful description. It was uncomfortable to hear someone speak of the Imperial throne that way. It just... wasn't done.



“But... doesn’t the Dragon Throne incinerate false claimants?” There were all sorts of stories of wicked schemers destroyed for daring to touch the throne.

“Certainly,” Bai Meizhen responded, her irritation showing in the sibilant undertone that colored her words. “However, the first emperor and creator of the throne was a very promiscuous man. Almost every noble family of any pedigree is descended from him.”

Feeling rather uncomfortable with the subject matter, Ling Qi soon changed it, but she now felt she had an inkling of why Meizhen might be isolated. Was her family out of favor with the Imperial Court?

The thought was unsettling enough to cut into her sleep that night.

This was very unhelpful the next day as she trudged toward the training grounds before sunrise for another lesson with Elder Zhou. If she were honest, these lessons were probably her least favorite times on the mountain. The man was a merciless taskmaster and every time she attended, she went home exhausted, sore, and filthy with sweat and dirt. She wasn’t afraid of getting dirty, but Ling Qi had never imagined she could be that tired.

She felt some pride in that she was one of only a score or so of the girls who regularly showed up and kept up. She saw Meizhen once or twice, as well as Sun Liling, both of whom were irritating in different ways. Meizhen because the snow white girl never seemed to tire properly and never sweated at all, no matter how hard she worked Sun Liling because whenever she showed up, she got the instructor’s personal attention.

There were no more incidents like the first day. No student spoke back or interrupted Instructor Zhou again, not even the boy still nursing a bruise from last week.

Their instructor spoke little. When he did, Zhou’s lectures were oddly mundane, in that he spoke little of cultivation matters but more on fitness. Actual exercise was needed alongside meditation to allow qi to properly seep into the muscles and bones, and he constantly reminded them that keeping their bodies in the peak of mundane health was necessary for laying the foundation of their physical cultivation.

A cultivator’s body degraded slower than a mortal’s, much slower as they grew stronger. Once she reached the peak, it wouldn’t be difficult to stay there, but here, at the beginning, she could not afford to slack at all.

Not that she intended to.

Ling Qi was all too aware of how much she would benefit from having an Immortal's body. Sickness, disease, starvation. All the ugly things she had spent her life worrying about could be cast aside and forgotten if she just exercised hard enough. How could she not put her full effort into it?

So despite her difficulties, Ling Qi stubbornly pushed on with her cultivation, doing her utmost to focus her qi into her exhausted muscles during her periods of meditation. Today, despite its miserable beginnings, her cultivation paid off.

It happened as she was in the midst of a set of push ups, a cool down from the more intense exercises. It was as if she had been straining against a great weight tied to her back, only for it to suddenly vanish. Vitality flooded her tired limbs, banishing her fatigue and lingering tiredness like morning mist before the sun. Her body felt lighter than it ever had before, and aches she had forgotten she even had faded away.

"Good. Get up and join the third group," Ling Qi's gaze snapped up as she found herself staring at the veritable mountain of muscle that was Instructor Zhou. How did Elders *do* that?

Hastily nodding, she stood, not trusting herself to respond without stuttering something embarrassing. No matter how harsh he was, the older man was very... distracting up close.

Moving toward the group of students who had reached the Early Gold stage, she paused as Elder Zhou spoke again.

"Do not slow down. You are still far behind your peers."

His words stung but... they were true. Gritting her teeth in determination, Ling Qi set herself to driving her body to exhaustion once again.

After Elder Zhou's lesson, Ling Qi dragged her tired body up the narrow path which lead to the archive. She had learned its location by listening in on the other groups of disciples coming and going. Although her muscles ached and her lungs burned with exertion, she did not want to put this off any longer.

She wished the location was more convenient. The archive was a rounded tower rising from the top of a cliff, and the path she walked was a narrow switchback carved into the face of it, steep and dangerous. Even as tired as she was though, Ling Qi felt no concern. Though her limbs dragged, her balance was more perfect than ever.

Reaching the top, she took a moment to catch her breath and then proceeded forward. It took a moment for her to figure out the door. Apparently, she needed to slot the token Elder Su had given her into it, but once slotted, the door swung open, opening the archive to her.

Soon, she would have an art of her own.

# Chapter 6 - Exam Prep 1

Ling Qi rubbed her eyes, trying to banish the blur of exhaustion. Scattered on the table before her were a half dozen opened scrolls, dense with text and diagrams. The archive supervisor had been able to explain the Archive's organization, but even limiting her search to arts which only needed a single heart meridian for the initial level, the number she had to sift through had been vast.

There were no windows in the archive, only hanging lanterns that burned without flame, but Ling Qi suspected that it was nearing sunrise. There were simply so many options, and she could only take a single one. Each art would allow her to perform feats that she could not have imagined a scarce few weeks ago.

The Burning Heart Art would allow her to inspire courage and banish fear, as well as project blazing heat in the wake of her movements. The Earthroot Art would fill her limbs with strength and slow enemies with the weighty energies of the earth. The Crimson Flowing Art would allow her to sense the flow of blood in things around her and staunch her own wounds with a thought.

And these were only a few of the available arts!

Ling Qi's gaze drifted to another scroll on the table. Zephyr's Breath Art was a set of techniques for manipulating the currents of air around the user to speed allies and impede foes. It was an art for making projectiles fly true and for avoiding direct confrontation.

In other words, it fit her well. But did she want it? She was a cultivator now, she could... should do whatever she wanted. Did she want to keep running away?

Ling Qi let out an explosive sigh. She was being silly; looking at her peers, she had no business being able to simply do as she pleased. Elder Su had mentioned that her qi had a natural wind nature so Zephyr's Breath really was her best choice for being able to quickly defend herself.

It was only a first choice after all, and meridians could be re-attuned. Ling Qi decisively snatched up the scroll. She wavered as she stood up but shook her head, took control of her breathing, and cycled her qi to push the exhaustion back for the moment.

Once she cleaned up and traded the scroll for the jade slip encoded with its contents, she could get some sleep. She just hoped that she didn't end up missing Elder Su's lesson by oversleeping.

Days passed, and Ling Qi found limited success in getting her new art to work. The finesse required to create more than directionless bursts of wind eluded her yet, and channeling the flows of qi left her feeling exhausted, her single meridian burning with discomfort. It seemed that her body needed more tempering yet.

She was not yet ready to make use of her art, but that day would come soon if she kept working hard. She was sure of it. Elder Su's lessons were slowly improving her ability to cycle and manipulate qi. Mastering the next stage of Argent Soul also promised great improvements to her stamina, and in a few days, she was going to be meeting that girl, Li Suyin, to share cultivation ideas.

As for Elder Zhou... Well, his lessons continued to be both blessing and trial.

Ling Qi's limbs trembled with exhaustion, her muscles burning from the strain of holding herself in the difficult pose Instructor Zhou had forced them to take up for meditation this week. The meditation had begun with simple stretches but had quickly progressed to difficult and highly uncomfortable exercises.

Muscles she didn't even know she had were sore, and the sweat trickling down her forehead despite the mountain chill kept stinging her eyes. Ling Qi doggedly kept her attention on Instructor Zhou as he paced between the rows of disciples, muscular arms clasped behind his back.

"As a cultivator, you cannot afford to neglect any part of your body. Physical cultivation is, at its core, an endless exercise in balance and unity. Lose that balance or cultivate some part out of sync and you will tear your own body apart," the elder lectured, pausing now and then to not so gently nudge a disciple back into proper position.

"At this low stage of cultivation, you may suffer torn muscles, broken bones, and other minor injuries."

One of the boys on the elder's left collapsed mid-movement, his leg giving out beneath him. The elder waved the boy off to cool down.

"The repercussions for failure only grow with your cultivation. You do not wish to make such mistakes when you begin reinforcement of the major organs."

Ling Qi gritted her teeth as the muscles in her back cried out from being extended for so long.

“One’s foundation of understanding is vital to cultivation. This is the sole reason that Elders such as I are spending our time teaching you.

“The key to physical cultivation is Unity!” His voice boomed out over the field, and another person collapsed in a heap.

“The body requires Unity and Balance.” Even in her current state, Ling Qi could hear the odd emphasis that he put on those words.

“Flesh, bone, muscle, blood, the organs major and minor. No part of the body functions well without the others supporting it! And so all must be cultivated to achieve true strength.”

He rounded the end of the row and began to walk down the one occupied by Ling Qi.

“The same can be said for the Sect and the Empire. No province would find the same prosperity or the same safety on its own.” Ling Qi’s breath hitched as she felt her body begging to be allowed to collapse.

“No soldier survives a battle on his own. He survives with the support of his squad, which survives with the support of its battalion. A General without his men is no better than a head without a body. An army without a general is no better than a body without a head!

“But all the same, cultivation is also about removing the impurities from the body. It is about ejecting weakness.” He stopped a scant dozen steps from Ling Qi’s position to survey the field, towering over the hunched and bent students.

“I have said it before; I am not here to train court cultivators, who sit in their clan homes and play the games of politics. I train the soldiers who will stand as the bulwark of the Empire. This is your warning. In two weeks, the lessons I give freely will end.”

Murmurs of alarm sounded at that, but none dared anything more.

“The week after next, I will oversee a test. It will not be one that solely tests personal strength. You will be organized into squads and set against one another in various tasks. I intend to accept no more than thirty disciples into the remaining lessons.”

He resumed walking then, and Ling Qi bit her lip as she concentrated on not falling. Not now. She didn’t want to fail just as the Elder walked by...

As the Elder moved toward her, she let out a breath and closed her eyes.

No. She would not let herself fail.

She felt her qi blaze in her dantian and resonate with the Argent Soul Art, the steady outward flow dispersing into her bones and muscles briefly increased and dulled the ache of exhaustion. When she opened her eyes, she found herself meeting the instructor's eyes, if only for a second, as he swept his gaze over her.

"We will see which of you has the potential to be worth more of my time then.

"At ease, disciples," Elder Zhou said as he reached the end of the line.

"Perform your cooldowns and go. Prepare yourselves well."

The tension in the air as he left the field was palpable. Ling Qi eyed her fellow disciples with new wariness. Their competition was no longer implicit. In two weeks time, they would be enemies.

Ling Qi left the day's lessons in a daze. With this new deadline hanging over her head, all of her progress seemed paltry. It wasn't fair. How was she supposed to compete in something like this when she had only just begun?

She reminded herself that life was not fair and had never been fair. She would just have to find a way to succeed.

It was a group exercise at least, and Elder Zhou had never said that it would be direct combat. Perhaps she could group with Meizhen? It felt unpleasant to have to rely on someone else's strength, but pride was a luxury of the strong.

In the wake of Instructor Zhou's announcement, Ling Qi had been tempted to discard her current plans for cultivating the Argent Soul Art in favor of spending more time on the Zephyr's Breath Art. In the end, she decided against it. Had the instructor not said that the foundation was the most important? Right now, the Argent Soul was her foundation so she would improve it no matter what.

She did come much closer to canceling her meeting with Li Suyin. However, she had already set the date, and there was no point in alienating one of her tiny handful of friendly contacts. Certainly not for a few hours of fumbling solo cultivation.

So unlike most days, instead of ducking out the moment Elder Su opened the door, she hung back. She watched Li Suyin carefully pack up the various writing tools the girl always brought to the lessons.

Ling Qi had started paying attention to the other girl since the day Li Suyin had approached her. The girl never seemed to be without her implements and carried them in an expensive looking case at her side. It was the only real proof that the girl had any wealth.

Ling Qi could see the appeal of taking notes. More than once, she had wished she could better recall Elder Su's instruction even with her improved memory. Sadly, such things were laughably out of her reach financially. And while she could read, her writing ability was far too slow to keep up with the Elder's lecture.

When Li Suyin finally noticed her looking, her eyes widened momentarily before she hurried up, the shiny wooden case holding her notes and implements clutched against her chest.

"I'm sorry! Were you waiting for me? It's just - I needed to blot the ink and -"

"It's fine," Ling Qi cut her off a bit rudely. There was already attention being directed at the two of them, and this wasn't the place for idle chatter.

"Let's walk while we talk," she added, turning away to head for the door.

She heard Li Suyin murmur a response and hurry to catch up with her. Apologizing as she moved around and between other students.

"W-why are you always in such a hurry to leave class?" the blue-haired girl asked as she finally fell in beside Ling Qi. Li Suyin was even shorter than Bai Meizhen, the other girl's head barely came up to Ling Qi's chest. Just another reason to feel awkward and out of place.

"I like staying in practice," Ling Qi responded. "The truce the Elders put down will only last less than two and a half months longer, and I am not popular." Left unsaid was that Ling Qi didn't have any family reputation to act as a buffer either.

"Oh, well, um..." The answer seemed to have surprised Li Suyin.

"I... surely no one will do anything excessive, right?" At Ling Qi's incredulous look, the shorter girl hurried on. "I mean, there will be... duels and such obviously, but we are all disciples of the same sect."

"... Maybe," Ling Qi allowed, but she doubted it would be so civilized. If one dumped a few scraps of meat into a pen of starving dogs, they wouldn't nicely share it either, and



in her view, that was a pretty close approximation of the trickle of resources supplied to the outer disciples.

“What’s the plan?”

Li Suyin blinked at the sudden change in subject as the two of them hurried out of the lecture building.

“I was thinking that you could come to my home, and I could ask you a few questions before observing you while you cultivate,” Li Suyin responded nervously. “I... I have been told my senses are quite good. It is hard to discern anything in the lecture hall when there is so much interference,” she said while gesturing vaguely to the other disciples around the two of them.

Was Ling Qi getting set up for a trap? Even if Li Suyin seemed genuine, she didn’t like putting herself in the other girl’s space.

“Why don’t we do it at my place instead?” Ling Qi asked challengingly to see how the other girl would respond.

The blue-haired girl’s eyes widened almost comically, and Li Suyin hunched her shoulders. “I... I’m not sure.... Would your housemate really allow that?” she asked, reminding Ling Qi of a frightened rabbit.

“It’s my home too,” Ling Qi responded stubbornly. She honestly wasn’t sure how Meizhen would react to someone else in their home.

“Besides, why is everyone so afraid or disdainful of Bai Meizhen?”

Now Li Suyin was the one looking at her incredulously. “She... does her aura not affect you?” Li Suyin asked before frowning.

“No, it must not. How else would you live in the same home,” Li Suyin mumbled to herself. “Is it just acclimation though or...”

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably. Her heart still sped up sometimes when she was startled by Bai Meizhen’s presence, but it was mostly something that she had almost forgotten about given her constant proximity to the girl.

“It can’t just be that,” Ling Qi said, cutting off the other girl’s inquisitive mumbling. “I mean- it’s a little unnerving, but we’re all cultivators here.”

Li Suyin grimaced slightly, turning her attention back to Ling Qi.

"I do not fully understand the matter myself... Father is only a regional minister of finance and was elevated in the exams. I'm not - not *really* a noble," Li Suyin admitted uncomfortably.

"The Bai family is... They frighten people and upset things with their disagreements with the Imperial Court. There are only a handful of ancient bloodlines left in the Empire, you know?"

Ling Qi didn't know, but she supposed she would have to take the other girl's word for it.

"...We'll do this at your place then," she decided. In the end, her instincts told her Li Suyin wasn't leading her on. She supposed it was a poor idea to invite someone over without asking Bai Meizhen. Her housemate could be prickly at the best of times.

Ling Qi followed Li Suyin to her home, a tiny stone hut on the edge of the residential area. It was... cramped. A single room with a hearth in the center and thin pallets laid out on either side.

One side clearly belonged to Li Suyin. It was neatly made and surrounded by paper and books. The other side was a mess of balled up blankets and discarded clothing, as well as a few other random knick knacks: a battered belt knife, a few stone dishes, and implements for grinding and mixing herbs. There were also fine, silky strands of hair on everything. Did the girl Li Suyin was rooming with have a cat or a dog?

In any case, Li Suyin mumbled apologies for the mess her housemate left and ushered Ling Qi into the only other room, which was essentially the equivalent of the meditation room at Ling Qi's home but... downsized.

Once the two were seated in the dim and cramped room, things started off simple enough. Li Suyin asked various questions about Ling Qi's cultivation and how Ling Qi felt while performing different exercises. Li Suyin scribbled down the answers on the paper spread across the wooden board she had laid out across her lap.

Ling Qi found herself relaxing as time passed and nothing untoward happened even as the other girl's questions grew increasingly difficult. Things like the number of qi circulations in each 'push' on her meridian or the exact number of breaths she took per minute when meditating... Ling Qi couldn't answer many of them since she didn't really pay attention to such issues herself. It was frustrating to be unable to answer again and again.

“Does any of this actually matter?” Ling Qi finally asked, cutting off Li Suyin’s latest inquiry about whether Ling Qi circulated her qi clockwise or counterclockwise or some mix of both when clearing her meridian.

The other girl paused in writing and shifted uncomfortably where she was seated only a short distance away.

“I... don’t know,” Li Suyin admitted.

“I ask questions in the lessons, but there is never enough time for everything I want to ask,” she added with a hint of frustration. “There is just so much that I do not know.”

“Why ask me then?” Ling Qi asked, leaning back against the wall. “There are probably other girls who actually know these answers.”

Li Suyin looked aside, twiddling nervously with her ink brush. “But would they answer me?” she asked, expression bitter.

“At least you are willing to sit down and answer questions instead of calling me foolish.”

“That’s... fair,” Ling Qi admitted.

“I don’t know that I’ll be able to do this often. I need to cultivate, and the Argent Soul isn’t going to master itself.” Ling Qi didn’t dislike the other girl, but she was also finding it difficult to think of reasons why she should continue.

Li Suyin’s face fell, but then her expression settled into one of determination. “Would - would you care for a look at my notes? I’ve done a fair amount of work on studying how the Argent Soul art works, as well as deciphering the meanings behind the koans and more opaque instructions.”

Ling Qi frowned but eventually nodded. She was already here, and it couldn’t hurt.

Li Suyin’s notes were densely packed, but at the same time... they were pretty insightful. Li Suyin had ideas for achieving the improved qi generation of the second stage of the Argent Soul art that Ling Qi hadn’t even considered.

Now that Ling Qi had been presented with them, it made all too much sense. With the new insight in mind, she barely gave Li Suyin a thought before closing her eyes to cultivate. If Li Suyin was right about the last step of the second stage, then it was more than worth a little observation from Li Suyin.

When Ling Qi opened her eyes, the sun had fallen beneath the horizon. She felt incredibly refreshed. She could not yet maintain the second stage with any stability, but she had advanced in leaps and bounds compared to the muddled attempts she had made previously on her own.

She still jerked back in shock at the first sight she saw. Li Suyin had leaned in far closer than Ling Qi was comfortable with, hands hovering a hair's breadth over Ling Qi's stomach. Just how out of touch was Ling Qi when cultivating?

"Back up," Ling Qi commanded in a voice that was definitely not an embarrassed yelp.

Li Suyin startled at the sound of Ling Qi's voice and flushed a deep red when she met Ling Qi's eyes. Li Suyin hastily jerked back with wide eyes as her hands flew up to cover her mouth.

"I - I'm sorry!" Li Suyin squeaked out. "I just lost track of things while observing your qi and I think I've nearly managed to open the meridian in my arm and I got better results when I was closer and..." she rambled defensively.

"Just - just don't do that again," Ling Qi interrupted shakily. She didn't care for having her personal space invaded.

"... I don't mind coming by again sometime," Ling Qi said in the awkward silence that followed. "As long as you keep sharing your notes," she added hastily.

Ling Qi couldn't but feel a little pleased at the bright smile that overtook the mousy girl's expression. How long had it been since someone had been genuinely happy to see her?

## Chapter 7 - Exam Prep 2

The qi that now thrummed through Ling Qi's dantian filled her body with energy. Her muscles tingled and her heartbeat thundered in her ears, making it difficult to remain still. The qi washed away the fatigue and thinly stretched feeling that followed a day spent in intensive effort.

She had mastered the second stage of the Argent Soul Art and the depth of her well of qi had grown by nearly half. Letting out a breath, she performed another cycling of her energy and felt wonder at how smoothly it flowed and how swiftly it responded to her thoughts.

This... This had been worth it. She would need to dedicate herself to training hard, but she could instinctively feel that she now had enough qi to put into practice Elder Su's lessons on using qi to reduce the need for sleep. It would leave her drained of energy, but she could train longer and harder if need be. With her increased stamina, she might even be able to begin seriously mastering the first techniques of the Zephyr's Breath Art.

With her success buoying her, Ling Qi left the meditation room feeling ready to take a well-earned break. When she found that her oft absent roommate had returned home during her cultivation, she was even more pleased. She hadn't had a chance to speak to Bai Meizhen in a couple of days, and she wanted to discuss the possibility of teaming up for Elder Zhou's test.

"What do you mean you don't intend to participate?" Ling Qi asked in distress as she looked across the fire at Bai Meizhen.

The pale girl sipped quietly from a steaming cup of tea as Cui lazily slithered up from the collar of her gown, coiling around her neck in a loose loop.

"Just as I said. I have no intention of joining the Sect military beyond training exercises. Elder Zhou's instruction is valuable, but in the end, it is not the path I wish to take. My own physical cultivation is sufficient for my needs."

Ling Qi grimaced. So much for the hope that she could succeed by relying on Bai Meizhen. There was still the possibility of trying to join Han Jian... but she felt less sure of her chances of successfully doing so. The boy had quite a few other friends from her observations.

“Do you at least have an idea of what the Elder’s test will be?” Surely Bai Meizhen knew more of the various elders’ reputations than Ling Qi did.

Bai Meizhen’s thoughtful hum had a slightly unnerving hissing quality to it, but Ling Qi was used to it by now.

“Guan Zhou is a man dedicated to the Empire through and through. It is likely he will test for cooperation, coordination, and ability to synergize one’s skills with others. I expect the test will take the form of achieving various military objectives. Other elders may have input into the test however, which may change the form the test takes.”

Ling Qi clutched her knees in worry as her thoughts spun through the possibilities. She might not have much combat ability... but she was fairly good at sneaking and survival. Scouting was an important part of army operations, right? She hoped so. Her only experience with soldiering was listening to drunk city guards bemoan their superior officers.

“Ugh. I wish I had more time and resources to cultivate with,” Ling Qi lamented. “There are so many things to do, and I’m still so far behind. I can’t afford to lose out on an Elder’s lessons.”

Bai Meizhen regarded her emotionlessly over the rim of her tea cup as Ling Qi spoke to herself. Cui was staring at her too, tongue flickering in and out.

“I had noticed that your cultivation has stopped progressing. Have you reached a block?”

Ling Qi shook her head. “No, I’ve been cultivating the Argent Soul Art instead. It’s my... foundation, right? If I strengthen it, everything that comes after will be stronger.” The explanation sounded better in her head, especially now that she was regretting the lack of immediate combat gains.

Bai Meizhen nodded, a hint of approval flickering in her golden eyes. “That is a good way to think, but I can understand why you are distressed. Building a foundation is important, but it lacks immediate returns.” She glanced downward thoughtfully, meeting the eyes of her ‘cousin’, who merely flicked her tongue lazily in response as far as Ling Qi could tell.

“Would you like some tea?” The question was bizarre and made Ling Qi blink in surprise as Bai Meizhen looked back up to meet her gaze.

“... Sure?” Ling Qi responded a bit awkwardly. Was the other girl trying to comfort her?

“What does that have to do with what we were talking about?”

Bai Meizhen pursed her lips. “I am no herbalist, but I do have some small supply of spirit herbs. Several of the herbs are no longer useful to me.” She said this as if it explained everything. Bai Meizhen frowned at Ling Qi’s lack of understanding and expanded on her previous statement.

“The tea will allow you to cultivate longer and more efficiently. It cannot be used too often though. Once a month at most, lest you risk poisoning.”

Ling Qi’s eyes widened. Even with the limitation, the tea would be an amazing boon. She hurriedly ducked her head thankfully to the other girl.

“Oh! Then yes, please. Thank you very much.”

Bai Meizhen waved her hand dismissively. “It is nothing. As I said, the herbs in question are not useful to one above the Red Soul realm.” She sounded pleased at Ling Qi’s acceptance.

Later that night, Ling Qi was not regretting her choice even if the tea had been so bitter she had nearly spat it out. As horrible as it had tasted, it had left her qi practically crackling within her dantian, straining at its confines as if to expand her capacity by itself. In a single night, she felt as if she had made up for at least a few of the days lost struggling with art cultivation.

When the tea’s effect faded and exhaustion set in, Ling Qi found herself toying with her flute for the first time since she had come to the Sect.

Everything was changing so quickly. Ling Qi might not have true strength yet, but she was achieving something. It hadn’t really sunk in how different things were now. She had friends, if tentative and eccentric ones. She knew things that she could never have imagined having the time or energy to care about. She was seriously considering competing in a military exercise!

As she brought the flute to her lips and closed her eyes, she could only think of one thing. She wouldn’t fail. She wouldn’t fall behind... and she wouldn’t be a burden on her housemate forever.

The other girl had helped her greatly tonight and in the past weeks. Their conversations had given her the basic understanding she would need to get by among the other disciples.

She would pay Bai Meizhen back for her kindness.

She played until tiredness finally stole her skill and laid down to sleep.

Days passed. Ling Qi found herself spending more and more time on cultivation and using her qi to avoid the need to sleep. Every time she found her eyes drooping or her thoughts becoming clouded with exhaustion, she would breathe deep and cycle the qi in her dantian. The tiredness would fade, and she would resume cultivating.

She could feel that she would not be able to keep this up forever. Every day that passed without sleep increased the slight feeling of strain and emptiness that she had begun to feel behind her navel as her efforts sapped the internal well of energy she was carefully cultivating. But for now, it would have to be enough.

Not all of her time could be spent in solitary meditation. She still had lessons to attend and... meetings with her friends for one reason or another.

Things were also beginning to change in the lessons. Instructor Zhou grew harsher and more demanding, and the class began to slowly shrink as individual disciples gave up in the face of his harsh criticisms.

Elder Su did not allow things to remain routine either.

"I am glad to see there are none left who remain unawakened at the end of our first month together." The matron opened the class on the second day of the week with an unusual statement. With the exception of her speech on the first day, she had always moved directly into her lecture the moment the door closed.

"It would have been unfortunate to have to expel such layabouts from my course," she continued pleasantly, eyes scanning the room.

Ling Qi noticed several of her classmates shifting uncomfortably, likely those who had only recently reached their awakening. She wasn't sure; she had been so focused on her cultivation that she hadn't paid them much mind. The only ones whose names she knew in Elder Su's lessons were Li Suyin and Han Jian.



“Going forward, I will have to be somewhat more strict in my requirements.” Ling Qi’s attention snapped back to the Elder, who handed out her ultimatum with a pleasant expression.

“First, after this week, if you do not have at least one of your meridians cleared, you will not be welcome in this class. The exercises we will be performing next week require that you be able to affect the world around you.”

Ling Qi caught Li Suyin shooting her a look of gratitude to which she responded with a weak smile. She was glad she had focused on clearing a meridian so early.

“Similarly,” the Elder continued, unperturbed by the unhappy looks on a few disciples’ faces, “if you have not achieved the mid-Red Soul stage by the end of the next month, I will ask that you not return.” She paused to give a moment for that requirement to sink in.

“I am confident that there are no slackers who will fail to achieve such a simple thing.” Ling Qi’s spirits sank a bit at that. It was something else she also had to worry over. At least this task seemed doable. With her meridian open and her Argent Soul Art improved to the second stage, she could now focus on raising her cultivation base.

“Demands are not all I have for you,” the Elder continued.

“Beginning next week, I intend to reward those who I feel are working the hardest and improving the most.” That drew an excited murmur.

“Each week, I will provide those five students with a medicinal pill from my department.” She flicked her sleeve and held up a softly glowing blue sphere the size of a thumbnail between her fingers.

“This is the Qi Foundation pill. For cultivators of the Red Soul realm, it provides a significant boon toward cultivation, greatly increasing the rate and efficiency of your qi absorption and meridian opening.”

Ling Qi fixed her eyes on the pill before it disappeared back up the Elder’s sleeve. She... didn’t really know how impressive her growth rate was. Li Suyin had seemed to imply that it was high, but the other girl was likely flattering her so that she would continue with their study sessions. Ling Qi would have to think about how she could acquire one of those pills; she needed every advantage she could get.

For now, she needed to pay attention to Elder Su’s lecture. The Elder had moved on to

outlining the day's topic. The class would be studying the various effects environment could have on qi and how to identify sites which had a strong energy and were thus helpful for cultivation.

Apparently, this entire mountain was selected as a training ground for this reason. The spirit stones it had once contained were long mined out, but the lingering energy still provided an ideal environment for new cultivators.

Ling Qi made a note to look into the mines at some point. Even if the mines had been stripped bare, they might still hold something of value. Finding even just a handful of extra spirit stones could be really useful.

It was doubtful that she was the only one with that thought.

... A darkened mineshaft was also almost as good as a cluttered alley for the purposes of getting the jump on someone. Perhaps seeking out more trouble wasn't the best idea with Elder Zhou's upcoming test, but it was something to consider.

## Chapter 8 - Exam Prep 3

After the lecture ended, she walked back to the residential area with Li Suyin. Ling Qi brought up the idea of trying for the pills when they became available, but so far, she was having trouble convincing the other girl that it was even a real possibility.

"I don't see what the problem is," Ling Qi said with a frown as they entered the narrow valley where the first year disciples lived.

"I'm just saying we should at least try to find a better cultivation spot. Your notes were pretty helpful, and I'm pretty sure your cultivation speed has gotten better too. You have a second meridian open now, don't you?"

Ling Qi kept her voice down and an eye on their fellow disciples. She still didn't trust them not to try anything, and the relative peace of her first month here was only feeding her paranoia.

"If we can actually find a a qi locus..."

Li Suyin fidgeted with the hems of her sleeves, hunching her shoulders nervously.

"It is not too difficult to open another once you manage your first," Li Suyin mumbled evasively.

"I do not compare to the other disciples though. You... um- might manage it. I think." She offered Ling Qi a weak smile.

"I... I am going to put my full effort into cultivation, but I am not sure going out looking for something potentially dangerous is a good idea."

Ling Qi held back on rolling her eyes at the other girl's self-deprecation as they turned into the 'street' leading to the scholarly girl's home. From what she had observed Li Suyin was actually a pretty hard worker, and her talent wasn't awful. Li Suyin just got hung up on the details of... everything and tended to second guess herself too much.

Well, Li Suyin was apparently awful at physical cultivation, and Instructor Zhou had scared her off in a matter of days. Ling Qi supposed everyone had their weak points.

Ling Qi paused as she noticed that Li Suyin's door was open already. "Is your housemate home today?" she asked carefully.

Li Suyin glanced at her house and paled slightly, clutching her writing case to her chest.

“Oh! I... Maybe? She doesn’t come back very often, but...” Li Suyin seemed nervous.

“I... Will you give me a moment please? I haven’t actually told her that I’ve been bringing someone over. I haven’t seen her since last week...”

Ling Qi was about to respond when a voice from just behind her nearly made her jump.

“Damn right you didn’t. I was wondering why the house smelled like a stranger.”

Ling Qi instinctively spun on her heel to face the speaker, her hands balling into loose fists. She found herself face to face with another disciple. It was alarming that someone had managed to get so close without her notice.

The girl’s features were narrow and a bit gaunt with a slight feral cast to them. The impression was not helped by the way her lips were drawn back, exposing sharp teeth. Sticking out of her bushy, tangled mass of shoulder length dark brown hair were a pair of large vulpine ears, fuzzy and twitching in agitation. Even more bizarrely, the girl appeared to have a tail the same color as her hair with a white tip wrapped loosely around her waist. Ling Qi would have thought it a weird accessory if it hadn’t been moving.

“You better not have touched any of my shit,” the girl added threateningly, poking Ling Qi in the chest with one bony, sharp nailed finger.

Ling Qi barely noticed Li Suyin wringing her hands and stammering out an apology out of the corner of her eyes as she met the new girl’s intense green eyes unflinchingly. She wasn’t going to back down from this girl.

Ling Qi could see what she was dealing with, inhuman features or no. The other girl was skinny to the point of unhealthiness and more than a bit dirty besides. The girl also had twigs in her hair and dirt smudged on her gown. Given the way she held herself... Ling Qi wasn’t dealing with some noble girl trying to throw her weight around but a fellow citizen of the gutter. She was sure of it.

Ling Qi brushed the feral girl’s finger away from her chest.

“If you’re that worried about it, then don’t leave things you care about lying around, but I’m not that poor a guest,” Ling Qi responded coldly.

"It's Li Suyin's place too. If she wants to invite me over, she can. It's not her fault that you apparently sleep outside."

The other girl scowled at Ling Qi, holding her gaze, but at least the girl wasn't exposing her weirdly sharp teeth anymore.

"I have too much to do to coop myself up in some tiny hut." The other girl huffed irritably, but she did take a step back, her fuzzy ears still twitching on either side of her head.

"Whatever. I guess it doesn't really matter. If I find something missing, I'll take it out of your hide."

"You can try," Ling Qi responded with a snort, crossing her arms. It was almost a relief to deal with someone simple again. She could never tell what Bai Meizhen was thinking and even Han Jian and Li Suyin could be more complicated than she liked. This girl's actions were pretty clear... if overly confrontational.

Ling Qi glanced over at Li Suyin, who was looking back and forth between Ling Qi and the other girl as if half expecting them to come to blows.

"Anyway, we going to study or what?"

Li Suyin glanced at her housemate nervously. "Ah, yes. If you don't need the meditation room, Su Ling?"

The other girl shook her head.

"Go ahead. I only came back because I needed my tools. My skinning knife broke." Su Ling bared a bit of fang in irritation. "Fucking rabbits shouldn't have hides that tough, spirit or no," she added with a grumble.

Li Suyin smiled in a slightly strained manner. "Oh... you were hunting again. I... You didn't leave it out again, did you?"

"No, it's bagged, you big baby," the vulpine girl said, rolling her eyes as she brushed past Ling Qi with one last suspicious glance.

Ling Qi raised an eyebrow and glanced at Li Suyin, who flushed and mumbled an apology before ushering her into the house for their study session.

By the time the two had finished dissecting the day's spiritual cultivation lesson and putting it into practice, Su Ling had disappeared again. She left behind some recently

cleaned processing tools and a silver furred rabbit hide being stretched and dried on a makeshift rack.

Li Suyin had begun to come around to the idea of searching out a better cultivation spot with Ling Qi. Li Suyin's sensitivity to qi would likely make finding such a place much easier than Ling Qi searching on her own. Hopefully, they could start searching after Elder Zhou's test.

After returning home, Ling Qi set about beginning the last major preparation for Elder Zhou's test: mastering the first level of Zephyr's Breath. Sitting down in the meditation room, she held the jade slip encoded with the art in her hands. Channeling a trickle of qi into the carved jade, words and diagrams bloomed in her thoughts, laying out the exercises needed to use the art's first two techniques. Taking a deep breath, she began the difficult process of refining her energy into pure wind-natured qi.

Over the course of the next few days, Ling Qi refined her first faltering steps into something approaching mastery. With her stamina reinforced by the Argent Soul Art, she could practice for hours instead of minutes, and she found herself progressing quickly through the theory and preparatory exercises.

When it came to practice, however, Ling Qi found herself stymied. The simplest application of the art was the Guiding Zephyr technique, but it required either an arrow from a bow or a thrown projectile to enhance. She tried using pebbles at first, but that didn't seem to work well.

While the training fields were full of weapons, Ling Qi was nervous about doing her practice out in the open. Bai Meizhen had assured her that the Sect wouldn't begrudge a disciple for taking a few 'training toys', but Ling Qi could not help but feel dubious of her housemate's words as she examined the fine steel throwing knives plucked from a training rack.

Even she could see the masterful quality of the knives' forging and balance. At home, any one of these knives would likely be sold for two or maybe three silver coins, enough to buy quality food for a week. Then again, her disciple's gown was spun from silk fine enough to clothe a wealthy merchant's wife. She supposed cultivators valued things differently.

With real weapons, Ling Qi found herself advancing more quickly despite her lack of prior experience in handling knives. In the past, if a situation escalated to the use of weapons, Ling Qi would have already escaped; fighting had never been an option. It surprised her when using throwing knives felt natural.

After only a single night, she found her knives striking the straw targets more often than not. By the end of the next, she could reliably hit within the first two rings. When she channeled her qi, guiding the sliver of steel after it left her hands, she struck the bull's eye almost every time.

When her throw buried a blade halfway to the hilt in a solid wooden fencepost, she felt she had mastered the Guiding Zephyr technique.

## Chapter 9 - Exam Prep 4

That was as far as she could take the training alone. The second technique, Against the Wind, didn't simply enhance her throws; rather, it used the connection formed by a successful attack to hinder the opponent, battering them with gusts of wind that could slow and throw off their movements. To make progress, she would require someone to practice with.

... She also needed a team.

There was less than a week left until Instructor Zhou's exam, and while she could simply wait and fall in with some random stragglers, it seemed more prudent to group up with someone she knew. With how busy she had been, meetings with Han Jian had fallen by the wayside. She wouldn't be able to speak with him after he returned to the boys' residences so she would simply have to do it now at the end of training.

Unfortunately, he was standing with two other disciples, one of which was that irritating Yu.

The other disciple was a girl with pale skin and delicate features subtly painted to accentuate her beauty. Her long, straight black hair gleamed like silk in its simple braid. She was also rather obviously gifted in all the ways that Ling Qi was not, and the sweat worked up by today's lesson was doing little to hide that fact.

A splash of color drew Ling Qi out of her envious study. On her right hand, the other girl wore a red leather glove. The glove's bright, crimson shade caught the light as the girl waved a hand dismissively at something said by the boys. Dozens of black characters were embroidered on its surface.

Much like that Yu, she seemed friendly toward Han Jian. And if Ling Qi were to judge, the girl was also standing closer to his side than was strictly necessary. She found herself scowling at the girl's back. Just what she needed. Another complication.

The crowd was thinning out. Ling Qi would need to either approach or leave. As much as she wanted to wait until Han Jian was alone... she didn't want to put this off either. Every day that passed brought the test closer.

Ling Qi took a fortifying breath and began to walk briskly toward them, doing her best to put on a friendly expression despite the churning in her stomach. She did make sure to adjust her approach so that Han Jian would likely be the one to notice her first. Sure



enough, she saw his eyes shift to hers as she raised a hand to wave to him. His attention made the other two look at her as well. Yu's look was brief and dismissive, but the girl regarded her with narrowed eyes for a moment before the expression smoothed out into a welcoming smile.

"Ling Qi. I haven't had a chance to talk to you lately," Han Jian said in greeting as she came into earshot.

"How'd things go with... ah, Li Suyin, was it?" Ling Qi had let him know why she was going to be busy.

Ling Qi dipped her head slightly in greeting, giving the other two a polite nod despite her irritation with Yu.

"We have both made some good gains from our cooperation. I reached the second stage of Argent Soul. I've also been able to reach the first level of mastery with the art I received from the Archive."

Ling Qi left out her lack of practice on live targets. She wasn't certain how to feel about the considering look this earned her from Yu, but she was glad Han Jian had given her an opening to talk herself up without it seeming awkward. She wondered if he had done it on purpose.

At this point, the other girl cleared her throat politely and spoke up. "Jian, are you going to introduce us?"

Han Jian laughed sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

"Oh, right. I suppose I forgot that. Ling Qi, you've already met Yu... Fan Yu, even if the introduction wasn't the smoothest."

"I have," Ling Qi said sourly, unable to keep her dislike from her tone. The short, muscular boy seemed unbothered by her dirty look.

"I said nothing untrue," Fan Yu responded with a snort, "even if it turns out you have a little talent. At least Jian was not totally wasting his time. I suppose everyone must have a good point." Ling Qi wasn't sure if Fan Yu expected her to be infuriated by his bluntly unapologetic statement or flattered by his compliment.

... Definitely infuriated. Han Jian's smile grew strained as she glared at Fan Yu, a slight breeze coincidentally kicking up and sending the hem of her gown fluttering.

“... This is Gu Xiulan, Yu’s fiancée, and one of my other friends from home,” Han Jian said.

“My condolences,” Ling Qi said dryly, drawing a scowl from Fan Yu.

Gu Xiulan just laughed lightly, covering her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

“That isn’t necessary,” Gu Xiulan responded sweetly. “My Yu is just a little too blunt for his own good at times.” There was an edge of something in her tone as she looked Ling Qi up and down before turning her gaze back to Han Jian.

“Where did you meet her, Han Jian?”

“Oh, we just had a chat during orientation and I thought I’d help out,” Han Jian said cheerfully. “Turns out she didn’t really need much help to get going,” he added kindly, smiling at Ling Qi.

Gu Xiulan sighed. “You are so kind, Jian. It is lucky that it paid off this time. I suppose you do have an eye for talent.”

“Thanks,” Ling Qi cut in, feeling slightly irritated at being talked over. Dealing with Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan was making her less comfortable by the moment, and she wanted to get this over with.

“I wanted to ask if you wanted to group up for the test, Han Jian. My art is good for support and ranged fighting and defense, but...”

“Well, at least she knows how to make herself useful,” Fan Yu interrupted.

“But you shouldn’t bother wasting the instructor’s time. Just be content with getting a month of his training. It’s already more luck than someone like you should expect.”

Ling Qi bristled, scowling at the other boy, but Han Jian managed to speak up before she could.

“No need for that,” he said warningly. “Besides, it’s not a bad idea. You’re a close up fighter and so is Fang, and Xiulan is not much on defense. We could use another supporting fighter to round things out.”

“But a barely trained peasant? I know you’re enamored, Han Jian, but this is ridiculous.” Fan Yu threw up his hands.

“Have you ever even been in a fight, girl? I refuse to lose my place because we took on an amateur.”

“I’ve been in a few fights,” Ling Qi responded defensively, glaring at him. She left out that it hadn’t so much been fair fights as taking advantage of drunks or tripping up angry marks to get away.

“Now, now. Let’s not get too worked up,” Gu Xiulan said placatingly, glancing at Ling Qi out of the corner of her eye. “Han Jian’s judgement is good, is it not? Why not trust him?”

Fan Yu looked rebellious but eventually dropped his gaze, grumbling under his breath.

Ling Qi gritted her teeth but refrained from speaking. Instead, she looked to Han Jian, whose expression was neutral.

“I think we could use a fifth person. Weren’t we talking about that before Ling Qi came over?” Han Jian asked lightly.

“That is the standard squad size. She fits the bill of what we need, if not perfectly. It’s not like any first year disciple will have a healing art at this point.

“Unless you want to go try and chat up Sun Liling again?” Han Jian asked Fan Yu.

The other boy shuddered, rubbing his chest as if remembering a phantom pain. “...No, not again, I think,” Fan Yu grumbled.

“Fine, I’m outvoted since Fang will go along with whatever you say, Jian. It’s on your head if she ruins this for us.”

“I can pull my own weight,” Ling Qi responded irritably. “Thank you, Han Jian,” she added in a softer tone. That was one less worry she had to deal with.

“Who is Fang though?”

“Ah. That would be my cousin, Han Fang,” Han Jian replied. “He’s gone into closed door for a few days to finish breaking through to Mid Gold.” He must have spotted her confusion at the term “closed door” immediately because he continued, “Fang’s cultivating non-stop.”

Ling Qi nodded in understanding. She had been doing something similar, but now she had a name for it. “I guess I’ll meet him soon then,” she said.

“... Is there a time where the group trains together or...” Ling Qi trailed off.

“Afternoons on the days after Jian’s spiritual lessons,” Gu Xiulan said. “We’ll have to make sure you’re up to standard after all.”

Fan Yu snorted, and Han Jian cast a suspicious look at Gu Xiulan, whose expression was the picture of innocence.

“Yeah. We meet up at a field at the mountain’s base. Let me give you directions...”

With her worst worry resolved, Ling Qi found her thoughts turning back to Bai Meizhen as she trudged home that night. She wanted to pay the girl back for the tea, which had already helped her and would only help more in the future.

Ling Qi had not seen even a glimpse of Bai Meizhen in days though. It struck her just how little she actually knew about the odd girl despite nearly a month of semi-regular interaction. Bai Meizhen simply didn’t talk about herself or even emote much. She had no idea of the girl’s likes and dislikes beyond the fact that she got irritated when Ling Qi didn’t pick things up quickly. Well, Ling Qi could probably say that she knew the other girl had a great deal of affection for her ‘cousin’.

This was why when she opened the door to her house, she was brought up short at the sight of the little green serpent curled up by the hearth alone.

“...Bai Meizhen?” Ling Qi called out. She didn’t hear her housemate moving about, but the girl could be disturbingly silent at times. Closing the door behind her, she continued to peer around. “Are you here?”

Her only answer was silence so despite the oddity, Ling Qi sat down to get the fire going so that she could fix herself dinner. As she busied herself with those tasks, her eyes drifted to Cui again and again. It was so weird seeing them separate.

She was careful not to tread on Cui, and the little snake didn’t pay her any mind. As she was boiling water for the tea, an idea occurred. Bai Meizhen had assured her once or twice that Cui understood them and was capable of speech even if Ling Qi had never heard the snake do so.

Who would know what the pale girl liked more than her constant companion? Ling Qi still felt a bit foolish when she cleared her throat and spoke up. She couldn’t quite get over the impression that she was talking to an animal.

“Bai Cui, do you know where Bai Meizhen has been?” she asked awkwardly, deciding to be respectful. “And why aren’t you with her?”

The thin green coils didn’t even twitch at her words, and as the seconds stretched on, Ling Qi’s feeling of foolishness only grew. Finally, she sighed and looked away, preparing to set the pot containing the water out over the fire.

*‘Cultivation. Winter. Dark. Fear.’*

Ling Qi jerked in place, looking back at the little green snake. That... hadn’t been words. It was more like... a foreign thought directly pushed into her head.

“... Was that you?” Ling Qi asked, feeling even more foolish as the words slipped out.

The snake raised her head from her coils to flick her forked tongue irritably up at Ling Qi. She got the impression that Bai Cui thought her question silly. Still it was... garbled, and the feeling stopped.

*‘Not Understand. Not Speaker.’*

That was a little clearer. It seemed like simple concepts were easier to convey. Cui was lowering her head again, apparently intending to go back to ignoring Ling Qi.

Ling Qi felt rather out of her depth but decided to push on anyway. She had already embroiled herself in this bizarre situation.

“Wait, please. I... want to do something for your cousin, but I don’t know what she would appreciate. Could you tell me something she might like?” She felt rather awkward asking this, but she was out of ideas.

It still seemed to catch Bai Cui’s interest, and the tiny snake stared at her, tongue periodically flicking out.

*‘Weak. Nothing.’*

Ling Qi scowled at the spirit beast’s disparagement, but the snake wasn’t done. What came next was hard to understand, but she thought Cui was suggesting that she just keep doing what she was currently doing.

“That’s not enough,” Ling Qi disagreed vehemently. “There has to be *something*.”

The little serpent stared at her until Ling Qi began to fidget. Finally, Cui sent an image of

a necklace. It was made of fine silver links with a dark green jade pendant in the shape of a coiled dragon. The pendant hung from a girl's chest, bouncing as she walked. Along with the image came a feeling of covetousness.

"Bai Meizhen wants jewelry?" Ling Qi asked, bewildered. Why hadn't the other girl just purchased the piece then? It was pretty, but she was sure that Bai Meizhen's family was absurdly wealthy.

Her comment earned her what she was fairly certain was a look of supreme irritation from Bai Cui.

Was it something Bai Meizhen was actively trying to get or had Cui simply noticed her wanting it? It was so frustrating that she couldn't properly communicate with the spirit beast.

Said spirit beast laid her head back down, and all further attempts at speaking to Bai Cui were ignored. Ling Qi wasn't quite certain she wanted to start thieving at the Sect yet if only because she wasn't sure if she could pull it off without getting caught. She was also a little dubious that she was interpreting Cui correctly.

She would just have to explore other options for now. She couldn't afford to get distracted with Elder Zhou's exam looming.

## Bonus 2: Lessons and Lore

The Paths of Cultivation are numberless, and the names for the steps along the Path are nearly as numerous.

At its core, cultivation is the art of taking in the qi of the world and awakening one's dormant potential. There is much debate as to why humans in particular require external sources to do so when plants, beasts, and even portions of the ground and sky can achieve this state naturally, but there are no concrete answers to be had.

What is known is that given time, resources, and talent, a human being can achieve far more than any other on the Path. Spirits are born with power but rarely exceed the limitations of their forms. Those that do can only achieve that ascension with human aid, willing or otherwise. It is speculated that part of the reason for this is the elasticity of a human's dantian. Unlike a spirit's core, the dantian is able to expand far beyond its initial limits with significantly less effort.

Another possible factor is the multitude of meridians or spiritual veins which the human body contains. A spirit's meridians are fixed and open from the moment of their creation, and carving out new ones is a matter of great difficulty for them. In contrast, a human being need only clear the spiritual detritus from one of the scores of veins twisting through their body.

Few but the most dedicated scholars bother with attempting to catalogue and label each meridian as the difference is largely down to the individual. However, modern cultivators have begun the practice of grouping them via broad categories of use...

- Lectures on Cultivation by Elder Su

The first realm of cultivation, the Red Realm as it is called today, is in truth merely a preparatory step for the far more difficult path ahead. While cultivators at even the middle stages of Red realm surpass all but the most skilled and gifted mortals, it cannot truly be said that they yet walk the path of the Immortal.

It is possible to reach the peak of Red Soul and of Gold Physique with even the meanest talent given time and dedication. The Empire holds hundreds of thousands of such cultivators. They serve as soldiers in her armies or as city or town guards protecting the mortals of the Empire. Their protection allows mortals to go about their lives as productive citizens rather than fearing the predations of spirit beasts and petty banditry.

In the past, this initial realm was often referred to as the realm of awakening or some similar moniker. Although that terminology has faded from common use, it remains accurate. To achieve it is to awaken, to see the world that lies beyond the veil of mundanity. Yet having managed to awaken is not an achievement to be truly proud of, not for those with potential such as yours. The common soldier serves an important role, but you, who have been chosen to join the Sect, have the potential to accomplish so much more.

Do not squander the opportunity you have been given.

- Preface to a Lesson by Elder Su

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Spirits are simultaneously one of the greatest troubles facing the Empire and one of its greatest assets. As bound spirits, they can serve as powerful companions and multipliers of a cultivator's power. In other cases, they serve as a final and terrible warning against infighting amongst clans lest the losing party's ancestors, Sublime or otherwise, decide that there is no longer anything left to lose.

However, these civilized spirits are sadly far in the minority. Spirit beasts stalk the wilds between our carefully warded cities and roads. Even the weakest of them are a dire threat to any mortal who catches their attention.

Every moment, another Lesser Spirit, an ephemeral creature of raw element, emotion, or concept, is born and dies, their motivations largely incomprehensible for the short time it is alive unless bound. It is these creatures that the peasant whispers of, warning his children against the calls in the dark for many of these creatures are all too eager to possess humans in a twisted mockery of a cultivator's bond.

Yet those are only the most common

Hundred year spirits - the slumbering intelligences of mountains, forests, and battlefields, and even minor objects - are also among their number. The worthiest among the spirits are, of course, the Great Spirits, the most powerful of their kind who bless our Empire and are blessed in turn by our reverence. The focus of this treatise are the first two types. They remain the greatest internal obstacle and threat to the safety of our citizens, as well as the most likely source for companions for our cultivators.

In this book, the categories, habits, and natures of many common spirits and spirit beasts will be discussed, as well as their weaknesses and the most effective formations for curtailing their activities.



- Excerpt from A Novice's Primer on the World of Spirits

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I have spoken before of the elements of qi but only in passing. Today, I shall take the time to educate you properly on this matter.

As I have previously mentioned, the true number of qi elements are as innumerable as the paths of cultivation. Ultimately, an element is simply a particular method and resonance to the flow of one's qi. It is entirely possible to 'create' a new element when developing an art, although given the length of history, most such creations merely come upon something which had already existed independently.

Many elements also overlap each other in function. This makes a cataloguing of various elements problematic.

The elements which the Sage Emperor used many millennia ago to unite the warring kingdoms and clans that now compose the Empire are what is now known as the Imperial Eight, along with the Traditional Five. These elements see the most common use today, and there is some overlap between the two sets in Earth, Water, and Fire.

The Imperial Eight is composed of the following elements: Heaven, Earth, Mountain, Lake, Water, Fire, Wind, and Thunder.

The Traditional Five is composed of: Earth, Water, Fire, Wood, and Metal.

Heaven, the creative force, separates and ultimately elevates man over beast. It is ingenuity and inventiveness and manifests as lightning when channeled into the world, thought made force. Earth is the element of devotion and plenty, the strong foundation which allows us to stand together in the face of our many foes. Its neighbor under the Emperor's system is the Mountain, representing steadfastness, immovability, and endurance of hardship. Lake is the element of joy and delight in material pleasures but also of content and tranquility.

Water and Fire are next. Water represents resourcefulness, wit, and the ability to adapt. In contrast, Fire drives one forward; aggression and passion are the hallmarks of fire. Wind is similar but not equivalent to Water. Where Water will wear a path through obstacles given time, Wind will flow over and through without conflict. Wind is the element of freedom, representing wanderlust and curiosity. Thunder is the element of conflict, ambition, and new beginnings. Those who seek the initiative in all things will be drawn to such element.

The Traditional Five incorporate Wood and Metal as primary elements. Wood is an element of life and spontaneity and overlaps with both Heaven and Wind in many ways. Metal maps well to the Imperial Eight's Mountain, although it exemplifies calm rationality rather than steadfast determination.

The subject of elemental qi is much deeper, but this will do for an introduction.

- Lesson on Common Elements by Elder Su

## Chapter 10 - Exam Prep 5

There were only two months remaining before the truce ran out.

If Ling Qi had not gained the ability to defend herself by then, things would go poorly for her. She needed every single advantage she could get. Passing Elder Zhou's test was her best hope for advancing quickly, but that did not mean that she had to place all of her hopes on it. Ling Qi was sure that Elder Su's lesson on qi loci was meant as a hint that the mountain held sites of power that could enhance cultivation. The trouble was that she couldn't afford to waste time wandering around the mountain at random. Time was a precious resource even with her new ability to cut her sleep time in half.

But did she need to do it alone? No. Thinking about the problem, Ling Qi quickly came up with an alternative. She would need to get Li Suyin and her roommate to agree to help her. After receiving her monthly supply of spirit stones, Ling Qi hunted down Li Suyin in the crowd.

"Li Suyin," she called out, raising a hand to get the other girls attention.

The smaller girl stopped walking, turning in surprise to face Ling Qi. "Ling Qi?" Li Suyin asked, glancing nervously at the crowd. "Did you need something?" She sounded befuddled; Ling Qi was not the one who approached typically.

"I have an idea," Ling Qi said as she stopped near the other girl, scanning the crowd for a messy mop of bushy hair. "I need to talk to your roommate too... Su Ling, right?"

Li Suyin's eyebrows rose. "What? Why?" she asked, even as she followed Ling Qi back into the crowd.

"You remember the lesson we were talking about before and finding something for ourselves?" Ling Qi replied vaguely, not wanting to be exact with so many people around. "I think Su Ling can help give us a good lead."

Li Suyin was falling behind, too polite to weave through the crowd properly. After a moment's hesitation, Ling Qi caught the girl's hand in her own to keep them from being slowed down. "... I do not think that is the best idea," the blue-haired girl hedged uncomfortably, glancing down at their hands. "Su Ling is very... private. I am not sure she will take well to the idea of being a guide."

Ling Qi was glad Li Suyin was sharp enough to pick up on her intentions so easily. "Maybe, but it can't hurt to ask," Ling Qi responded impatiently. Spotting Su Ling's bushy head through the crowd, she gave Li Suyin's hand a tug. Their target was quickly

moving away. "We all stand to benefit here. She didn't seem *that* unreasonable."

Ling Qi barely registered the scholarly girl's incredulous look. Li Suyin followed anyway, clearly resigned to being pulled by Ling Qi. Given their hurry, the two girls' passage was anything but subtle. It came as no surprise to Ling Qi that the animalistic girl noticed their approach.

Su Ling's pointed, furry ears twitched in agitation as she glanced back and scowled. "Oh. It's you again. What do you want?" She turned to face Ling Qi and Li Suyin with her arms crossed, ignoring the people forced to go around her.

"I wanted to offer a deal we can both benefit from," Ling Qi responded carefully, keeping her eyes fixed on the feral girl's to avoid appearing weak. "It'd be better to talk away from the crowd," she added. No one seemed to be paying attention to them, but Ling Qi knew better than to take that at face value.

Su Ling narrowed her eyes, looking from Ling Qi to Li Suyin then agreed. "Fine. Come on then. I know a good place."

Ling Qi glanced back at Li Suyin, who smiled nervously.

"Sure. Lead the way," Ling Qi responded confidently. She wasn't worried about conflict yet; not while the Elder's decree was still in effect. They followed Su Ling out of the plaza and toward the training fields. Si Ling's 'place' turned out to be a small clearing in the lightly wooded cliffs that surrounded the path further up the mountain, a decent distance from the actual road.

"So?" Su Ling asked archly as she came to a stop in the middle of the clearing. "If this is just some dumb trick to get me alone, you're gonna regret it." Su Ling flexed her bony fingers, drawing attention to her sharp black nails.

"I would not help someone trick you like that," Li Suyin mumbled from behind Ling Qi, sounding hurt.

Su Ling glanced at the short girl with a complicated expression and then huffed. "Not on your own, but I'm pretty sure you'd cave in real quick to a threat," she said mercilessly before turning her attention back to Ling Qi. "So what do you want?"

Ling Qi frowned as Li Suyin stared at the ground, shoulders hunched. Su Ling was even blunter than Ling Qi was. While it was true that Ling Qi wasn't sure that Li Suyin could

be trusted in the face of pressure, there was no point in saying it straight to the girl's face. "The two of us are going to search the mountain for a qi locus," Ling Qi said. It was a little gratifying to see someone else wearing a blank look of incomprehension for once.

"It's a location filled with potent qi that lets you cultivate faster." Ling Qi figured Li Suyin could explain in more detail later if Su Ling wanted to know more.

Su Ling continued to regard Ling Qi suspiciously. "Yeah? Good for you. What does that have to do with me?"

This would be the hard part, Ling Qi knew. She took a deep breath, drawing on her experience convincing fellow gutter urchins to play patsy for more complicated thefts. It shouldn't be hard, right? She was even intending to treat honestly this time. "The first thing you should know is that we aren't just searching around at random. Elder Su all but said there would be places like that on the mountain." Ling Qi felt confident that this was true. "And Li Suyin has a really good feel for qi. It's why we're cultivating together."

"I'm still not hearing a reason why this should involve me," Su Ling said dryly, but Ling Qi could see that she understood where this was going. The girl wasn't dim. "I'm not interested in letting Li Suyin paw at me like you do. I like men."

Despite her focus, Ling Qi stuttered for a moment and flushed slightly. The absurd accusation simply came out of nowhere.

"It's not like that at all!" This was enough to finally break Li Suyin's shell of meekness. A glance confirmed that Li Suyin had gone red with embarrassment. "There's no need to be so rude and to imply something vulgar about our study sessions, you... you ruffian!" Li Suyin angrily pointed a trembling finger at Su Ling. "Is it really so difficult to just be polite!"

Su Ling and Ling Qi blinked almost in unison at the other girl's outburst. Su Ling seemed slightly bewildered.

"Whatever," Su Ling finally huffed. "It was just a joke. Make your pitch, will you?" she added, sounding troubled.

"... Right," Ling Qi cleared her throat, deciding to ignore the awkward atmosphere. "The point is spirit beasts supposedly congregate around these places. We were hoping you would show us where you've been hunting. In return, you can use the place too when

we find it. You might stumble on it on your own, but we'll all waste less time looking together."

Su Ling bared her teeth, but as she glanced between Ling Qi and Li Suyin again, a low uncertain growl escaped her throat. After a moment, she scuffed her foot against the grass, looking frustrated. "... Fine. Beast cores and elixirs aren't letting me keep up alone anyway," Su Ling grumbled. Jabbing a finger at Ling Qi, she added, "You aren't allowed to talk about my hunting spot with anyone else though. Swear it."

Ling Qi shared a look with Li Suyin.

"I swear I won't mention your grounds to anyone else," Ling Qi said. It was an easy enough thing to promise. She even meant it.

"I swear as well," Li Suyin said. "Um, sticking together will benefit all of us, right?"

Su Ling grimaced, her tail flicking back and forth. "When are we doing this?"

Ling Qi sighed. Now came the really hard part. Scheduling.

Once they had hashed things out, they agreed to meet again a few days after the Elder's test. Ling Qi and Li Suyin headed off to their spiritual lesson, and then afterward, back to Li Suyin's hut. There, sitting in silence save for the breathing of the other girl in front of her, Ling Qi found herself losing track of time as she cultivated. The energy of a fresh spirit stone pulsed in her hands, filling her dantian with warmth.

### *Cycle and Expand.*

The core of spiritual cultivation was the expansion of one's dantian. It was an oddly relaxing exercise. The feeling of rough stone beneath her faded, the whistling of the wind through cracks in the stone faded, the warmth of Suyin's hands on hers faded, and even her nagging worry about the coming test faded. All that remained was her heartbeat and the pulse of her qi, slowly rising in tempo as she circulated the stone's qi and assimilated it into her own.

Today, there was a feeling of constriction, like being forced into a pair of shoes a size too small. It only grew worse as she continued to cultivate. Ling Qi felt her breathing hitch and her heartbeat grow erratic as a great weight seemed to press down on her from every direction. She knew somehow that if she just ended her circulation, the feeling would end. She almost did... But something in her rebelled at the idea of giving up and at allowing herself to be restricted.

Hadn't she suffered worse to do what she wanted? Endured freezing nights and an empty belly for years on end? Risked death or worse as a young girl living on the street? Would she really give up and be held down by just a little pressure? No. Ling Qi would be free in the end, no matter the trial, no matter what she had to sacrifice to obtain it.

The pressure vanished like a dam burst by floodwater.

Awareness returned to her, along with all of her doubts and thoughts, shattering the moment of utter clarity she had just experienced. Even as she opened her eyes and smiled weakly at her excited partner, accepting Li Suyin's praise and congratulations at breaking through to the Middle stage of the Red Realm, that final thought lingered.

Was that really who she was when everything else was stripped away?

Somehow, it made her feel a little hollow.

## Chapter 11 - Exam Prep 6

The following day, Ling Qi set out early to meet Han Jian and his friends as they had discussed. She could not say she was looking forward to it, but it made sense to spend more time with the people she would be taking the test with even if Fan Yu was an ass and Gu Xiulan put her on edge. So despite her misgivings, Ling Qi descended through the morning mist, self-consciously adjusting the wrist sheath holding her knives.

She didn't think Han Jian would attempt anything untoward but... she had been wrong about people before. She still felt frighteningly vulnerable.

Regardless, she didn't allow her doubts to slow her pace. Soon, she came to the field and found the group waiting for her. The fourth member of their cadre was here today, and Ling Qi could not help but pause and stare as the last of their number came into view through the mist.

He was... big. There was no other way to describe him. He was a head taller than even her and twice as broad at the shoulder. She briefly wondered if he was related to Instructor Zhou somehow. He was thankfully fully clothed, unlike said shirtless instructor, even if his disciple's robe was stretched distractingly over a great deal of muscle for a boy who was presumably her age.

She pulled her eyes upward at that point and resumed walking. The new disciple, who must be the Han Fang discussed last time, had a clean-shaven head and rough, blocky features with sun-darkened skin. As he turned to look at her along with the others, she noticed one final detail. He had a massive ropey scar stretching all the way across his throat like an ugly grin.

"Ling Qi. Glad you could make it," Han Jian said with an easy smile. He nodded to the new boy, who was examining her in a way that left her feeling defensive. "This is my cousin, Han Fang. Unlike my lazy cat, he'll actually be helping us out. Don't be fooled by his looks. This guy is still a first year disciple like us." He added the last while clapping the other boy on the back.

Ling Qi glanced between the two Hans doubtfully. The two looked nothing alike. She was aware of how little that meant when a golden tiger cub was also related to Han Jian, but she thought it strange anyway. She bowed in greeting to Han Fang. "It is nice to meet you. It seems I will be in your care." She did her best to speak politely as she usually did around Han Jian.



Ending his examination, Han Fang met her eyes, only to scratch his cheek awkwardly. He ducked his head politely but remained silent before glancing at his cousin.

“Fang can’t really speak much so don’t mind him. We’ll show you some of the signals we use for communication later,” Han Jian explained patiently.

Ling Qi’s cheeks heated slightly, and she shot the other boy an apologetic glance. That really should have been obvious given the scar.

“Ah, of course,” she responded awkwardly, casting about for a change in subject. “Why...”

“If the introductions are over, then shouldn’t we move on to practice?” Fan Yu asked gruffly from behind the two boys. “We don’t even know if she can fight without freezing up.”

Ling Qi shot him an irritated look, but Han Jian nodded, looking apologetic.

“Yu’s right. Sorry, Ling Qi, but we really do need to get to work. Do you mind having a spar with Xiulan first so I can see where you stand? I need to know what you can do to plan around it.”

Ling Qi felt as if the bottom of her stomach had dropped out. The other girl was smiling sweetly in a way that didn’t make Ling Qi comfortable at all.

“I... Yes, I can do that,” Ling Qi responded hesitantly.

“Try not to worry too much,” the other girl said sweetly as she moved toward an open part of the field and gestured for Ling Qi to follow. “I’ll just test your reflexes a bit. I need to make sure that you’re able to properly watch Jian’s back beside me, you know?”

Ling Qi nodded stiffly as she took up a position a good eight meters distant from the other girl, all too conscious of the three boys watching them. There were no obstacles in the grassy meadow the group had chosen for practice so she would have no choice but to face the other girl openly.

Ling Qi did her best to ignore the instincts that screamed at her to run, instead sinking into the low, defensive stance she had learned from the Zephyr’s Breath Art. She stared at Gu Xiulan, who bounced energetically on the balls of her feet, gloved right hand extended forward with her palm out.

Han Jian took up a position about halfway between them but out of the way. Ling Qi couldn't embarrass herself here if she wanted to work well with this group. Even if she couldn't win, she could at least give a good showing.

That was the last thought she had before Han Jian chopped his hand down.

"Begin!"

Gu Xiulan was moving before Ling Qi could so much as blink. Her left hand blurred forward, curled into a fist before the echo of Han Jian's words could fade. Sparks erupted from her knuckles and the air distorted with heat as Gu Xiulan launched a bolt of superheated air that screamed like an overheated kettle.

Ling Qi barely had time to widen her eyes before her instincts and feel for the currents of wind howled at her to dodge. Desperately, she rolled to the side, barely fast enough to avoid the missile.

Then, she was forced to dodge again, this time beneath a fan of heated air as the other girl danced backward and swiped her gloved hand through the air in Ling Qi's direction. Ling Qi could smell the tips her hair charring as she rolled under it and sprang back to her feet. Her every instinct cried out to flee and escape danger, but she forced herself to ignore them. She had to stay close in this fight, or she would have no chance at all.

The third attack came in the form of a rising wave of heat kicked up by a sweep of the other girl's leg, carrying grit that stung and burned whatever it touched. Ling Qi jumped, forcing wind qi out into the air around her to boost her leap and carry her over the worst of it. She landed hard, wincing at the jarring feeling in her knees as her legs bent to absorb the impact.

A flick of her wrist brought one of the blunted training knives to her hand, and she flung it, the wind carrying it unerringly at her smirking target. Surprise flickered in Gu Xiulan's eyes, and her gloved hand rose to deflect the knife. Ling Qi saw a wince cross the girl's expression at the impact before the blade bounced away. All told, it had only been a handful of seconds since the fight had begun. Ling Qi locked eyes with the other girl, tensing as she planned her next move.

"I think that's enough to get started on," Gu Xiulan said with a smile, relaxing her stance. "You're pretty rough, but we can polish you up a little," the pretty girl added cheerfully. "You would have been in quite the trouble if I had been using real fire."

There was an edge of warning in the other girl's tone. Gu Xiulan was right though. Even now. Ling Qi's legs stung from the painfully hot grit that had gotten under the hem of her gown.

"Thanks," Ling Qi responded slowly as the other girl crouched to pick up her knife. She toyed with the idea of shooting back a quip about the other girl being wounded too if her knives had been sharpened, but she decided that it was better not to push things. "You were almost too fast to follow," Ling Qi added after mulling it over.

"We'll have to work on that then," the other girl said sweetly as she handed Ling Qi's knife back to her. Han Jian had a satisfied look on his face as he observed the two of them, Han Fang was unreadable, and Fan Yu was scowling at her, ass that he was.

"A little dodge training is just the thing for you, I think," Gu Xiulan continued, her smile taking on a sharp edge.

Ling Qi felt a shiver go up her spine at the girl's words and expression. Why did she have this strange impending feeling of doom?

As it turned out, it was because Gu Xiulan was absolutely brutal in her teaching. Ling Qi lost count of the number of times that she caught a dainty fist with her short ribs or was laid out by a jab to the jaw. Gu Xiulan hit like a full-grown man twice her size. Ling Qi was just surprised at how few bruises she had by the time she parted ways with the group that afternoon.

Although Gu Xiulan seemed to take a personal and sadistic pleasure in putting Ling Qi in the dirt over and over again, Ling Qi decided that she didn't care. She was getting stronger and whatever else she could say about Gu Xiulan, the girl's advice was sound. Ling Qi had been able to block or at least avoid some of Gu Xiulan's hits by the end.

Despite that resolution, she could not quite decide if she was grateful or hated the other girl. She would decide after the test.

However, Ling Qi had not spent the day just being beaten by a girl several centimeters shorter than her. She had also taken part in a few drills with Han Jian and the others and learned something of their own styles.

Han Jian was a swordsman, perhaps unsurprisingly, but he preferred to stay behind the other two boys and direct their actions, flickering about with preternatural speed on

bursts of heated wind to avoid being entangled in melee. Fan Yu wielded a short-hafted spear and fought defensively using earth qi to harden his skin and bull through opponents and obstacles with brute force. Han Fang had a very large hammer and a talent for thunder qi. Fighting near him often left Ling Qi with a ringing headache, but Han Jian had assured her that she would become acclimated to the boom of his strikes.

The week blurred by between cultivation, training, and lessons. Focusing on improving her fitness, Ling Qi found herself advancing impossibly fast. The qi she gently disseminated throughout her body seemed to multiply the effects of her exercise a hundredfold. She hardly had any fat to lose, of course, but her muscles grew more solid by the day.

On the last day of Elder Zhou's lessons before the coming test, Ling Qi felt a change as she meditated. The daily exercise of working qi into flesh and muscles began to grow more difficult as if she were trying to pack more loot into a bag already bursting at the seams.

Growing excited as she recognized the feeling from the Elder's instruction, Ling Qi eagerly pressed forward, even as a painful ache started taking root deep in her bones. She could feel her fingers clenching on her knees as she powered through the pain to surpass her own limitations.

After a moment of blinding pain, she trembled as she felt something snap - and the pain vanished, taking with it all the aches of the day's training.

Then the stench struck her.

Looking down at herself in dawning disgust, she nearly retched. She had somehow become covered in some kind of disgusting black gunk. It clung to her skin and soaked through her clothes. Her eyes watered at both the smell and the stinging feeling of the gunk getting into her eyes.

"Good work disciple," Elder Zhou's deep voice shook her out of her horrified fascination. He loomed over her, his stern expression approving for once.

"You are dismissed for the day. Go and cleanse yourself. You have expelled a great deal of impurities."

Nodding shakily, she stood. *This* was what Elder Zhou had meant when he said that the Mid Gold breakthrough would begin removing the body's impurities? Her cheeks burned

with humiliation, but... looking around, she did not see the smirks and mocking looks she had expected. Instead, there were looks of sour envy or wary appraisal.

“Thank you very much, Elder Zhou,” she said hastily. “Ah... is there anything I should do specifically or...” She still wanted to run and get this filth off of her quickly, but she did not want to make a mistake.

The older man simply raised an eyebrow, a twinkle of amusement in his dark eyes.

“I would suggest burning that gown. The smell will never leave it. Be off with you, disciple.”

Not needing any further encouragement, Ling Qi rushed from the field to seek a long and well earned bath.

# Chapter 12 - Zhou's Trial 1

The day of Elder Zhou's test had come.

Sunrise saw Ling Qi at the field where pockets of mist clung sullenly to the ground, mirroring the groups of disciples that awaited the start of the test. There were nearly a hundred people here, many of whom she had never seen before. They must have been taking lessons on the days she was attending spiritual class.

To avoid exacerbating her nerves, Ling Qi ignored them and moved to join Han Jian and the others. Han Jian greeted her with a confident smile and Han Fang a nod, doing much to dispel her fretting. Fan Yu still glanced at her with disdain, but Gu Xiulan at least seemed to grudgingly accept her presence, moving over to give her room to join their little circle.

When Elder Zhou appeared, he gestured for the test takers to follow him further up the mountain. They walked a steep cliffside path, eventually reaching a paved plaza overlooked by a stone pagoda. In the center of the plaza was a ring of black tiles surrounded by a complex arrangement of narrow stone pillars. Every tile and pillar carried a single unreadable character carved into its surface that glowed with a ghostly blue light.

"Once you pass through the ring, the test will begin. Each squad will be transported to one of the Sect's training sites. There, you will find tasks laid out for you. You will pass the first test when you have fulfilled all the tasks given." Elder Zhou barked as he looked out over the crowd sternly, muscular arms crossed over his chest. "I will not lie. There is some danger of death should you overreach yourselves. If you fear that, do not enter! Once you begin the test, you will not be able to return to this plaza until the test is complete or you fail."

Although a few squads were called before them, Han Jian's group was among the first to be transported to the test site. While Ling Qi didn't manage to stride in as confidently as the others in her group, she liked to think her hesitation wasn't obvious. The groups that entered before them had vanished between one blink of the eye and the next, stolen away by the magic of the circle. As she stepped past the innermost circle of pillars, vertigo and blackness hit her. Ling Qi stumbled as the ground seemed to tilt beneath her, only to catch herself on something hard.

She blinked and then flushed, pushing herself upright and off of Han Fang's chest.

"Sorry. I just..." Ling Qi lost track of her words as she peered around. The group was at the base of a steep stone path leading up a mountain of black stone. More alarmingly, just a half dozen feet behind them, the path crumbled away, revealing that the mountain was suspended in air over a yawning void of mist with no apparent bottom.

She was shaken out of her stupor by the mute boy clapping a hand on her shoulder. He offered her a crooked smile as she looked back up to his face and then nodded to Han Jian and the others, who were looking unsettled as well.

Han Jian cleared his throat. "Right. Well, ignoring the bottomless pit... It looks like I have the instructions for the first part of the test." He waved a sheet of paper.

"There's a small fort at the top of this... island. We're to occupy and hold it for the next two hours. There are two other groups on the island with us, and only one group is allowed to hold the fort at a time. We can also win if we're the last ones standing but only if we're within the fort. "Thoughts?"

"That's simple enough. Just eliminate the other groups before they reach it then proceed to the fort," Gu Xiulan said cheerfully. "There will be no trouble holding it then."

Han Jian hummed thoughtfully. "We could do that, but defending the fort might be easier if we can get there first."

"I would rather not hole up and let others dictate the pace," Fan Yu grumbled. Fang gestured to indicate that he agreed with Han Jian.

Ling Qi glanced around nervously before tentatively offering her opinion. "I think... We should listen to Han Jian. He's supposed to be the leader, right? And I don't know if we, um, have any good ways of searching for the other groups..." Ling Qi relaxed somewhat when her words didn't spark hostility.

"I doubt the other disciples will be hard to find. But -" Gu Xiulan huffed, crossing her arms under her chest, and glanced at her frowning fiancée. "Could you feel them through the ground, Yu?"

"... Not at any real distance. I have not yet mastered that part of the Yellow Mountain arts." Fan Yu shot Ling Qi an irritated look, missing the flicker of contempt in his fiancée's eyes at the response. Ling Qi just glared back. That was not *her* fault.

"Which is why I figured defense was our best bet," Han Jian cut in firmly. "We don't have anyone with extended senses yet."

"Then why ask at all?" Ling Qi asked curiously as the group began to climb the steep stone path, keeping a wary eye on the cliffs above.

"A leader needs to hear his subordinates even if he thinks he knows best," Han Jian responded as if by rote. "Otherwise he might miss something. We should quiet down and get marching. We'll be moving double time so that I can survey the area around the target and set things up in our favor."

Han Jian's words seemed to ease Fan Yu's tension and drew an admiring sigh from Gu Xiulan. Han Fang simply shook his head and made a sound like a rasping cough that Ling Qi was fairly certain meant laughter from the mute boy.

As they picked up the pace, Ling Qi worked to slot into the formation they had practiced. The pace Han Jian set was a punishing one, enough to leave her red-faced and out of breath by the time they finally reached the first plateau a quarter of an hour later. She was glad that she had gained so much endurance in the past month. Some part of her still felt wonder that she was only winded after practically sprinting for nearly a quarter of an hour. Thanks to the qi that had seeped into, and empowered her body, the march was merely tiring and not exhausting.

Their advantages as one of the first groups seemed to be holding as they pushed on, slowed only slightly by the lightly forested terrain. Despite the obstruction, a banner bearing the sable dragon and violet phoenix of the Empire was visible far ahead, flapping from the top of a watchtower of the fort they were aiming to reach. The banner made navigation an easy task but also increased the urgency of their march since the other groups would easily see it as well.

Han Jian gave them a minute or two to catch their breath before signalling everyone to spread out slightly and continue. Ling Qi was a moment behind the others in following the silent order, and it made her wish that she had been able to take more time to sync herself with the group. Despite the fact that she was keeping up, it still felt like those few awkward times that she had fallen in with other street urchins. Like she didn't really belong here.

Ling Qi ruthlessly shut down that niggling self doubt and focused her attention on the scraggly trees and underbrush around them, straining her ears for any sound that was out of place. The woods were eerily silent, lacking even the faint buzz of insects. The only sound came from the wind blowing through the branches and the rumbling of thunder from the dark and bloated clouds roiling overhead.



The fast pace Han Jian and the others set was all the more difficult here on the uneven ground. It was far more tense as well. At least on the path, the number of directions she had to watch was limited, more like watching a street; here, an enemy could come from any direction.

The others didn't seem happy with the terrain either. She noticed Gu Xiulan grimacing as her gown was caught now and again on passing branches, and Han Jian nearly stumbled once or twice on a well-hidden tree root. Was this kind of terrain not common in the eastern provinces?

In the end, they burst from the treeline less than ten minutes later. The fort lay ahead, set at the top of what looked to have once been a shallow hill. On three sides, stone and dirt had been sheared away, leaving unnaturally smooth cliffs some five meters high that seemed to flow into the utilitarian gray masonry of the fort's walls.

The final side was a shallow slope with a rough stairway carved into its center, leading upward to the fort's only entrance: a gateway wide enough for three men to pass through side by side. The gate itself currently stood open, revealing that the walls were only perhaps a meter thick. This really was a small fort; even Tonghou's outermost walls were thicker than *that*.

The two forward corners held rounded fortifications raised on stubby towers rising half again the height of the walls above the rest. They were covered by wooden canopies, with the center of each dominated by an odd wooden device. It looked a bit like a crossbow the size of a horse cart. Ling Qi recognized it as a net thrower. She had seen Tonghou's city guard take down flying spirit beasts with it once or twice. A third tower with another net thrower overlooked the fort's rear.

As they came to a halt at the bottom of the steps, Ling Qi did her best to catch her breath without being obvious about it. The others were winded as well but none to the same extent as her. Ling Qi's disciple's gown clung uncomfortably to her skin and was darkened by sweat in places. She felt even more out of place than usual next to Gu Xiulan, who, at worst, had a few brambles caught on the hem of her gown.

"Weapons out. Stay spread out but within range of our support techniques," Han Jian said quietly as Han Fang mounted the first of the steps followed by Fan Yu. "We don't know if someone else made it first and is trying to lure us in so stay alert until we've scoped it out."

Ling Qi flicked one of her sharpened knives into her right hand, pausing to scan the treeline behind them as she did. She didn't want to be snuck up on either.

They reached the gate without incident, and after a brief scan of the courtyard, Han Jian waved his cousin forward. The larger boy stepped cautiously between the gates, hammer held at the ready. When nothing happened even after Han Fang took several steps inside, Han Jian gestured for Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan to watch the approach to the fort as he and Ling Qi stepped inside.

The courtyard was a field of packed dirt with a set of steps on each wall leading up to the battlements. In the center stood a stone square of a building with a single door and only a handful of narrow arrow slits for windows. It looked far too small to hold more than a handful of people at a time.

"If I remember correctly, the fortifications in this region usually have their barracks and support buildings underground because Imperial Earth arts are superior to those of the barbarians and flat space is at a premium in the mountains," Han Jian said from beside her. "But I doubt that shutting ourselves in a hole for a couple hours will satisfy the instructor."

"Probably not," Ling Qi responded distractedly as they moved further inside. It might fulfill the letter of the order, but it wasn't in keeping with the spirit, which might be part of the test. "We could probably retreat to it if we need to," she added in an unsure tone. "Falling back if you're overwhelmed is good sense, right?"

Han Jian chuckled. "Depends who you ask. There's more than one person who would say that any retreat from barbarians is shameful and a dereliction of duty besides."

"Well, of course," Gu Xiulan's voice came from behind her along with the creaking sound of the gates closing.

Ling Qi glanced back to see Fan Yu turning the mechanism to close the heavy gates.

"Retreating in the face of barbarian trash means allowing them in to ravage the poor defenseless little mortals, shame in one's cowardice aside," the annoyingly pretty girl said in a chipper voice.

"Sometimes, needs must, but it certainly should not be the first option in mind," Gu Xiulan added with an irritating smile that made Ling Qi bristle at the implied insult.

Han Jian raised a hand to cut off Ling Qi's retort and glanced at Han Fang, who was standing beside the door leading into the central building.

"Fang, check inside."

Ling Qi blinked. That gave her an idea. Maybe they could hide in the barracks and attack whoever came next? Or even wait until the other groups were fighting and attack the winner? She probably would have done that if she were on her own.

"We need to hurry. I doubt we have more than a quarter hour at most before someone reaches us. Less if they're being impatient," Han Jian continued, moving purposefully toward his cousin.

"Then we need to find our positions quickly," Fan Yu grunted as he strode up. "What do you intend, Jian?"

"I think..." Han Jian mused, glancing at the gates. "I think Fang and I should move to the battlements over the gates. His art will be fine for harassing approaching enemies, and even if I'm not great at archery, I can handle a bow."

"You don't have one though?" Ling Qi pointed out slowly.

Han Jian glanced at her in confusion and then seemed to understand. "Oh, right. I have it on me; it's just in storage. Father gave me a small dimensional ring before I left home."

Ling Qi had no idea what that was, but she didn't feel like exposing her ignorance further to her companions.

"Yu, I want you down there to hold the gate. It's going to be broken so we need someone resilient down there to hold any enemies off," Han Jian continued

"And what of us?" Gu Xiulan asked, idly shifting her weight from foot to foot. Han Fang had re-emerged from the central building at this point and nodded to Han Jian, signaling all clear.

"You... should be on one of the watchtowers. Your arts have the best range, and I need someone to keep an eye on the other approaches. I need you to use some tokens to set up alarm formations on the other walls too. I don't think many disciples could make it over the rear walls, but I could be wrong. I don't know the arts of every disciple we're

competing against.”

“Ling Qi,” Han Jian looked over at her with a frown. “I’d say that you should go with Xiulan. Leaving someone alone is usually not the best strategy.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Defending a fort with so few people... We’re almost certain to have to retreat to the courtyard if the others are reasonably well-organized,” he muttered in annoyance.

Ling Qi considered, glancing at the still-smiling Gu Xiulan. She didn’t really like the other girl and wasn’t certain she trusted her. Would the other girl really have her back if they were alone?

The whole plan seemed excessively dangerous to her because of how spread out and isolated each person would be. Ling Qi could not help but think that it would be better to hide and ambush the enemy disciples rather than face them head on.

Would it be possible to convince her teammates to listen to her?

## Chapter 13 - Zhou's Trial 2

Trying to convince a bunch of nobles to use what she was sure they would think of as dishonorable tactics... Ling Qi wasn't confident of her chances. Nor was she sure Instructor Zhou would find such a course of action acceptable.

At the same time, hadn't Han Jian said it himself? Holding a location like this with only five people was next to impossible. They didn't have to hold out against an army or anything, but it still felt like a bad idea, especially with another stage of testing after this.

Ling Qi was stronger now, but all the same... it went against her instincts to stand out in the open and fight. And Han Jian *had* said a leader should listen to his subordinates...

"I'm not sure trying to hold the walls directly is the best idea," Ling Qi began before she could lose her nerve.

"Not that I do not think we could," she hurried to add. "It's just that we would probably get worn down and there's still another test after this."

Han Jian frowned at her words. "We have to hold this place if we want to fulfill the objective. It's true that we have too few people to be effective, but the other students won't have the numbers to fully take advantage either." He grimaced then. "Unless they team up temporarily."

"The objective only said that we had to be the ones in control at the end of two hours," Ling Qi pointed out with a bit more confidence. Han Jian hadn't gotten angry at her for criticizing, even if Fan Yu was scowling at her and Gu Xiulan was giving her a strange look. Han Fang seemed unconcerned, keeping an eye on the gates.

"Why don't we leave the gates open and just hide ourselves in the barracks? We can let the other two groups fight things out until we're near the time limit then attack whoever is still standing. If they send someone down to scout the barracks, it should still be easy to take them out. And that's one or two less people we need to fight."

"Do you really think Elder Zhou would be impressed by such a cowardly approach?" Fan Yu responded angrily. "Han Jian, now do you see why bringing a peasant into this was foolish?"

"I think that Instructor Zhou cares more about results than methods," Ling Qi answered stubbornly. "I mean, didn't Gu Xiulan say that just a little bit ago? If we fail at holding

back the barbarians, it means settlements burn. Why shouldn't we do whatever we need to? Instructor Zhou would have made the instructions more specific if he wanted us to limit our tactics. When has he ever failed to tell us exactly what he wants us to do?" Ling Qi found her words spilling out in a rush as she glared at the stout boy across from her.

Fan Yu looked furious at being talked back to, when Han Jian held up a hand, looking both thoughtful and irritated. She could only hope he wasn't irritated at her.

"... Was it cowardly when Father lured that Ash Walker vanguard into the walls of the Falling Sun temple so they could be burned with minimal casualties?" Han Jian asked Fan Yu.

"It's hardly the same thing, Jian!" Fan Yu blustered. "You cannot seriously be thinking of taking some inexperienced girl's battle plan over your own, Where is your pride?!"

"Pride has no place on a battlefield," Han Jian responded glibly with the air of one repeating someone else's words. "And she's right. I got caught up planning for a battle that doesn't even need to happen. I'm lucky Father isn't here to cuff me for it."

He looked back to Fan Yu, who was still staring at him angrily. "Yu, don't think of this as a duel or a contest between peers, you know? The purpose of the sects is to combat barbarians. Since we're training, doesn't it make sense to treat our enemies the same way?"

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably while Han Jian tried to calm the other boy. Instead of trying to butt in and possibly ruin the more diplomatic boy's efforts, she found herself meeting Gu Xiulan's deliberately neutral gaze. Ling Qi raised her chin, refusing to look down or away from the other girl. A few tense seconds passed with the boys arguing back and forth in the background before the other shrugged her shoulders slightly and glanced over at Fan Yu, a smile playing on her lips.

Ling Qi didn't think it was a very nice smile. Nonetheless, the other girl soon joined the effort to convince her fiancée, and Ling Qi couldn't help but mentally compare the process to an ornery bull being guided to its pen. She was still a bit bewildered that her plan had been accepted so easily. Did that mean Han Jian had been thinking something similar and just didn't want to suggest it himself?

... That was perhaps a touch too paranoid.

The interior of the central building was little more than an empty stone box though the door had a sturdy iron bar that could be laid across the inside. The stairwell itself was

only wide enough for two people to walk shoulder to shoulder and was lit by faint blue crystals embedded in the wall. Each crystal was only as bright as a weak candle, but combined, it provided as much light as a moonlit night.

The actual barracks was bare and mostly unfurnished. It consisted of a handful of roughly carved rooms filled with empty weapon racks and various storage containers. Whoever had created this place had not bothered to fill the fort with the necessities an actual military fortification would have.

Ling Qi hung back as Han Jian directed the others around, only speaking up to point out better locations for them to hide while maintaining sight on the stairway. Han Fang took a spot inside the first door on the right, ready to step out and block potential escape. The rest would conceal themselves in the next set of rooms: Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan on the right and Han Jian and Ling Qi on the left.

"We wait one hour," Han Jian explained quietly. "If no one comes in that time, we'll consider moving out to hunt down the other groups. In that case, Ling Qi, you and Han Fang will be the first up the stairs," he continued, meeting her eyes. "It looks like you have some experience with scouting duties."

"...Yeah," Ling Qi agreed uncomfortably. She supposed she had made it obvious that sneaking was one of her skills. "Han Fang is my backup then?"

"He's your partner," Han Jian replied with a smile. "He's quieter than he looks."

"Hmph. She should have said that she was a scout to begin with," Fan Yu grumbled. "Are we going to... hide or not?"

Han Jian nodded, and they moved into position.

The wait was nerve wracking. Ling Qi had been in similar situations before, but somehow, hiding in a barrel alone was less stress inducing than standing ready for an ambush with four other people. No sound from above reached them as the remainder of the first hour ticked by with agonizing slowness.

The next hour began without fanfare, the first quarter passing at a crawl. As Ling Qi began to wonder if they would have to move to the back-up plan, the sound of the gate mechanism activating echoed down the stairs.

Ling Qi tensed, meeting Han Jian's eyes where he crouched in the shadow of an empty crate. Footsteps on the stairs preceded the emergence of two people from the stairwell.

The first was a boy of middling height with short dark hair and sharp features. There were tears in his robe and a wound on his right arm that darkened the silvery cloth with blood. He was armed with a paired set of silver sabers held at the ready.

Behind him was a slight girl with long, unbound brown hair and soft features that made her look younger than she was. She held a short bo staff close to her chest and peered around with far less confidence than the boy in front of her.

The enemies' stances were wary but not alarmed, their eyes darting from one vague shadow to the next. One step and then another carried them further inside, away from their only escape route. Ling Qi held her breath as she waited for her moment. She met Han Jian's eyes again. He shook his head, signalling her to hold.

The duo took another step, carrying them past Han Fang's position. As the girl squinted into the shadows where they hid, the armor rack that Han Fang had been behind flew across the hall and smashed into the boy with a thunderous bang, exploding into splinters from the power of the qi forced into it.

The boy skidded back, hitting the opposite wall with a grunt as he shielded his eyes from the debris. The girl who had been behind him whimpered and clapped a hand over her now bleeding ears. In their moment of distraction, Han Fang darted out, placing himself between them and the exit.

"Put them down quickly! Do not allow them to escape!" Han Jian's voice echoed unnaturally as he smoothly rose to his feet, sword pointed like a commander's fan. It sounded strange to hear the normally laid-back boy speak in such a domineering voice, but she knew it was part of his art. She felt her doubts and fears washed away in an instant, replaced with a swelling confidence.

Ling Qi circulated her qi, feeling the stagnant flows of the dry air in the basement barracks. She twisted them to guide and protect herself and her companions. She didn't know which one Gu Xiulan would target, but for Ling Qi, it was the reeling girl. She focused her will on the knife in her hand and felt the wind converge on it draining qi from her dantian with the effort.

It happened almost too fast to process. She stood and threw, and the blade seemed to directly sprout from the other girl's stomach, embedded to the hilt. The already reeling girl let out a scream of pain as she finally dropped her staff, blood already staining her gown.



The sight caused Ling Qi to freeze. She had just attacked someone with intent to kill, and the only reason she hadn't aimed for the throat was because she didn't have confidence that she could hit it. Instructor Zhou had said there was a chance of death, but they couldn't seriously be intending to have the disciples slaughter each other, right? There should be... should be some kind of magic removing the defeated and the chance of death was just from it not activating in time, or...

A bright orange lance of flame seared a line in her vision as it slammed into the girl Ling Qi had just wounded. It hit the girl and speared through her... and then the girl vanished in a burst of twinkling starlight, leaving only a scorch mark on the wall behind.

... At least she was right in her suppositions, Ling Qi thought numbly as the boy cried out something that was lost in the din of his engagement with the charging Fan Yu. Moments later, a second burst of thunder followed as the opposing disciple took a heavy blow to the back from Han Fang's hammer. He too vanished even as the sound of cracking bone reached her ears.

"Hey. Don't freeze up." Ling Qi was startled out of her thoughts as Han Jian gently nudged her with his elbow, his voice too low to carry. The heat haze from his art was already fading. "Everyone coming in was aware of the danger."

"Are battles always that fast?" Ling Qi asked quietly as she watched a grinning Fan Yu clap Han Fang on the back. Fan Yu's previous foul mood had been displaced by the cheer of victory. It had only been a matter of seconds from start to finish; not even a minute had passed.

Han Jian shook his head. "Not always, but an ambush with low ranked cultivators like us? It'll be fast. Things change past a certain level," he said before placing a hand on the crates in front of the two of them and vaulting over it.

"Alright. Good work everyone, but we need to form up. Someone probably heard that. Fan Yu, we need you up front with your defensive art active..."

Ling Qi stared at Han Jian's back and took a deep breath before following him over, only to be surprised when she was forced to snap a hand up and catch something blurring toward her. It turned out to be the bo staff of the girl she had attacked. Now that she got a better look at it, it was clearly valuable, a perfectly round and smooth length of dark brown wood with a dark green jade cap on either end and odd characters painted along its length.

The one who had thrown it was Gu Xiulan. The other girl met her questioning gaze with a smile.

“Spoils of battle, you know? I am not suited to wood-natured qi so you may as well have it. She took your knife with her after all.”

As the two girls fell in behind Han Jian, Ling Qi gave the other girl a suspicious look. “Even so, why give it to me? I’m sure you could find something to do with it.”

Gu Xiulan simply smiled mysteriously. “Perhaps I think you might be worth a little generosity?” she quipped, not bothering to look back as she regrouped with the rest. “We should focus on the rest of the test. There will be time enough to talk later.”

Ling Qi wanted to press her further, but Gu Xiulan had a point. With an annoyed huff, she glanced at the thing. She would have to carry it for the moment since she had no way of storing it. It wasn’t as if she needed her off hand to throw knives. Maybe she could block an attack with the staff.

“This will be the more difficult part. I doubt simply staying down here will count as fulfilling the objective. Yu was right in that.” Han Jian had started to speak again as they began to mount the stairs.

“Even if no one heard that, it’s only a matter of time before they notice these two missing. There should only be three of their teammates left so we’re going to come out hard and fast. Focus your attacks on one target at a time when possible. Don’t hesitate to take a shot if you have it. No one walks the path of cultivation without making enemies.”

Han Jian didn’t look at her when he said that, but Ling Qi still shifted uncomfortably. Were those two dead? Neither had been in good condition before they vanished.

Han Jian didn’t pause in speaking, and his next words carried the weight of command even as the temperature around him began to rise again. “Yu, can you feel anyone nearby?”

The stout boy grunted and crouched down at the top of the stairs, fingers brushing the stone. “You know I’m not good at this, Jian,” he grumbled quietly. “One, in the courtyard ahead, at the edge of what I can feel, ten... perhaps fifteen meters.”

Han Jian nodded once sharply. “Then we hit him. The others are likely on the walls. We’ll suffer attacks, but it’s better than allowing them to group up. If we’re lucky, they’ll

be sensible and surrender once their third member is down. Otherwise, we'll have to chase them down. Stick to the basic formation. Fang and Yu are the vanguard; you two stay with me." He explained, gesturing to Ling Qi and Gu Xiulan.

There were no objections to that, so the second part of their plan began. Fan Yu led the charge, skin darkening to the color of granite, closely followed by Han Fang. The three of them followed the two boys out of the building.

There was barely a moment to catch sight of another tall, noble-featured boy in the center of the courtyard before a lance of fire snapped out from Gu Xiulan's porcelain pale hand, cutting between her allies to strike him in the back. The boy was surprisingly unharmed by that, but he was knocked off balance and sent stumbling forward with a scorched hole in his robe. Then the two boys reached him.

The haft of the spear he raised to defend himself was driven into his chest by a thundering blow from Han Fang's warhammer followed by Fan Yu's spear slipping under his broken guard.

Of course, to keep those two in range of Ling Qi and Han Jian's arts, the three of them had to leave the safety of the central building. Ling Qi caught a glimpse of one of the other two enemies up on the wall above the gate raising a bow and releasing an arrow that transformed into a streak of reddish purple light. It struck Fan Yu in the shoulder and punched through his stony flesh.

Ling Qi had her own problems to deal with: the girl further down the wall whose gesture in their direction had drawn a hasty "Scatter!" from Han Jian.

She was too slow to dodge completely as razor sharp shards of ice pelted the area they had been standing in. One cut a painful gash across her upper thigh and a second buried itself in her shoulder, making her choke off a scream.

"Xiulan, take Ling Qi and return fire!" Han Jian shouted as he dodged in the opposite direction from them and moved toward the other boys.

Caught up in dodging the assault by the ice wielding girl, Ling Qi had no attention to give to the boys' battle. The sound of thunder and breaking stone reached her ears, but it was a distant thing compared to her heartbeat pounding in her ears and the pain in her shoulder.

Gu Xiulan roughly seized her by the arm and took off, looking furious as blood ran down her face from a cut on her cheek. "Focus on dodging and guiding my attacks," the other girl snapped, all pretense of playfulness gone.

Ling Qi gritted her teeth and nodded, breaking from her pained daze to run alongside her teammate. Throwing herself aside, she avoided the next shard of ice, and a wild flail of the staff in her hand managed to deflect another, the characters along its length flaring to life.

She hated that she had no way of responding to the other cultivator's attacks directly, but feeling the buildup of heat around Gu Xiulan's hands, she pulled deep from her well of qi and twisted the wind into guiding channels for the bolts of searing flames.

The conflicting temperatures threw the wind flows into chaos, and the girls traded fire for what felt like an eternity. Sizzling flame and shards of ice filled the space between them. Suddenly the girl attacking them yelped in pain, the sleeve of her gown catching fire and disrupting the pattern of her own attacks. The next instant she stumbled, an arrow sprouting from her side.

It was her undoing.

Ling Qi glimpsed her teammate out of the corner of her eye as Gu Xiulan raised her hands overhead. Her beautiful features were twisted in fury, and her carefully combed hair was wild. Flames bloomed between her hands, quickly expanding into a ball of fire larger than her head with a core of brilliant blue. The orb flew and struck the staggering girl with a deafening blast like a firework going off at close range.

As the smoke cleared from the charred ramparts, Ling Qi shuddered. If she had been uncertain about the others... the stench of burning flesh on the breeze filled her with even more doubt. She met Gu Xiulan's eyes, noting the triumph burning there as she turned to look at Ling Qi, opening her mouth to speak...

But Ling Qi never heard what Gu Xiulan was going to say, because the world went black.

## Chapter 14 - Zhou's Trial 3

She was blind, she couldn't feel her limbs, and the only sound was the rushing of wind in her ears. Even her grasp of air currents told her nothing. Panic rose in her chest, and yet, Ling Qi could not so much as scream.

Then she impacted the ground in a heap, and feeling and sight returned. Ling Qi scrambled to her feet, her fingers scrabbling at cold, packed earth. She was surrounded by trees and a thick mist that cloaked everything beyond a handful of meters from sight. Ling Qi let out a hiss of pain as the wound in her shoulder and the lesser cuts strewn across her body throbbed in pain.

She was alone.

... Where was she?

Ling Qi blinked as a single piece of paper fluttered down in front of her eyes as if to answer her panicked internal train of thought. She snatched it out of the air despite the twinge of pain from the rapid motion. The shard of ice in her shoulder had melted, but the wound was still bleeding badly.

Grimacing, Ling Qi glanced at the neat lettering on the page, but she put it aside for the moment, weighting the page down with the looted staff. Flipping one of her remaining knives into her good hand, she cut the bloodied sleeve from her gown then carefully trimmed it into strips with which to bind the wound. Ling Qi was no first aid expert but she could manage this much. Once the bleeding had been stanching, she turned her attention to the note.

*Congratulations, lucky disciple!*

*Having defeated your competition early, you have been granted a head start on the second test. Do not waste this advantage. Unlike the previous test, your personal resourcefulness and character is to be judged, and as such, you will begin alone. Do not expect to find your previous allies here.*

*Your task is to reach the Celestial Dragon Temple at the end of the path. All roads lead to the temple, but not all roads are equal. Each contains different challenges, opportunities, and for the astute disciple, rewards. The final selection will begin at sundown within the walls of the temple. Do not lose the token included with this document. It must be presented to gain entry to the temple.*

Well, wasn't that great, Ling Qi thought darkly. This didn't really seem like something

Instructor Zhou would set up either, which meant there were other elders involved. Now she couldn't even count on her spotty knowledge of what the burly man would be looking for. Well... the other option was that she simply had not judged Instructor Zhou as well as she had thought.

Before her eyes, the paper disintegrated and deposited a smooth circle of silver engraved with the character for moon in her hands. The moment that the token came to rest in her palm, a chill wind picked up. Ling Qi shivered, looking up to see the mist had begun to lift, extending the range of her vision.

On the left, the peaked rooftops of a town could be seen in the distance, and to the right, the path sloped downward toward the glimmering surface of a lake, barely visible through the trees. The center path lead toward the dark shape of a mountain in the distance.

As the sun was already on its way toward the horizon, her time was limited. It was hardly a choice. Ling Qi was a city girl, and she would much rather navigate the streets than a mountain path or a lake.

After checking her makeshift bandages one more time, Ling Qi straightened her shoulders and began to walk toward the city. As she did, the brief gust that had dispelled the mist passed, and her vision once again shrunk down to a few meters. The path she found herself walking was narrow and unpaved with tall trees looming on either side. All around lay darkness and mist twisting into unpleasant shapes. Ling Qi found herself tensing at every rustle, clutching the wooden staff she still carried in her left hand tightly. She could hear whispers, like bugs crawling on her brain, murmuring unintelligible words and enticements directly into her thoughts.

Ling Qi had always avoided the outskirts of Tonghou for exactly that reason. No one she had talked to when she was younger could hear the same sounds she could. She now knew that they were the whispers of lesser spirits, and although her ability to hear them was a result of her talent, it was still uncomfortable.

She would be safe as long as she didn't leave the road. Ling Qi had just passed a pair of the stone lanterns that served to ward the road against spirits; she just had to ignore them and press on. It was in being lured off the road that people died.

She did wonder what it would be like to step from the road once she could understand and contend with spirits properly. Would it be better to know what was being said or worse?

Ling Qi shook off such ponderings and focused on the path ahead of her, keeping up a good jogging pace. Her strides ate up ground quickly, the shadowy mist-filled forest and the twisting faces and ghost lights under its boughs beginning to blur by as she found her pace. Still, every footfall jarred her wounded shoulder slightly. Ling Qi was glad when she saw the high stone walls looming ahead in the mist.

... It was a little odd though. She hadn't thought the city was so close given how far away it had looked from the intersection. She had probably just misjudged the distance or how quickly she could cover ground now.

As the walls grew solid in the mist ahead, Ling Qi slowed down to a sedate walk. As was expected, there were guards at the gate, looking just as imposing as she remembered from her childhood. They wore heavy, banded armor and held the sturdy spears traditional for those assigned to guard the outermost walls. It was strange to think that according to her lessons, she was probably as strong or stronger than most of them in cultivation now.

It still wouldn't do to start trouble or get cocky. Even if she could match a city guard in cultivation, they were probably better than her at actually fighting. Ling Qi did her best to look confident and unworried as she approached them. The guards had no reason to stop or impede her, and besides, not looking suspicious was half of the solution to avoid getting caught or questioned.

She felt disquieted by the absence of anyone else on the road, or immediately inside the gate. Even this late in the afternoon, there would usually be some traffic.

Ling Qi passed the guards without a word, and although she felt their eyes follow her, none of them moved to stop her, which was strange in and of itself. Travelers usually had to pay a gate tax and give an accounting of their purpose, didn't they? Maybe the guards had been informed that disciples would be coming through today?

As Ling Qi proceeded farther past the gate, she looked furtively at the lightless buildings on either side of the street. There were a handful of people in the street here, but they walked quickly and with their heads down. Ling Qi had a disquieting feeling in her gut; the oddities that were stacking up were getting on her nerves.

She had to focus on her goal. Big temples were usually in the central district of the cities, along with mansions of the ministers and lords. The Celestial Dragon was one of the monikers for the great spirit that had accompanied the Sage Emperor in his crusade to unite the Empire, so her temple would be quite grand.

Normally, she would worry about gaining passage into the inner sections of the city, but she was a Sect disciple now. She probably wouldn't be turned away like she would have a month ago. The number of people in the streets slowly increased as she moved away from the gate, but the city still felt empty. It didn't help that everyone she passed seemed... slightly off, eyes sunken as if they hadn't slept in days, a certain listless hopelessness. The only exception was the city guards who stood watch at the street corners, sharp eyed and straight backed.

Ling Qi's shoulder twinged again, and the cut on her leg throbbed, reminding her of one of the reasons she had chosen the city. A physician would be able to dress and bind her wounds.

However, she didn't want to spend any more time here than necessary. She doubted it would be so easy, but going straight to the temple would be for the best if it were possible. To that end, she did something that she never would have in her pre-Sect life.

"Excuse me, but do you know where the Celestial Dragon's temple is?" Ling Qi asked politely as she stopped in front of the next guard she came across. She was all too aware of her missing sleeve and bare arm, not to mention the hanging flap caused by the cut in the lower part of her gown, but she did her best to appear confident.

The stern faced man glanced over her with practiced disinterest. "It is in the center of the city. The tallest building. You can see the roof from here," he responded with slow, measured words, eyes flicking away from her to watch the street.

That was... simpler than she had thought. "Oh, thank you," Ling Qi belatedly remembered to say. "I'm not from around here so I wasn't sure."

As she was about to walk away, the man spoke up in the same unhurried tone. "You will not be able to enter as you are. Only those bearing tokens of the Sun, Moon, and Star are to be allowed into the central city tonight."

"Wait, there are three tokens? ... Of course there are," she began loudly and ended in a frustrated mutter.

"I don't suppose you know where I can acquire the other tokens, do you?" she asked, losing a bit of her polite veneer.

"The Sun and Moon are held by your fellow disciples. The five stars are hidden in the



city, guarded by spirit and marked by light.” The man’s calm and toneless voice was beginning to irritate her.

The implications also worried her. This meant that she would definitely be targeted by the other disciples and that she would need to target them in turn. She gave the man a curt nod when it was clear that he was finished speaking and left, turning her thoughts to how she would handle this. She would have to keep an eye out for her fellow disciples, as well as for the locations of the Star tokens as well. “Marked by light” sounded fairly obvious. “Guarded by Spirit” sounded troubling. The only spirit she had ever faced was Bai Cui hogging the hearth, and she had a feeling that whatever guarded the tokens wouldn’t be a lazy little serpent.

Was it possible that the whole thing was a trick? It didn’t seem like the kind of thing Elder Zhou would do, but neither did this test. Her instincts told her the guard had been holding something back. She had no doubt she wouldn’t be able to walk right up to the temple without the three tokens, but if she could arrive without them, would she be turned away? The message at the beginning had only said she would need her moon token.

One thing was for certain: she needed to get her wounds taken care of.

A light touch on her makeshift bandage was enough to feel the stickiness of the blood soaking through the thin fabric. Tough as the disciple uniforms were, they didn’t seem very absorbent. However, that was not the real problem. Money was. The services of a real physician were expensive, and even if she resorted to a street peddler hawking poultices and salves, she would need something to pay him with.

Her first thought was to simply steal some funds. It wouldn’t be hard. She had lived for years on pickpocketing and other larceny... but what if she was being observed? This was a test after all. It was possible, even likely, that she was being watched right now by whoever who was supervising the exam. She still knew so little about what more powerful cultivators could actually do so she had to rely on the sort of whispered hearsay that one heard about them. Ling Qi mulled over the problem in her head as she asked passersby about where she could find a physician.

It shouldn’t be a problem, she eventually decided. The Sect had taken her, knowing who and what she was. Besides, she had a suspicion that this wasn’t entirely real anyway. Otherwise, how could the temple be at the end of all three paths, and why was this city so eerily quiet?

Stealing was even easier than she remembered and not just because she actually had

a proper knife to cut purse strings with. Her marks never noticed a thing as her fingers found their pockets and purses. Were people always so easy to read and predict in motion? It startled her, how much more quickly her hands and fingers could move and how quickly she could adjust for her targets' reactions.

She quickly acclimated and soon had a fairly healthy purse of coin. This was more than she would have managed in a month when she was a mortal. It was too bad that coins were of limited value to her now. She had nothing to spend them on back at the mountain.

While that was a bit of a dampener on her good mood, she didn't let it distract her. Even with the disturbingly listless nature of the citizens of this city, it wasn't really too difficult to get directions to a physician's practice.

However, following the directions was more problematic. As Ling Qi moved deeper into the city, the streets grew more cramped, buildings huddling tightly on every side. Debris and obstacles appeared on some streets, blocking her path and forcing her to detour. The roads seemed to twist back on themselves. Several times, she had to stop herself when she noticed that she had gotten turned around. She was beginning to suspect some cultivator magic at work, especially as the last vestiges of human presence outside her own disappeared.

Just as she was about to turn back and escape the labyrinthine streets, she found her destination. A sign bearing the mark of a physician's practice hung creaking from the overhang which shadowed the doorway. The small building was well cared for, unlike some of its more shabby neighbors, with bright blue tiles on its roof.

Ling Qi approached warily, catching the scent of herbs and incense. Peering through the window, she saw that the front room was empty of other people. Strings of drying herbs hung from the ceiling, swaying slowly with the slight breeze from the open door.

After a moment of hesitation, Ling Qi entered, squinting in the darkened building. The walls were obscured by shelves laden with pots and jars, each with their own neatly written label identifying them as the cure to some ailment or another. The floor was mostly bare, save for a space off to one side where a number of cushions were arranged artfully around a polished table.

A wooden placard on the table read: "Please Wait Warmly". The odd phrasing made Ling Qi glare suspiciously at it before she approached the apparent waiting area. There was a door on the rear wall with a light shining from underneath it so the physician was probably here.

“Hello? I’m sorry for the intrusion, but are you still open?” she called out, doing her best to sound both polite and friendly. Ling Qi had asked for the best public physician. With her sudden windfall, she thought she could afford better care than usual. After the eerie journey, she was less sure if this had been a good idea.

She received no immediate answer to her call, but she did catch a few sounds from beyond the door. Maybe they were busy? From her limited understanding of medicine, Ling Qi was aware that mixing and creating cures could be delicate and volatile. It was one of legitimate professions she had daydreamed of back before it became clear she didn’t have such choices.

Ling Qi decided she would wait a bit before moving on. It definitely wasn’t an excuse to rest her feet. Her calves still twinged unpleasantly from the hour crouched uncomfortably in the dark of the barracks. It wasn’t anything she couldn’t handle, but it wasn’t pleasant either. She settled herself down on one of the soft cushions in a position where she could keep an eye on both doors.

Ling Qi did her best to relax while remaining alert as the minutes ticked by. As she was considering leaving, the door finally cracked open, and a woman stepped out.

At first, Ling Qi thought the physician was an old woman due to the silver hair done up in an elaborate bun. Another glance showed that assumption to be wrong. The physician looked to be middle aged at most with a motherly air about her despite the odd youthfulness of her features.

The physician wore a blue and red gown of simple cut with scandalously short sleeves. A second look showed that they were simply rolled up. The woman glanced around searchingly before her eyes fell upon Ling Qi.

“Oh, there you are.” The physician’s voice was warm and maternal, much like her appearance. “I apologize for the wait. With all my sisters and assistants out tonight, I haven’t been able to keep up with things,” she said with a sigh as she approached with measured, graceful steps.

“It’s fine,” Ling Qi said awkwardly. “Is there something special happening tonight?” she asked. It couldn’t hurt to start gathering more information.

“Shouldn’t you know? You are one of the disciples we’re expecting, aren’t...” she trailed off then, her eyes shifting away from Ling Qi’s face. “Oh! That is a nasty wound. It’s so dark in here that I almost didn’t notice. I suppose you’re here to get that dressed then?”

Ling Qi almost asked her why the physician kept her building so poorly lit but thought better of it as the woman glided forward to examine her. "Yes. I ah... had a little trouble on the way in," she admitted.

"I hope you gave whatever ruffians attacked a polite young girl what for then." The physician huffed as she kneeled in front of Ling Qi, fingers plucking at the amateur dressing on her shoulder. "Miss..."

Ling Qi remembered the ice wielding girl's expression in the instant before the fire consumed her. "... It was taken care of," she responded quietly. "My name is Ling Qi. How much will this treatment cost and how long will it take?" She almost winced as the words tumbled out of her mouth. She was supposed to chat more before getting down to business, wasn't she? Hopefully, the woman wouldn't feel slighted.

"Physician Xin at your service," the older woman responded politely. "A mere fifteen silver should be fine, I think, for a Sect disciple," she added as she placed a pair of clay pots on the table beside them. Ling Qi almost winced at the price, but she had more than enough to pay for the treatment. It just... went against her ingrained instincts to spend so much at once. She had gotten by for entire weeks on less before.

"And it will take no more than a quarter hour. Could you turn this way, please?" Physician Xin said, patiently waiting for Ling Qi to comply. Physician Xin began to gently but deftly pick apart Ling Qi's work.

"We - I mean, the Sect disciples - were expected then?" Ling Qi asked carefully, trying not to grimace as the doctor peeled away the bloodstained cloth she had wrapped around her shoulder.

Physician Xin glanced away from Ling Qi's shoulder to meet her eyes, a pleasant smile on her pale face. "You do seem to be a bit early, but the disciples were expected."

The doctor took a pinch of off-white powder from one of the vessels and sprinkled it into a small cup of steaming water. Ling Qi's eyes stung briefly. When had Physician Xin gotten that? It... Oh, she had been carrying it when she came out of the back.

Ling Qi really was tired if she was missing details like that.

"Things will get much more exciting once more of your peers arrive. My nieces are quite looking forward to the chance to meet young, handsome cultivators."

Ling Qi grit her teeth as Physician Xin dipped a cloth in the now cloudy white liquid in

the cup and began to carefully clean her wound. It was less painful than she thought it would be. Whatever was in the water dulled the pain and made her skin tingle pleasantly.

"I don't know if my fellow disciples will be able to focus on anything but the test, but with boys, who knows." It was a weak joke, but Ling Qi really wasn't good at small talk. It didn't help that she felt incredibly nervous for some reason.

"Are you a cultivator too?" Ling Qi asked, voicing the suspicion she had since she had seen the woman's too young face.

"I suppose I am in a sense," Physician Xin replied, dabbing at the wound to clear the last of the blood. The doctor set the cloth down and opened the other vessel, revealing it to be full of some thick bone white paste. "I leave that sort of thing to my husband these days, even if I do try to keep in practice," she continued pleasantly. The doctor dipped a flat metal implement into the paste to scoop some up before beginning to spread it over the wound.

"Why, now that I think about it, I do believe we met on a night much like this."

Ling Qi nodded absently, still feeling inexplicably on edge. She glanced around the room, but she couldn't find a source for her unease.

"I guess it's good to know that you can move on from the army stuff," she murmured under her breath. "Do you know anything about the test and these tokens we're supposed to find?"

"Nothing you couldn't figure out on your own, although I would suggest you not take things at face value," the doctor responded mysteriously as she moved on to bandaging Ling Qi's shoulder.

The soreness was gone now, and Ling Qi felt almost invigorated. The medicinal paste Physician Xin had used must have been good quality.

"You're a smart girl. My sister, Tsan, has high hopes for you."

Ling Qi blinked as the woman continued to expertly bandage her shoulder, her unease doubling.

"What do you mean? I've never met your sister." Something was at the edge of her thoughts, screaming for attention, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

Physician Xin made a sound of satisfaction as she finished her work and smiled. "Oh my, you noticed that? Perceptive given how clouded your thoughts are. Think about it, dear. I'm certain you'll figure it out." She patted Ling Qi's hand.

Ling Qi met the woman's eyes and stiffened. They were black, deep and infinite as the night sky and radiant with the light of a thousand stars.

A spirit - she had wandered into a spirit's domain! Ling Qi felt her panic begin to rise then...

She was kneeling in the street. There was no sign of the building she had just been in.

All at once, it hit her. Ling Qi had been nervous because the woman kept pulling things out of nowhere: the water, the bandages, the tools. Not to mention those eyes. Had she just had a pleasant conversation with a spirit?

It was at that moment she noticed she was holding something in the hand that Physician Xin... the spirit had patted. It was a small clay vessel sealed with a cork.

Even as she stood up, hurrying out of the middle of the street, curiosity drove her to open it. Inside, Ling Qi found three shimmering silver pills and a stick of jade so dark green that it appeared black. The scent that wafted out on a cloud of silver mist made her think of dark, moonless nights.

The scent finally flushed the lingering fog from her thoughts and she realized what seemed now to be an obvious conclusion.

Xin and Tsan. New and Crescent.

Xin had said that her sister had high hopes for her... The Grinning Moon was supposed to smile on those who did their work out of sight and out of mind. Ling Qi had burned incense for the Grinning Moon before when she had been afraid of failing at a particularly difficult theft.

Ling Qi wasn't sure how she felt about having the direct attention of a Great Spirit, even if it was a relatively minor one not often included in official rolls. She glanced down at her shoulder. It was expertly bandaged and didn't hurt any longer. At least that had been real... probably. How real was anything right now?

## Chapter 15 - Zhou's Trial 4

In the end, Ling Qi put aside such useless thoughts. She could panic about her possible encounter with a Great Spirit later. For now, she had an exam to pass and a plan to follow.

Her plan was simple, as good ones usually were. She would disguise herself as a commoner and gather information while watching out for her fellow disciples. Cultivators paid little attention to mortals so if she could still pass for one... she was sure she could find advantage there.

It didn't take very long to find what she was looking for. The entertainment district was full of gaudy storefronts and colorful signs, although it was quieter and less crowded than she was used to. Ling Qi grimaced as she passed in front of seedy business after seedy business, full of women with empty smiles and men who stunk of alcohol and other things. The cloying scents of cheap perfumes and incense was ever-present.

She hated these kind of places. Whatever difficulty and pain she had suffered after leaving her mother and whatever troubles being a cultivator would bring, at least she would never have to serve in a place like this.

Still, it had its uses for her present need. She bought a set of cheap clothing and some cosmetics to disguise herself. She was even able to purchase some rawhide and canvas to wrap her new staff in and hang it over her back. If she were to ambush a fellow disciple, it wouldn't do to alert them by carrying an obvious talisman.

She used her time purchasing her supplies to slip in innocuous questions about any odd happenings in recent days. It didn't go as well as she had hoped. The citizens of this city were tight lipped and often apathetic, and getting straight answers from anyone was irritatingly difficult.

Still, she did manage to pick up a few leads, even if the details were lacking. The first was that the city's sealed catacombs had been opened the day before and not for any funerary rights. A group of city guards had been seen carrying in a large clay urn with something shining from within but leaving empty-handed. The second was that the primary well in the southeastern section of the city had been shut down. Someone had been seen lowering an object that glimmered like starlight into it a few nights ago. In the morning, the guards had removed the bucket and crank that normally adorned the well.

Ling Qi didn't particularly look forward to entering a tomb or climbing down a well, but it seemed these were her best leads.

As she was mulling over which one to follow up on, she heard a commotion further down the street. Voices were raised followed by a crash from something falling to the ground.

Ling Qi spotted the distinctive silver robes of one of her fellow disciples. She vaguely recognized the boy from her lessons though she didn't recall ever hearing his name. He was thin and gangly with somewhat pinched features and a proud set to his shoulders and demeanor. The impression was reinforced by the way he was berating the owner of one of the many dingy street stalls that lined the narrow streets.

Ling Qi wasn't close enough to properly overhear, but she could piece together the situation well enough from the wet stain on the front of the boy's robes and the broken gourd on the ground at his feet. The stall looked to be selling cheap drink, probably brewed in one basement or another, but something had caused a spill. She couldn't really say who was at fault, but she couldn't help but pity the merchant. No one else was going to help him.

This was an opportunity. If she could lead that disciple to one of the star tokens, she could wait and take it from him after he had braved whatever dangers there were. She could also just try to rob the other boy for a chance at a sun token and maybe take a competitor out.

For a moment, Ling Qi lost herself in thought, nervously plucking at the sleeves of her new and much drabber clothing. The obvious thing, in her opinion, would be to strike out of the crowd while the boy was distracted with the merchant, but starting a fight in the middle of the street would endanger civilians. Even if the civilians weren't real, she couldn't help but think that the Elders would disapprove of a plan that unnecessarily endangered them.

No, that wouldn't be the best option. But what other options did she have?

While she had never particularly focused on being a scam artist, she had played the role once or twice when more direct methods were off the table. Of course, she had been younger then, and people were less suspicious of being tricked by a child.

She would just have to try. If she continued to stand here agonizing over it, her opportunity would pass. Taking one last moment to steel herself, Ling Qi began to move



towards the disciple and the merchant, shifting her posture to a more subservient and fearful one, as was appropriate for a mortal approaching an angry cultivator. She was fairly confident that the boy wouldn't recognize her under her disguise and hopefully he wouldn't sense her qi.

As she drew near, she noticed the splotch of red on the left side of the other disciple's robe and the way he favored his right leg. He was wounded at least as badly as she had been, and perhaps worse given the location of the wound. His robe stuck wetly to him, soaked through, but the lack of dripping indicated the wound was sealed by some means. The sight made her more confident.

"Ah - Excuse me, honored sir," Ling Qi spoke up as the proud boy wound down from berating the scrawny merchant for poorly securing his goods. She couldn't see a weapon on him anywhere, but unfortunately, that didn't necessarily mean anything given the existence of dimensional rings.

The boy didn't seem too startled so he had been keeping an eye on the people around him. He still snapped his head around to glare down at her... only to fail due to their relative heights. Ling Qi managed to conceal her wince at the flash of irritation in his eyes. Why did she have to be so tall?

"What do you want, girl?" he asked haughtily, crossing his arms over his chest. "I have no business with the rest of you, only this clumsy fool." He gestured with irritation at the merchant, who was eying her warily over the disciple's shoulder.

"I am very, very sorry for interrupting you, sir," Ling Qi continued hurriedly, catching the merchant's eye as she bowed deeply to the disciple. "Please spare my uncle. I beg your mercy in this matter." It was a gamble involving the vendor in her lie, but she could probably rely on the man's survival instincts to have him play along. Besides, someone entirely unrelated choosing to involve themselves in the dispute would be too unbelievable.

She saw the merchant's eyes widen a fraction before his expression returned to one of abject gratitude and contriteness.

"Oh, Yue. No, please do not involve yourself in your uncle's foolishness. Sir, this is entirely my fault. Please do not take offense at this girl's interruption. I will, of course, remunerate you for my carelessness..." Even in this weird city she could rely on people knowing how to act in their self-interest.

The boy scowled, glancing back and forth at the two of them before glancing up at the sky. His expression darkened further at the sight of the steadily sinking sun. "I will dismiss this for the moment as I have other business. You will surrender whatever funds you have in this mangy stall of yours and act as my guide."

So that's what he was doing. It was rather ham-handed of him but about what she would expect from a wealthy boy trying to find information in the scummier parts of town.

"Sir?" she spoke up meekly, doing her best to tremble in fear as he turned his glare back to her. "If it is a guide you need, I can serve that role. Disciples such as yourself are here for the tokens hidden in the city, are you not? I saw where the guards placed one of them. I can lead you there, but please, spare my Uncle's stall. We have so little as it is."

Ling Qi could see that she had succeeded by the look in the other boy's eye. "Hmph. You should be thankful to have a niece so filial, old fool," he said haughtily, eyeing the merchant. Ling Qi suspected that the merchant's expression of gratitude was not faked at all.

"However," he added, jabbing a finger toward Ling Qi. "If this is some trick or a waste of my time, I will ensure that your entire family regrets it."

"Of course, sir." Ling Qi bobbed her head in another bow. "I would never dream of lying to a lord such as yourself. Would you like me to take you there now?"

"Thank you so much for your mercy, sir," the merchant added quickly. "Truly, I do not deserve such a dutiful niece."

The old man barely got another cold glance before the boy's attention focused on Ling Qi. "I do not have time to waste. Lead me there now, girl."

Ling Qi restrained the twitch of irritation at his condescension. It meant that her disguise was working. She kept her expression meek and her head bowed. "It's right this way, sir."

She only had rather vague directions to the well, which she had decided was better for the sake of her plan, so she would have to bluff and hope he didn't notice any uncertainty on her part. Thankfully, her fellow disciple was - not foolish, because that could lead to underestimating him, but - less than attentive. Although he kept an eye on his surroundings as he marched stiffly along, concealing the occasional pained hitch in

his step, he seemed to have entirely dismissed her as a threat.

It took another quarter of an hour to cross the city and reach the the well she had learned of, partially because she wasn't familiar with the street layout. The most difficult bit was when she had to convince him to stop and purchase a coil of rope with an explanation of what he would need it for.

Eventually, they reached the square where the well was located, only to find it dark and empty. A few wooden barricades surrounded the squat, knee-high stone ring of the well. It was uncapped with the rope and bucket missing from the bar suspended above it, yet a faint glittering light seemed to shine from the darkness within.

As they wove through the signs along the squares perimeter warning civilians to keep away, she glanced at her temporary companion. He had a certain desperate eagerness to his expression, which she hoped meant she could manage the second part of her plan. She paused a few steps from the well, leaving him to continue on and peer down into it, leaving his back to her.

"Sir? Should I tie the rope for you?" Ling Qi asked quietly, hefting the coil of rope carried on her good shoulder. "Will you need me to look after anything for you while you descend?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, a frown on his pinched features. "Do not be foolish. I am not going to leave any of my things behind." He gave a haughty sniff as he turned to fully face her.

"Besides, you will be descending first. I refuse to give you the chance to run off while I am occupied. I don't even know if this place yet contains a token, and I will need a servant to carry a torch."

Ling Qi blinked. This wasn't part of the plan.

"Sir?" she asked, injecting a bit of fear into her tone. "I... I'm not sure - I mean - aren't there s-spirits and other things down there? Please, I led you here, didn't I? Please don't make me go into such a place!" With practiced ease, she squeezed a bit of moisture out of the corners of her eyes, doing her best to look frightened and pathetic.

For a moment, Ling Qi thought she had managed to convince him, but then the boy's expression hardened. "Stop your whining, girl!" he snapped. "You should be thankful to be assisting me like this. You will just have to stay close and..."

She couldn't do as he asked. If this were the location of a token, there was no way she would get through whatever defenses lay down there without revealing herself as a cultivator. Nor could she realistically refuse him without blowing her cover. It was fairly obvious he intended to use her as a canary given that he intended to make her go down first and play torchbearer.

No. Playing along wasn't an option.

Ling Qi's cultivation of Zephyr's Breath had trained her in the use of throwing knives. This included simple melee forms, but it was nothing so refined that she struck with. It was simple experience in the street that formed most of her response, combined with reflexes honed by 'training' with Gu Xiulan. Her shoulder hit the boy's chest at the same moment a knife dug into his injured side and twisted.

He let out a yelp of pain and surprise... and to Ling Qi's shock, he was easily shoved backward by her shoulder check. Why was he so weak? She had expected it to be like striking a wall, but instead, his arms windmilled as the back of his knees hit the lip of the well. She ducked under his grasping hand with ease and instinctively kicked out, striking his stomach even as she pulled out of reach.

Ling Qi winced at the meaty thwack of flesh striking stone as his head cracked against the back lip of the well, dulled by a flare of blue-white qi. Had he used qi to absorb the damage? Whatever he did, it didn't stop the boy from falling. His expression was locked into one of fury, pain, and surprise as the well's mouth expanded before her eyes like the maw of a hungry beast, leaving him nothing to grasp onto as he disappeared down the shaft.

Ling Qi stood there, dumbfounded by how easy it had been, only to wince as a much louder thump resounded from far below, echoing hollowly up the shaft. The distended black void that he had fallen into seemed to wobble for a moment before snapping back down to the size of a normal well. As time resumed its normal pace, she became all too aware of the sticky wetness staining her right hand. A single thought dominated her thoughts.

... That had *not* been a splash.

## Chapter 16 - Zhou's Trial 5

Ling Qi stared at the now innocuous well that the boy had disappeared into. She wasn't certain what she had expected to happen, but it wasn't that. Was that boy dead? Did the Elders retrieve him? She didn't know. Despite having lived in the streets, she had never killed anyone before, not like this.

Her thoughts flashed back to a memory of a disheveled Gu Xiulan's expression of satisfaction as the ice-flinging girl was consumed by fire. Would she become like that? Someone who could smile while trying to kill another person? She had known that she would have to fight and kill from the moment she was recruited, but she had thought it would only be barbarians. That was different than having to fight and kill a person - even if that person had been an unrepentant ass.

Ling Qi shook herself and straightened her shoulders. She didn't have time to stand here doing nothing. Her plan to rob the other boy after he completed the trial was useless now. If she wanted the star token, she was going to have to do it herself. And if the boy was still alive and present down there, she could at least make sure he didn't drown in a puddle or bleed out. She couldn't afford to regret her chosen course of action, but neither did she have to be completely callous.

Ling Qi let out the breath she had been holding and stepped forward, eyeing the well warily as she secured the rope. She soon had it looped over the high bar that would have once held the well's actual rope and bucket, with an additional length pulled out several feet away from the well. Sadly, she lacked any proper tools so she broke off one of the 'legs' allowing the barricades to stand upright. The wood had splintered with a bit of effort and some leverage on her part. Using one of her knives to scrape the broken end down to a point had taken a little longer, but eventually, she had something with which she could stake the end of the rope to the ground.

It was surprising how little it hurt when she had used her hand as a makeshift hammer. The force necessary to drive the stake firmly into the hard packed dirt of the street had only made her hand sting but not bruise. Once she had given the rope a few experimental tugs to ensure it was actually secure, she returned to the side of the well and looked down the dark shaft, steeling her nerves.

The climb down was nerve wracking. Bracing herself against the damp stone wall, Ling Qi half-expected to find it pulling away or for a gust of wind or some other strange magic to drag her down.

The descent went on longer than she expected. She was certain that the rope hadn't been long enough for her to be climbing down the well for nearly ten minutes. The tiny circle of light from the surface seemed terribly far away.

As she descended, some illumination appeared below, looking like dim candles burning in the dark. The wide dark chamber that greeted her was just barely high enough in places for her to stand upright. Its walls were dotted with odd crystalline growths that glowed with the faint illumination of a moonlit night and its floor was a field of mud with the occasional standing pool of water.

Reaching the end of her rope, Ling Qi dropped the remaining meter to the floor, grimacing at the feeling of mud squishing up under her sandals. Spotting the still figure of her fellow disciple lying in the mud, she felt her stomach drop. The boy really was still down here. His right arm and leg were unpleasantly twisted and the nearby mud and water were stained by red. Despite his injuries, his chest still rose and fell shallowly.

Maybe he hadn't been removed because the fall hadn't killed him? Elder Su had mentioned in a lesson that a cultivator would instinctively use qi to blunt harm, even if it was only minimally useful without a proper defensive art and training.

... Maybe this was why Gu Xiulan had seemed so blasé about throwing lethal attacks during the first test?

She considered the boy as she peered down at him in the dark. She was glad that he hadn't been faking, but as much as he had been an ass, she also hadn't really intended to seriously injure him outside the heat of the moment.

Ling Qi dragged the other disciple out of the slowly filling muddy crater his impact had dug. Although the movement made the boy twitch and groan in pain, thankfully, he didn't wake up. Ling Qi looked him over, tearing off a bit of his sleeve to rebind the stab wound she had inflicted. He... should be fine, and with his limbs like that, he shouldn't be a threat even if he woke up. The Elders would still retrieve him at the end of the test, right?

She hoped so, but having bandaged him, she paused. She - perhaps not fairly - had beaten him. She had even taken some time to make sure he wouldn't die at the bottom of the well. ... She had earned her spoils, right? Besides, this would all be pointless if she failed to get the tokens she needed.

Nodding at her own reasoning, Ling Qi quickly searched the other boy. She checked his belt pouch first, the strings securing it deftly sliced by one of her knives. Ling Qi found herself grinning with relief when the first item she pulled out was a golden disk with the character for sun carved into it.

Lucky. She was very lucky.

Thinking of the strange pills resting in her own pouch, she couldn't help but wonder. Maybe it had nothing to do with the spirit that was apparently interested in her, but she could afford to take some incense from the storehouse and make up an offering. It certainly couldn't hurt.

The pouch didn't have much aside from the token, but she was glad for what it did contain: three red spirit stones and a clay bottle with two dark blue pills of some kind. She was going to have to find someone who could identify medicines.

The rest of her search turned up frustratingly little. The boy didn't even have a weapon or any talismans. Ling Qi was beginning to think that maybe he hadn't been quite as much of a wealthy young lord as his behavior had suggested. However, she did find something tucked under the collar of his robe, between the underlayer and the upper one. The three odd bronze cards shined with a mirror finish on one side and stylized swirls on the other. Turning them over in her hands, she couldn't begin to guess at their purpose.

Tucking the items into her bag, Ling Qi stood up. Now that she had a sun token, there was only one other that she needed to acquire to pass. She began to search along the walls, squinting in the dim light. At first, it seemed that this small muddy chamber was all that lay down here, but eventually she found a point of egress: a low, muddy tunnel set near the floor of the chamber.

After a moment's hesitation, Ling Qi sighed and knelt in the mud to peer through the exit. Thankfully, the tunnel retained the dim lighting from the strange crystals, but the crawl was still going to be uncomfortable. She scowled as she leaned forward, hands sinking into the mud with a wet splorch as she began to shuffle forward on her hands and knees. She hated tight spaces like this. Absolutely hated them.

Ling Qi kept moving as quickly as she could manage, alternating her gaze between the tunnel ahead and the ground below. Several times, she nearly slipped, but she managed to avoid face planting into the deepening muck. The cheap clothing she had bought was less lucky. By the time she could see the end of the tunnel, her sleeves and

top were sporting several rips where they had caught on the crystals.

For all that she felt relief as she poked her head out of the narrow tunnel and into the open space beyond, she was still brought up short by the sight that met her eyes. Not only did the tunnel drop off into clear, knee-deep water, but the temperature had suddenly dropped as well, enough that her breath was coming out in puffs of steam.

Warily climbing to her feet, Ling Qi peered around, confirming what she had hoped was a trick of the light. The chamber had three other passages leading out from it, and every wall was coated in a solid layer of ice from which her reflection stared back at her in the dim light.

It made her skin crawl to have her gaze reflected from multiple directions like that. She looked positively filthy: her hair was askew, her arms coated in mud up to the elbows, and her clothing tattered from the passage. Grimacing, she took care of at least one of those things, washing the silt and mud on her hands away in the icy water.

Ling Qi shivered and not just from the chill. She didn't like this place. Glancing between the three identical-seeming passages, she chose the leftmost one and flipped a knife out of her sleeve to mark the ice that made up the wall. It failed, the knife's edge only grinding uselessly against the reflective plane.

Gritting her teeth Ling Qi instead crouched down, shivering as the water further soaked into her clothes. She picked up a handful of mud and smeared it over the mirror. She was going to mark her path one way or the other.

Navigating the icy passages proved difficult. At first, when the tunnel was straight, it was easy enough, but the tunnel quickly began to curve, twist, and split. The reflective walls only made it worse. Gradually, they began to distort, showing off twisted reflections that made her head spin as she tried to make her way through the labyrinthine passages. It didn't help that all the while, even with her efforts to mark the walls, she was feeling less and less sure of whether she could find her way back out. She couldn't afford to turn back...

"Why were you so concerned about killing him?" Ling Qi whipped around, a knife already in hand as an echoing voice sounded just behind her. However, instead of a person, she found her own distorted reflection looking back at her from the curved mirror of the wall behind her. As she stared into her own shadowed eyes, she thought she may have simply imagined it.



Then, the image cocked its head to the side and crossed its mud-stained arms over its chest.

Ling Qi hadn't moved at all.

"Why?" her reflection asked, its eyes narrowed and pitiless. "He was a threat. You heard the Elder. If he died, it would have been his own fault."

"That doesn't mean I should be trying to kill people." The words slipped out even as she inched backwards, away from the unsettling doppelganger. "I don't need to make more enemies." She didn't quite know why she was explaining herself to the thing wearing her face, but if it wanted to talk that gave her time to find an exit. There was another split behind her, but she was pretty sure the left path wasn't real, just another twisted reflection.

Unfortunately, inching backwards did not prevent the mirror thing from stepping forward through the plane of the mirror as if it were merely water.

"Ah. So you were just being a coward again. That's not really surprising," it said condescendingly.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Ling Qi snapped. The thing's attitude irked her as condescension usually did, but it seemed worse to hear it in her own voice.

"There's nothing cowardly about showing restraint."

"What restraint?" the thing asked, its expression warping into an ugly sneer. "You don't give a damn about that idiot. You tipped him into the well with barely a thought. So why feel guilty afterward? Or do you really believe that you've never killed anyone before? How delusional are you?"

"I haven't," Ling Qi responded, her uneasiness increasing. Should she just run? This was obviously some kind of spirit trick. "I - I'm a just a thief, not a murderer." She was babbling. Was this part of the trick - something making her want to keep talking?

"Liar, liar, Ling Qi's such a liar."

Ling Qi stiffened as a second voice, high pitched and childish, sounded from behind her. A careful look over her shoulder made her silently curse. The path behind her had gone dark, all of the crystals beyond a half dozen meters extinguished. Sitting in front of the inky cloud, seemingly in mid-air, was another reflection of sorts. It was her as she had been right after running away from home. Ling Qi felt a stab of regret as her eyes

caught on the flower shaped ornament keeping the little girl's unruly hair in check. That had been her last birthday gift, and it had broken a few months after she had run away.

The child reflection grinned, seemingly noticing where her eyes had gone. "Did you already forget Wei? He really thought you were gonna pull him up after you, you know? How about old man Shen? Even after he gave you bread, you still stole his blankets when winter came."

The thing leaned forward on its invisible seat and added in a conspiratorial whisper, "But you don't even remember, do you? I guess there were so many..."

Ling Qi felt colder than before even as she tried to keep both spirits in sight. This... What was... Were these spirits plucking things from her mind? While she didn't have more than a vague inkling of recognition at the names it spoke, she could not say that she didn't recall events that were at least... similar.

"Kids - People who join a heist know what they're getting into," she said defensively, memories of the first person she had ever partnered up with bubbling up. "I didn't pull him up because I would have gotten caught too. I didn't kill him. I mean - the guards caught him, but..."

The older reflection let out a derisive snort. "Idiot! Do you think that scrawny little dumbass survived long after the beating you'd get for theft?" It rolled its eyes as she fell silent from the interruption. "And he said he'd protect us. As if anyone could do that."

"You didn't even try to say anything about the old man," the child added with a giggle. "I could bring up some more, but we both know you'd just make more excuses!"

"Cut the crap," Ling Qi responded roughly, her hand tightening on the grip of the knife. "What do you want? This... this is some kind of test, right? Get to the point."

She had to hope it was part of the test, because the lights were winking out one by one around her, steadily shrinking the circle of light she had to see by. If she needed to, she could break through in the child thing's direction, but...

"If it is, then you've already failed," the older reflection sneered. "Do you really think the Sect wants a disloyal coward like us anywhere in their upper ranks? Especially if we can't even bring ourselves to dirty our hands? We're meant to be a warm body on the front line at best."

“Stop calling me that!” Ling Qi snapped. “If you’re really me, then you know damn well that I just... I just did what I needed to do!” The justification sounded lame even to her. “Besides, I can be better now, right? I’m a cultivator. Improving myself is what it’s all about!” Ling Qi straightened her shoulders and glared at them defiantly. Was it just her, or had a few of the crystals flickered back on?

“If you weren’t a coward, you would have talked to Mama when you saw her in the market last year,” the child reflection’s voice cut in, sounding subdued instead of gleeful like it had before. The phantom idly kicked her feet, sending the painstakingly stitched hem of her dress flapping. “We saw how thin she was.”

“If you weren’t disloyal, you wouldn’t have left mom to rot just because you were scared,” the older one growled.

Ling Qi flinched.

“Oh, it looks like you remember Mama at least,” the child taunted.

Ling Qi’s free hand balled into a fist even as the circle of light shrank. “I wasn’t going to let her make me like her,” she snapped. “I couldn’t be what she wanted. So why not run away! It saved us both pain.”

“Liar.”

“Coward.”

“That wasn’t what you were thinking when you ran,” the older reflection said, her voice dripping with contempt.

“You were scared of that gross man,” the child added with a shiver. “And you didn’t trust Mama to protect you anymore.”

“You just kept telling yourself that stupid lie until you believed it,” the older one sneered

“Ling Qi runs, Ling Qi hides, and Ling Qi only loves herself. This is who we are,” they both continued with eerie synchronicity. There was something wrong with their voices; they were distorted as if speaking through water. The last of the lights were flickering out. She could barely see either of them, save for their eerily glowing eyes, staring at her with derision and pity.

She didn’t... She wasn’t really like that, was she? Was that the kind of person she was?

Why was she so tired? Why were these words affecting her so much? She had been called worse things before. Suffered worse things before. So why did she feel so hopeless?

It was...

Why was it so cold?

# Chapter 17 - Zhou's Trial 6

No!

She wasn't going to give up. She couldn't afford to be weak, and she couldn't afford to doubt herself. Not in the middle of a dangerous test. Even if what the reflections said was true.

"It's true that I have lied. People have probably died because of things I did... and Mom..." Her voice, despite being little louder than a whisper, resounded in the utter darkness she was in.

"You should stop," the childish voice responded with resignation. "More excuses won't help."

"Shut up!" Ling Qi snapped, straightening her sagging shoulders. "Do you really think you've said anything I haven't thought of before?" More than anything, Ling Qi felt angry: angry at these stupid spirits playing with her mind; angry at herself for stopping to listen to them; and angry at their reminder of things she had so deliberately forgotten. The spirit wasn't wrong.

She knew she had hurt people with her actions. It wasn't possible to live at the bottom without doing that.

She knew she was selfish.

She knew she wasn't a virtuous person.

... She knew that mother hadn't really wanted the same life for her. Her education was proof of that, even if it hurt to admit it.

Ling Qi barely noticed the flickering of the lights overhead, allowing her to see the dim outline of her hand as she pointed accusingly at the thing wearing her face.

"You're wrong. I've stolen things, left people behind, and made plenty of other shitty decisions I can't even remember, but... I know that. I know I'm not a good person. I never said I was. Just because I'm not a saint doesn't mean I'm a monster," Ling Qi snapped angrily.

"I'd make those decisions again if the situation was the same," she admitted in a more subdued voice. "That doesn't mean I'd do the same if I had more choices."

As the light grew, she could once again see the child, now staring at her skeptically. "Words like that won't do you any good, you know. Saying that you didn't have any good choices is just an excuse."

Ling Qi's vision swam, and she found herself wobbling on her feet as the creeping fatigue sapped the energy her anger had given her. The little girl's voice and tone had changed somehow.

"... That's bullshit, and it pisses me off to see someone wearing my face say it." Ling Qi frowned, forcing herself to continue speaking. "There's a reason I stopped thinking that way." She shook her head, trying to shake off the fuzziness of her thoughts. "Because - I've thought about it - what it means to be free. I... I left mom just for that after all, even if it started because I was scared. It doesn't matter if it wasn't what she wanted... If I'd stayed, then..." Her words were a bit slurred, but she managed to keep her focus on the girl's face.

"... As long as you're poor... as long as you're weak... you aren't really free. I've seen that. There aren't any real choices there. You're bound by all kinds of things." It was getting hard to concentrate.

"Point is - I... Things can be different once I change that."

"Does that really make it better though? You're still the same person in the end." The not-child sighed.

"Won't you make the same excuse when Li Suyin needs your help? Or when your fellow disciples finally manage to find their spines and gang up on Bai Meizhen?" The voice was different now, lower and more mature. In the corner of her vision, something shimmered.

That shimmer seemed to break through the clouds filling her head, and for a moment, she found clarity.

"...Maybe," Ling Qi admitted quietly. "But that's something to work out for myself in the future, not something to discuss with a damn parasite messing with my head."

"What...?" the illusion began, its childish features drawing down in a pout.

Ling Qi's hand snapped out in a blur, launching a sliver of metal upward toward the sight that had flickered in her vision. A shrill squeal shattered the silence, and with it, the world. Everything around her wavered: the reflections, the darkness, even the sense of

fatigue that had been creeping up on her again.

A glittering web, beautiful in its intricacy, hung across the ceiling of the tunnel in front of her. Its occupant, a spider the size of a small cat with glittering silver chitin, fell from it, spasming around the knife buried dead center in its abdomen. It kicked up a splash as it hit the ankle-deep water. Ling Qi moved forward without hesitation, renewed anger burning in her veins, and brought her foot down as hard as she could manage, again and again, until the damned thing finally stopped twitching.

“Stay out of my head,” she hissed under her breath. She reached down and jerked her knife out of the corpse.

She was left staring at the milky-white, oblong shape stuck on the end of her knife. She could feel qi in it. She recalled Li Suyin’s roommate had mentioned something called a “beast core.” Maybe this was it?

She gingerly prodded the thing. It felt like warm stone, not fleshy at all, so after a moment’s hesitation, she tucked it into her belt pouch.

As her anger and adrenaline faded, Ling Qi found her thoughts turning back to her recent ordeal. She knew now that it hadn’t been real, just another illusion twisting her own thoughts and blaring the distorted results back in her face. The last thing she wanted was to think about her old life, but that stupid spider had pulled it all back to the forefront. Now, she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She glared darkly at the tunnel ahead, carefully studying it for more webs or any other sign of a trap. She even strained the vague sense for qi she had managed to cultivate as she advanced. But despite her best efforts, she remained distracted.

Ling Qi hadn’t lied. She didn’t like hurting people or abandoning them... but she had to put herself first, and in her previous position, that hadn’t left much room at all to care for others. She still believed leaving Mother had been for the best - for both of them. Even now, knowing that she had misread the situation due to her fears, she still held on to that belief.

... Still, maybe she could send out a letter along with some of the coin she had recently acquired once the Sect restrictions on communication ended. She hadn’t wanted to chance getting entangled in things again back in the city, but she was beyond that now.

Mother had done her best for her daughter, even if Ling Qi had rejected it at the end.

Ling Qi could afford to give... something back. It wasn't as if she had much use for silver anymore after all. Assuming the silver was real anyway, she thought irritably. After this day, she wished that she had some ability to sense that kind of thing.

The path ahead was still a maze, although she wasn't knee-deep in water anymore. Perhaps that was the trick? She needed to follow the decreasing water level?

The last trap had left her feeling tense, but perhaps that was a good thing because it allowed her to maintain focus and keep her sense of direction in the maze. Ling Qi kept working toward a single direction even when the twisting paths didn't allow her to proceed directly. Several times, she found herself stopping and backtracking to avoid more glittering webs or places where the darkness grew unnatural.

Gradually, the water grew shallower, first to lap around her toes then to simply leave the ground wet and muddy. The number of turns, twists, and splits in the path began to taper off as well until finally, the tunnel opened up into a small chamber dimly lit by a single crystal growth on the ceiling.

Ling Qi peered inside warily, easily spotting the stone plinth that lay directly under the light with a glittering black jade token shot through with veins of white laying atop it. If that wasn't the star token, she would eat her sandals.

Unfortunately, the plinth rose from a pool of crystal clear water. Stepping into the chamber, Ling Qi could not help but stare suspiciously at the pool. She strongly doubted that it was so simple as simply walking up and taking the token. If the rest of this spirit-infested city was any indication, the token would be guarded by some kind of water spirit.

Perhaps she didn't need to confront it? Spirits could be placated, and Ling Qi recalled a few things about water spirits that had slipped in among her etiquette lessons with Bai Meizhen when conversation turned to the girl's home province. Ling Qi didn't have incense or offerings, but... maybe she could talk the spirit into just handing the token over or at least explaining what it wanted before she went and stuck her foot in the thing's pool?

After deliberating, she decided that it couldn't hurt. Ling Qi stepped into the chamber, straightened her posture as best she could, and then bowed, pulling on dim memories of priestly ceremony and hearthside conversation. She then clapped her hands together, once and then twice before holding them apart.



“Scion of waters, child of the the Eternal Ocean from which all life rises, this one would treat with you. Will you appear?” Ugh. Ling Qi had nearly stumbled over the odd and formal words, but she thought she had gotten it right. Ling Qi almost grimaced, feeling increasingly ridiculous as she held her pose in the silence that followed.

Then, she heard the sloshing of water and witnessed the calm surface of the pool growing frothy with motion, lapping at the shore. The water bubbled and rose, an indistinct face forming from the waters. Its eyes were two unsettling dark holes, and its other features were little more than outlines, like an amateur sculpture of a person’s head. She could feel a weight in the air which had been absent as those pits focused on her.

*Rootbound Fledgling, what words/meanings/communication do you have for [Earthwater/Bringer of Health/Shadowsea/\*\*\*\*]\*?*

Its words, if the sudden barrage of meaning that struck her mind could be called that, made her body tremble in discomfort. Ling Qi did her best to ignore the pressure that she felt weighing down on her. For all that this was no great spirit, she had a feeling that the New Moon had been distinctly taking it easy on her, body and mind, if something like this could make her feel so pressured.

“This one requests the knowledge of what must be done to acquire the token at the center of your pool,” she pressed on, knowing that it was too late to back out now. “This one has no wish to unnecessarily defile your waters.”

The face in the water regarded her silently, and she found herself dearly wishing that it was more expressive, less flat and alien.

*Blood and flesh has been offered, yet the life was denied. Were we true/real/original, we would take of yours. Here, we are but a shadow/reflection/memory so there is no purpose/meaning/nourishment.*

*A thread was cut. Return it and begone with our burden, disciple of the Blood-Drenched Moon.*

Ling Qi concentrated on keeping her limbs from trembling. The spirit’s words were difficult to parse, but she thought she understood what it wanted. Loathe as she was to give up her prize for having killed that damn spider, it was probably a... part of this spirit? She knew vaguely that spirits were often interconnected in weird ways.

Hoping she was right, she slipped a hand into her pouch and brought out the core she had torn from the dead spider and held it out. Sure enough, the thing vibrated in her hand and shot from it the moment she opened her fingers, hitting the surface of the pool with barely a ripple and dissolving.

Ling Qi stumbled back as the star token hit her chest, having been flung with significant force. She managed to catch it before it hit the ground though despite the throbbing where it had struck her. She would probably have a nasty bruise on her chest later.

“Thank you,” Ling Qi said, bowing her head a fraction lower. “I apologize for disturbing your rest.”

*Wings too stunted to fly, and roots too damaged by frost to flourish. It is not for your sake that we grant our burden. Begone.*

Ling Qi stiffened as the world seemed to twist and distort around her, squeezing down on all sides. She was just beginning to panic as she found herself unable to move, but before she could even get going, she found herself blinking as the light of sunset stung her eyes.

Carefully peering around, Ling Qi found herself standing at the edge of the square which contained the well, hidden in shadow behind several haphazardly stacked crates. She frowned as she saw another disciple, a girl she didn't recognize, watching the well intently with a fine saber in hand. Ling Qi's rope was still there, and from the way the girl stood, her intentions were clear. Ling Qi supposed she owed the water spirit thanks, even if it had been irritatingly cryptic and condescending.

Ling Qi crept away with the girl none the wiser, eyeing the sky. She still had some time, but the sooner she got to the temple, the better. At this point, every moment she spent in the city was a risk with no reward.

Luckily, she doubted any of her fellow disciples would identify her at a glance; she was wet, muddy, and wearing cheap, torn clothing. Unless they could sense her qi or they recognized her personally, she could pass for a commoner, unless the wrapped staff on her back drew attention.

... At least until she got to the wealthier part of the city. There, her appearance would start to stand out.

However, that concern could wait for the moment. Ling Qi focused on making her way further into the city at the quickest pace she could manage while sticking to back streets

and alleys. As she traveled, it became more and more clear that the city had quite a few disciples in it now. Smoke rose in the distance, and people were hurrying away from that location with frightened looks on their faces. These signs and other little things caused Ling Qi to pick up her pace even more.

Once she moved out of the poorer, outer districts, Ling Qi made a small detour to clean up and dry off. A stop at a pawn shop afterward bought her a cloak to throw over her tattered clothes. Leaving the shop, she worked to blend in with the street traffic as she approached the inner walls around the wealthy districts. She could see a huge tower, carved to appear as a tightly coiled dragon rising over those walls. Going by the guard's words, that was her destination.

That just meant she needed to be even more cautious.

She saw some of her peers on the way. Some loitered on street corners, scanning the crowd. A tiny number had even gotten the same idea as she had and dressed down, making themselves less obvious. Ling Qi focused on remaining in the background and kept a tight leash on her qi.

As she neared the inner districts, Ling Qi slowed her pace even more. She no longer weaved through the street traffic for maximum speed without compromising her anonymity. Instead, she walked normally. She even stopped periodically at street stalls or entered shops, making sure she didn't appear to be in a hurry to reach a particular destination.

It seemed to work. Her fellow disciples took no notice of her as she worked her way closer. There were at least a dozen guards in plain sight at the intricate bronze gates that separated the outer city from the inner, including two who wore marks of rank. Here, there were no disciples that she could see. Perhaps they assumed that the guards would intervene in violence that occurred right in front of them.

A handful of bloody footprints that had yet to be smeared away by passing foot traffic seemed to give credence to that, as did the fact that several of the guards had blades drawn. As much as it went against every instinct she had to openly approach such a group, Ling Qi finally broke her casual pace as she reached the open square in front of the gate. As she expected, the two men flanking the gate raised their halberds to block her way, staring at her with cold disinterest. She glanced at one of the two officers in their ranks, digging into her pouch to reveal her tokens. She hoped that what she had really was a star token. The guard officer stepped forward to examine the offered tokens. Ling Qi held her breath until he silently gestured for the two men to lower their

weapons. This was it! She had managed to pass! She felt almost giddy at the realization.

She murmured a breathless thanks to the guard officer and darted through the gates, hurrying through the opulent buildings of the inner city. Even the confused disdain on the wealthy citizens she passed couldn't bring her mood down. Soon, she stood before the wide open gates of the temple with fires burning merrily in the braziers that flanked it.

Ling Qi forced herself to pause and examine the temple's grand interior for potential traps, but there were none. Smiling triumphantly, Ling Qi stepped through the doorway.

## Bonus 3: Faculty Meeting

Warm afternoon sunlight played across the polished black surface of the table which took up the majority of the space in the meeting hall. The tall windows that lined the east and west walls were left open, allowing the cool breeze to blow inside. It was, Dong Feng supposed, much like the quieting of the winds that came before the breaking of a storm.

Looking back down to his desk in the corner of the room, Dong Feng resumed arranging his tools to his liking. It was an honor for a Sect Clerk only a bit past his centennial to be selected to take minutes for a meeting of Elders. He would certainly have to buy his senior another bottle of Blossoming Dream Nectar in thanks for the opportunity.

As Dong Feng placed the last strip of jade down and checked the nib of his etching tool for sharpness, the doors at the far end of the brightly lit hall opened, and the first of the Elders swept in with a small rustle of cloth. Elder Hua Su was among the youngest of her rank, he thought idly. Only two hundred and fifty years or so older than himself. Truly a talent and credit to the Sect. He did not raise his eyes as she passed him. Normally, it would be quite rude to not acknowledge an Elder, but as a record keeper, his role was to be a silent pair of hands.

His ears caught heavy footfalls echoing from the hallway a moment later, and he felt a thrill of fear go up his spine as Commander Zhou marched past, barefoot and bare chested. Dong Feng still remembered well his days serving in the Sect military, training under sergeants who had in turn learned directly from the Indomitable himself. His muscles ached at the memory.

“Sect Sister Su,” the man greeted shortly, dipping his head briefly to the other Elder. “Your courses are going well?”

Elder Su gave the taller man a soft smile as she pulled out her seat. “As well as can be expected. Our disciples are an interesting bunch this year, are they not?”

Elder Zhou scowled, and Dong Feng felt himself break out in sweat as the shadow of a vast mountain fell over him, crushing his shoulders with its weight. It passed then, a mere flicker in the Commander’s iron discipline. “I dislike this... circus,” he said with distaste. “There is nothing that I can teach such neophytes that a lesser officer could not. I look forward to weeding out the worst.”

“You underestimate your insight,” the younger woman replied, taking her seat. “Still, it is not often that the Sect is host to such names. Have any yet made an impression?”

"The Bai lives up to her name. She will be a terror in a century or so," Commander Zhou replied, a touch of irritation in his voice even as he sat down. His seat creaked from his unnatural weight, but the spiritually reinforced wood held. "The Sun is hot-headed and talented but bored by the basic lessons. I have no other insights to share."

"Neither is much interested in my basic primers either," Elder Su admitted. "The other though..."

Commander Zhou grimaced. "I have no complaints at her performance," he replied neutrally.

"Of course you don't." The light drained from the room as another voice echoed as if from the bottom of the well, and Dong Feng felt a violent shiver go up his spine as staring, judging eyes formed in his shadow and all across the room. Watching and grading and... He took hold of himself before he could make a mistake in the etching recording the Elders' words.

Across from the other two Elders, a pillar of liquid darkness arose, frothing and bubbling until it resolved into the gray skinned form of Elder Jiao, lounging in his seat and wearing a robe of eye-searing yellow and a jauntily tilted cap on his bald head.

"Our Glorious Duchess would hardly fail to prepare her heir," he drawled. "But really, must we talk of this again? Is there nothing more interesting to speak of?"

Dong Feng was quite sure he saw Elder Su roll her eyes during Elder Jiao's extravagant entrance, but that was obviously a mistake of perception on his part, he told himself. At least the eyes in his shadow were fading away.

"If you have any insights to offer, they are obviously welcome, Sect Brother Jiao," Commander Zhou replied in a voice drier than any desert. "You have, after all, been so involved in the running of the Outer Sect."

"Oh, nothing of my work would interest you, Sect Brother," Elder Jiao replied in amusement. "Just scribblings and such, you know. Nothing for a man of your stature to be concerned over."

The room shook, and the stone floor rippled as another arrived. The figure of Elder Ying was not an impressive one visually. The stooped figure, wrinkled face, and tightly bound bun of gray hair would be common on any street. All the same, she had emerged from solid rock, and her plain brown gown drawing ripples in the flagstones as she shuffled toward the table and her seat at a deceptively slow pace.

“Do let it rest, you two,” she chided. “We will be discussing our high status guests enough, I think. Why not speak of the other gems we have been given to polish?”

“There are a few,” Commander Zhou grunted. “It is too soon to know if there is anything but potential among the charity cases.”

“And potential hardly guarantees ability,” Elder Su added. “Yet there are two that have the drive to make something of it, I think.”

Commander Zhou grunted in agreement. “Agreed. I am disappointed in the Golden Fields group. I never imagined that Han would coddle his son so.”

“Hmph. Not everything is cultivation,” Elder Jiao replied. “That one is at least well adjusted. There is a reason that the common age for beginning cultivation has risen.”

Commander Zhou scoffed. “We are growing soft.”

Elder Su gave the commander a brief look which Dong Feng could not read, but it was Elder Ying who spoke, her reedy voice nonetheless carrying a great weight to it. The air began to tingle with thickened qi as wills clashed through narrowed eyes. “You know as well as any that beginning before the age of twelve is near pointless. A child so young cannot properly form even the first steps of a Way. You may as well attempt to sculpt a wall from dry sand.”

“But we have an exemplar of such early cultivation this very year!” Elder Jiao said brightly. “And they have such an interesting mind, do they not?”

Elder Ying’s wrinkled face drew into a scowl, and Elder Su frowned. Elder Zhou merely closed his eyes. “I am aware that there is a point which is too early,” the commander said. “That does not change the truth of my words.”

For Dong Feng, things were far more intense. He shivered violently, goosebumps forming on his skin as the qi in the room thickened with raised emotion. Where before he had looked upon a brightly lit meeting hall and four seniors and superiors, now he drowned in a lake of darkness filled by mocking, judging eyes while twin mountains, one a peak of barren gray stone and the other a riot of greenery and life, that both stretched into the sky rumbled and shook at one another.

He felt relief when thunder clapped, rattling the very frame of the building, and the tension in the air dissolved along with the figments of power. Dong Feng gasped for air as the crushing weight fell from his shoulders and chest.

“Hoh, he’s finally here. I am surprised that the Sect Head was so late,” Elder Ying said, sounding curious.

“Must he limit himself so with mortal affectations? He could very well have just entered the room directly,” Elder Jiao complained, a flick of his voluminous sleeve producing a sheaf of densely written papers.

“Not all are interested in abandoning their bodies so, Sect Brother,” Commander Zhou snorted. “You will survive waiting another minute for the Sect Head to traverse the halls.”

Dong Feng almost sighed as the serious atmosphere that had formed dissolved back into the casual one-upmanship and bickering of a normal office meeting. It was always frightening to be reminded of just how far an Elder was above a mere clerk.



## Chapter 18 - Zhou's Trial 7

It was like having cold water splashed in her face.

Ling Qi blinked as her vision swam and the opulent temple interior she had glimpsed was replaced with a plain stone room with a bright bonfire burning in the center. The doors she had just passed were closed, and beneath her, the lines and characters of a formation flickered.

“You have passed the second stage. Calm yourself and rest.” Instructor Zhou’s deep voice rang out from the raised stage at the other end of the room. He stood there, arms crossed, his expression just as hard and stern as ever as he looked down at her from over the bonfire, and yet, she couldn’t help but feel that there was the tiniest hint of approval in the man’s steely eyes.

Ling Qi did her best to ignore the warmth she felt on her cheeks as she hurried away from the door. She didn’t want to end up getting bowled over by another entrant from behind, certainly not in front of Instructor Zhou or the... another person on the stage? She squinted. There was a man lounging against the wall on the left side of the stage.

It was the Elder from her very first day in the Sect, only this time, the odd man was wearing a minister’s robe that was a horribly eye-searing shade of orange. As she looked at him, he raised his head, apparently awakening from the light doze he had been in and looked back at her. Ling Qi felt pinned by his gaze, but the thin-faced man smiled as if at some private joke and glanced to the side, freeing her from his regard.

Ling Qi quickly averted her eyes, taking in the other occupants of the room. There were surprisingly few of them. There were only six... no, seven disciples here already. She had been the eighth to make it to the temple. Among them, she recognized only three.

Gu Xiulan and Han Jian stood near the fire, and Han Jian raised his hand to wave to her when he saw her. He looked a bit crispy around the edges, his robe blackened at the hems and an ugly burn marred his cheek. In contrast, Gu Xiulan looked like a waterlogged cat, irritable and miserable. It made Ling Qi feel somewhat better about her own state.

The last person she recognized was no surprise. Sun Liling sat cross-legged in a secluded corner of the room with a scowl on her face, otherwise looking none the worse for the wear. The room was quiet. Even those speaking were keeping their voices down to a low murmur. It seemed she would have to wait a while yet.

With the glow of victory fading, Ling Qi felt rather wrung out. The encounter with that damn spider had been mentally exhausting, and the stress of sneaking through the outer city had not been restful either. Frankly, she could see the appeal of doing as Sun Liling had and just finding a quiet corner to sit down and meditate in. Who knew what the Elders would have them doing next?

It might seem rude though. Han Jian and Gu Xiulan were both present, and if both she and they passed, they would be the only ones in the class that would be friendly to her. She had a feeling that her efforts to stay unnoticed would be for naught after this.

It wasn't as if she disliked them either. Well, she liked Han Jian; her feelings about Gu Xiulan were more complicated. The other girl intimidated her if she were honest, and Ling Qi didn't quite know what to think about the girl's actions toward her.

She found herself recalling the mocking words of her reflections. It would be better to have allies. The Sect wasn't like the city. The rules were different, and so was she, and even if she was still weak... well, she had proven that she had some value, right? Making it here *had* to prove that.

Ling Qi walked toward her two teammates, attempting to appear unfazed by the appraising looks she was receiving from the other disciples in the room. For better or worse, she had done something to stand out, and people would be paying attention to her. She couldn't just run to another district this time. She would have to be much more careful in the future.

"Ling Qi. Looks like you made it. Great job," Han Jian greeted her warmly, smiling despite the burn on his cheek. She gave him a tentative smile in return, allowing herself to relax.

"Congratulations," Gu Xiulan added. Ling Qi thought she detected a bit of surprise in the other girl's demeanor, but she wasn't sure. The way the other girl's cosmetics had begun to run and smear made it harder to read her expression. "And you made it through unmarked as well. How did you manage that?"

"I... managed to surprise the boy who had my sun token," Ling Qi admitted sheepishly. "He thought I was just a mortal." She plucked at the frayed cloth of her new clothing for emphasis. "It's how I got past the others circling the inner city gates too. No one pays attention to commoners," she added wryly.

Han Jian chuckled, and Gu Xiulan looked thoughtful.

"I had wondered why you changed into such dreary rags," the other girl said, looking Ling Qi up and down contemplatively. "I cannot say that I would employ such methods myself, but I can see the use in them."

"Of course you wouldn't," Han Jian interjected dryly. "You could never avoid the spotlight for that long."

Gu Xiulan pouted prettily at the taller boy, crossing her arms under her chest as she turned back to face him. "And what is wrong with that? No one should ever forget encountering me."

Ling Qi let out a small sigh. It was a little irritating that even with her make-up running and her clothing in disarray, Gu Xiulan was still so much more attractive than her. She didn't miss that Han Jian's gaze had flickered down, let alone the way Gu Xiulan drew attention from the other boys in the room.

... Not that she wanted that sort of attention. It was just annoying that some people had all the luck when it came to appearance, talent, and wealth.

"So, what happened with you two?" Ling Qi asked. "Why did you end up taking the lake path, Gu Xiulan?"

"Hm? I did not have much choice in the matter. I was forced to travel between a number of small islands," Gu Xiulan responded, turning her attention back to Ling Qi.

"That miserable excuse for a watercraft I was provided with capsized several times," she added darkly. "I do believe I hate the ocean. It is going to take ages to fix the damage done by the saltwater."

"Oh, have you managed to learn how to swim in the last couple years, Xiulan?" Han Jian asked, sounding amused. "I seem to remember..."

"Hold your tongue, you terrible man. What of you then? I suppose you managed to trip into a campfire?" Gu Xiulan said hastily, looking genuinely embarrassed. Ling Qi had a feeling that it was only because the one poking fun at Gu Xiulan was Han Jian. Anyone else would probably have gotten a less pleasant response.

Han Jian laughed, sheepishly rubbing his hand on the back of his neck. "Well, something like that. I got... entangled with a flame spirit while searching for my star token." His smile faded, and he seemed a bit distant.

Ling Qi was distracted then by the arrival of another disciple. It was a broad-shouldered boy with short-cropped golden hair and darkly tanned skin. By the time Elder Zhou greeted him he had left the entryway to join a sharp-featured girl with luxurious waist-length black hair and a disproportionately long sword sheathed in a blue scabbard on her shoulder.

“So, Ling Qi.” She blinked in surprise as Gu Xiulan turned to address her, pulling her from her observation of the other disciples. “I do believe we have earned ourselves some luxury. There is a hidden mineral spring on the mountain that my Elder Sister deigned to inform me of. Would you care to join me after this is all said and done? I am not the only one who looks like she could use a warm soak.”

Ling Qi stopped herself from frowning. She supposed she was still a bit muddy and damp, but the other girl’s little offers and gifts were starting to bother her. She didn’t know why Gu Xiulan was being so amiable.

“Maybe. Why?” She asked, almost wincing at how bluntly it came out.

Gu Xiulan gave her a slightly exasperated look. “It is hardly a good idea for a lady to bathe alone in such a setting. Who knows what might happen? Besides, it only makes sense for us to get to know one another better, does it not? Unless you intend for this to be the last time we work together.”

Ah, did Gu Xiulan just decide to be blunt right back? Ling Qi wasn’t really sure how to respond.

“Well, no. I - I think we made a good team.” Ling Qi hated the way she managed to stumble on her response. “I think I need to cultivate tonight, however... Maybe another day?”

Gu Xiulan pursed her lips but eventually nodded. “Very well. I suppose we all likely have some things to meditate on after today.” Thankfully, Gu Xiulan didn’t seem to be angry at Ling Qi’s refusal.

Ling Qi noticed Han Jian giving Gu Xiulan an unreadable look while the girl was focused on her, but when Gu Xiulan’s eyes shifted to him, his expression had relaxed back into a smile.

“Ling Qi probably has the right idea,” he added supportively before glancing toward the entrance.

"I hope Yu and Fang make it through as well, but I admit I'm worried that we'll have another test if too many people succeed."

Ling Qi frowned at the thought. She had hoped that maybe enough people would fail that a third test wouldn't be necessary. As if to mock that hope, the entrance formation flashed then, and another disciple entered.

This time, it was a short and rather effeminate boy with long, silky hair. Half of the upper part of his robe was missing, leaving his shoulder and part of his chest exposed. There were a series of wounds across his torso that made it look like he had been clawed by some huge beast.

Ling Qi frowned at the newcomer as he stumbled his way across the room... to Sun Liling. Huh. Ling Qi hadn't thought much of it, but the red-haired girl hadn't gone into the test alone. Sun Liling's dark expression lightened a tad when she saw the boy enter, and he smiled weakly at her. Ling Qi couldn't hear whatever was said between them, but it ended with the redhead cuffing him lightly on the back of the head and evidently ordering him to sit down and clean up.

She shook her head and turned her attention back to her own group.

"We'll make it through even if there's another test. I didn't go through all that for nothing," Ling Qi said with more conviction than she really felt.

"A good attitude to have," Gu Xiulan said absently, shifting closer to the fire. "Obviously, we aren't going to fail at this point," she added with a more genuine confidence.

The three of them continued to chat idly while Ling Qi sat down to rest her feet. She stayed quiet for the most part as disciples continued to trickle in. She didn't have context for a lot of the things her two teammates spoke of, but it was nice regardless. She almost felt like she actually belonged.

Ling Qi did manage to pick up a few things about her companions from context. Han Jian was an only child, but Gu Xiulan had a number of older sisters. Han Jian's father was a general, and the relation Gu Xiulan's family had to his was unclear but subordinate. Gu Xiulan's family were also apparently very, very wealthy.

Han Jian did his best to include her in the conversation when he could, which she was thankful for, but in the end there simply wasn't much for her to say. The room steadily filled up as the remaining time ticked away, and Han Fang finally emerged from the

formation some thirty minutes into the wait, making him... the seventeenth in if her count was correct. The tall boy looked significantly worse for wear with both sleeves reduced to tattered shreds and his muscular forearms looking as if they had been scoured bloody with sandpaper.

He came over to them without hesitation and sat down heavily, letting out a raspy sigh as he gave her a nod of acknowledgement. His presence didn't do much to change the conversation; Han Fang seemed content with Han Jian's initial congratulations and little else. She hadn't really noticed it before, but Gu Xiulan seemed almost dismissive of the large boy, offering him a polite greeting and then largely ignoring him. Ling Qi wasn't quite sure what to make of the attitude. It didn't seem malicious, but it was strange. Unfortunately, she didn't really have a polite way of asking about it so she let it go.. The rate of disciples finishing began to increase steadily after Han Fang's arrival though those who came in at this point were in rather poor condition.

By the time Elder Zhou clapped his hands together to draw everyone's attention, there were more than forty disciples in the room. Fan Yu was not among them.

"The second phase has now come to an end." Elder Zhou's voice overrode any lingering noise from the crowd of disciples, and those sitting down moved to stand at attention. "Through wit or strength, you have succeeded at the trials placed before you. I have no doubt that every one of you has gained something of value in this test. However, I have one final task for all of you. In the first test, I saw which of you could lead and how well you could function in groups of your own devising. In the second, with help from Elder Jiao, I saw what you could accomplish with your own power."

The gray-skinned man in the hideous robes smiled lazily in acknowledgment of Elder Zhou's words.

"In this final test, I will see how well you are able to cooperate with those who are not friends or allies. A soldier of the Empire must put aside personal grievances and rivalries when in service. This will be the final test." Elder Zhou scanned the room, meeting each disciple's gaze in turn.

"Now..."

"Mm. Hold on a moment, will you, Sect Brother Zhou?" Ling Qi blinked as the moment was broken by the other man speaking up. Elder Jiao pushed himself up from the wall, an amused expression on his face.

"Since I so graciously provided my expertise for your second test, I'd like to make a suggestion."

## Chapter 19 - Zhou's Trial 8

For just a fraction of an instant, Ling Qi was certain that she saw an expression of irritation cross the implacable Elder Zhou's face.

"... Yes, Sect Brother Jiao? As you will be providing the opposition for the coming exam, it would be rude to refuse your input. Could you not have done so earlier however?" There was a distinct note of exasperation in Elder Zhou's tone.

As Elder Jiao chuckled merrily, moving to stand next to Elder Zhou, Ling Qi frowned at the implication in Elder Zhou's words. They weren't going to have to fight an Elder, were they?

"No, not really. It only came up recently," Elder Jiao said, maintaining the same unconcerned demeanor despite the look Elder Zhou was leveling at him. "It's only a minor thing anyway. I simply suggest that you pass that one immediately instead of putting her through another test." Elder Jiao raised his hand as he spoke, pointing down into the crowd of disciples.

... Right at her.

Ling Qi blinked and swallowed nervously as she felt everyone in the room look at her. She very much wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. Gu Xiulan's expression was calculating, and Han Jian's surprise quickly faded into curiosity and contemplation. Even Han Fang was eyeing her with interest. Many of the other gazes were less friendly.

"Sect Brother Jiao," Elder Zhou spoke up after a short, uncomfortable silence. "I will not refuse you if you desire to select one of the disciples for your personal tutelage, but that does not seem to be your intention."

"You're as perceptive as always, Sect Brother," Elder Jiao said, folding his arms behind his back. "She's not quite ready for that. I suppose that depends on how well she manages to take advantage of the good fortune she encountered in my Hidden Soul's History Formation." Ling Qi's eyes widened as gazes on her grew greedy.

As she stared at Elder Jiao, she glimpsed something strange. It was only the briefest flicker, but she was sure she saw the face of the moon spirit, Xin, appear over Elder Jiao's shoulder, giving Ling Qi an apologetic look before shooting Elder Jiao an exasperated one.

Elder Zhou stared at his fellow Elder hard, having either not seen or not reacted to the image. A surreptitious glance around showed that no one else seemed to have seen Xin either. Elder Zhou turned his eyes back to her, and Ling Qi straightened her shoulders, swallowing nervously.

“... Ling Qi.” He actually knew her name, which was shocking in its own right. “This is unusual, but as poor as his sense of timing can be, Elder Jiao is one whose opinion I respect. I will leave it to you. You may participate normally in the third exam or pass on his word. Make your choice.”

Ling Qi felt that if she let her eyes grow any wider, they would roll out of her head. She should have been overjoyed to pass, but the feeling was drowned by the avaricious atmosphere that had come over the room. What was she going to do? Everyone would... Ling Qi felt a hand on her shoulder and glanced back to see Han Jian giving her an encouraging smile. To her left, she saw the huge shadow of Han Fang shifting to stand behind her as well. Even Gu Xiulan, for all that her gaze was cold and calculating, hadn't moved away from her.

Right... This... She would still be fine, but she had to make a choice. Taking the pass guaranteed her a position in Elder Zhou's class, which she would need to get ahead, but it would also raise the ire of disciples who might otherwise be willing to leave her alone. And even if he said he would respect the other Elder's words, would Elder Zhou really be impressed with someone who coasted by on a recommendation?

More than anything else, Ling Qi felt frustrated. That encounter had been the first real glimmer of good luck she had in years, and it was getting flung back in her face, causing her more problems. The resentment she felt for the loudly dressed elder up on the stage was difficult to keep off her face. After everything she had dealt with today, she absolutely didn't want to have to fend off other thieves during or after the test.

That was going to happen regardless now so she would accept the silver lining and take her pass. Rejecting a free victory would be an absurd and pointless show of pride.

Despite the anxiety she could feel at being the center of attention, she straightened her shoulders and back and bowed politely to Elder Zhou and Elder Jiao.

“Thank you very much for your recommendation, Elder Jiao. I humbly accept your offer, Elder Zhou.” Her voice sounded stiff and unnatural to her own ears, tight with ill-restrained nerves, but she managed to avoid making a fool of herself.



Her words brought more than a few discontented murmurs from her fellow disciples, but she saw no recriminations on the faces of her team... and for the moment, that was enough. Elder Zhou silenced the murmurs with a single stern glance before looking back at her, expression neutral.

“Very well. Come up to the stage. Elder Jiao will release you from the formation.”

Ling Qi let out a low breath but managed to keep her posture straight and unworried. She nodded politely to Han Jian and the others, murmuring a quiet wish for their good luck before proceeding up to the stage where the Elders stood. She saw plenty of resentment along with greed on the faces of the disciples around her, but to her surprise, it wasn't omnipresent. A few of her fellows seemed ambivalent or looked at her with interest and calculation instead.

The most obvious was the girl she had noticed earlier when the first disciple to arrive after Ling Qi had gone to her side. The immaculately dressed girl stared at her with furrowed brows, studying Ling Qi with uncomfortable intensity as if the girl was committing every detail of her face to memory. At least the girl's face was easy to remember as well, completely unadorned by the cosmetics the other obviously wealthy girls wore with thin lips and sharp features that made her more handsome than pretty.

As Ling Qi ascended the shallow stairs to stand beside Elder Zhou, she dipped her head respectfully to the older man. She resolved to work twice as hard as before to make sure she was ready when the truce came to an end. So focused was she, she almost startled when she heard the instructor's voice, pitched low so as not to carry down from the stage.

“Retreat is not always cowardice but can become it if relied on overmuch. Think hard on what stands to be lost before choosing to cede ground.” Ling Qi nodded rapidly, relief bleeding away some small part of the tension she felt. Elder Zhou didn't think she was a coward for taking the pass or resent her for the decision.

As she moved past Elder Zhou, Elder Jiao gestured for her to follow him and walked toward the far end of the stage. It made her nervous to follow someone who clearly didn't have her best interests at heart out of sight of everyone else, but there wasn't much choice.

“You chose wisely,” the amused elder commented as the two of them reached the rear wall where a single silver character was emblazoned on the stone. “Do try not to get trampled in the coming days. It will be ages before I hear the end of this as it is.”

Ling Qi kept her expression carefully neutral, but she had a feeling the Elder could detect the resentment she was doing her best to hide going by the merry twinkle in his color-shifting eyes.

“... Why?” she asked quietly, drawing on her last bit of courage.

The spindly man hummed thoughtfully to himself as he traced the character on the wall with his finger, leaving a dull glow in its wake.

“Because it amused me, girl,” he said lightly, shooting her a warning look. “And perhaps because you caused my companion the discomfort of being subsumed by her greater self, if only for a short time.”

Ling Qi frowned, not understanding what he was talking about. Did he mean the moon spirit? What did he mean by greater self?

“... I’m sorry?” she tried, not really feeling sorry at all. She could tell he was lying, which probably meant he wasn’t even trying.

Elder Jiao chuckled quietly as he finished tracing the character. The wall in front of her warped, becoming a doorway filled with shifting fog.

“Don’t worry yourself. I’m not the sort to hold a grudge.” He looked her way once more, the same infuriatingly lax expression on his pallid face. “Well, as long as you do not slack on your studies. I would be most offended if you manage to be merely average.”

Ling Qi set her lips in a thin line but nodded. The older man wasn’t going to give her any further answers. Elders were beyond her. Being angry at one was as pointless as raging at a thunderstorm and about ten times as likely to get her struck by lightning. All she could do now was to deal with the fallout.

As she stepped through the fog filling the gate, his voice reached her one last time.

“Oh, young lady. Neither those garments nor the silver in your pockets are real. I suggest you find a change of clothes before they fade away.” Her eyes widened. She tried to turn back, but it was too late.

Ling Qi found herself being quickly drawn forward as if an invisible rope had been fastened around her waist and pulled by a team of horses. Phantom wind roared in her ears, and she felt her eyes watering from the sensation of being pulled rapidly through

space, only to stumble as she came to a sudden stop. Her vision swam as she regained her balance.

Ling Qi stiffened immediately as she took in her surroundings. She was back at the site of the formation that they had begun the test at, with the sun sinking under the horizon. All around her were other disciples, presumably the ones who hadn't made it through the test. Thankfully, she didn't see anyone she had directly confronted.

However, she was once again the center of attention, and she was getting very tired of that indeed. She glanced back at the formation she had emerged from to find it still lit and active. Ling Qi hurried to step away, hoping she could merge with the crowd of failed students and observers, but even that was denied to her.

"You! Peasant girl. The third test has already begun. Did you see Xiulan? Was she well?" Ling Qi found herself confronted by Fan Yu, who had pushed through the crowd to approach her. One side of his face was swollen with bruises, and she could see more such wounds under the collar of his robe. He resembled those poor souls who managed to draw the ire of an entire gang and survive, beaten black and blue.

The way he referred to her was irritating, but she was too tired to argue with the lout. He did seem genuinely worried about Gu Xiulan. Maybe she could just answer quickly and move on.

"Gu Xiulan was fine. She wasn't wounded as far as I could tell. The others are still taking the test," she said while glancing over his shoulder, trying to find a path through the crowd that she could take.

"Han Jian and Han Fang were fine too, just a little banged up," she added as an afterthought.

The squat boy's shoulders sagged in what she thought was relief. It was hard to read the expression on his swollen face, but she thought that she saw some bitterness briefly flash in his eyes.

"That is... good. If she's fine then..." he muttered, seemingly to himself. As she began to try and edge around him, his eyes snapped back up.

"So what of you? Did it simply take a bit longer for them to fish you out of the second?"

Ugh. Why did he want to talk to her now? And to just assume she failed like he had when she had done the opposite and been one of the first to make it through... She could feel her already frayed temper slipping her control.

"No. I'm the first to pass the third," she found herself snapping. "Elder Jiao let me out of the formation early." She almost immediately regretted saying it as a few of the disciples nearby looked to her in surprise, and whispering began to quickly spread. Fan Yu looked poleaxed for a moment, but his expression quickly twisted into a sneer.

"What a ridiculous lie. A commoner like you who can barely fight being the first one to pass Instructor Zhou's test? The test that I failed?" His voice gradually rose, growing angrier with each word.

Ling Qi grimaced. She was done with this. No longer attempting to be subtle about it, she sidestepped Fan Yu and made to pass him without saying another word. It wasn't to be. Maybe it was her mental exhaustion or maybe she had just been too surprised by his action, but when he reached out and seized her wrist, she didn't avoid it.

"I did not say you could leave yet," the battered boy growled. "Apologize for lying to my face right now."

Ling Qi tried to pull herself free but found his grip on her wrist inescapable. Her struggling only caused him to tighten it. She could still get away, but it would involve hitting or tripping him up. Would that count as attacking another disciple?

"I'm not lying," she responded angrily. "Now let me go. That hurts, you oaf." Ling Qi knew she shouldn't insult him further, but her temper was up at this point.

"I won't just..." he began, expression darkening. Ling Qi prepared to do what she needed to in order to escape, but then the disciples around them, who had been watching their argument with interest, went pale and silent. Ling Qi's eyes met a pair of gleaming gold ones over Fan Yu's shoulder. Fan Yu went pale when a dainty white hand clamped down on his shoulder, quite painfully from the way he winced.

"Ling Qi has asked you to release her. Do so this instant," Bai Meizhen said frostily. "And think, the next time you choose to be so boorish."

Fan Yu let her go as if she were suddenly aflame, stumbling back and clutching his arm. Resentment stewed on his features. Bai Meizhen did not even look at him, stepping past with a swish of cloth to gesture for Ling Qi to follow.

"Shall we walk home then? I completed my meditation somewhat early so I thought that I would come observe your success," she said as Ling Qi quickly fell in beside her. Bai

Meizhen ignored the disciples clearing the path around them.

Ling Qi almost laughed, although she suspected the sound would have been closer to a sob. Just like that, she was safe to reach their home. It really was that easy when you were strong, wasn't it?

There was something different about Bai Meizhen now; she managed to seem even more casually ominous than before.

"Thanks," Ling Qi managed. "I guess your cultivation was a success?"

Bai Meizhen's eyes flicked up to meet hers before she nodded shallowly, returning her gaze to the path leading out of the formation plaza.

"Somewhat. I have broken through to the next stage of the Imperious Serpent art. Unfortunately, I have not yet reached the next level of cultivation. It seems something yet holds me back. What of you? I imagine the Elder's exam was not easy."

"It wasn't," Ling Qi admitted. "But... I think I did well, and I have many things to meditate on." Everything she had experienced recently swirled in her mind's eye. She really needed to get her thoughts in order. "I should thank you. Knowing how to beseech a water spirit properly really saved me in the second test."

Bai Meizhen raised one perfect eyebrow questioningly. "Is that so? Well, I am glad that some part of my words remained with you. I had worried that you were not truly listening at points."

Ling Qi flushed. She knew her attention had wandered a bit during some of those conversations, but she hadn't thought that Bai Meizhen had noticed.

"I was," she responded quickly. "So thank you... and not just for that."

The other girl simply nodded slightly. "It was a trifling thing. A man should know better than to lay hands on a lady outside of combat," Bai Meizhen responded with a dismissive gesture.

"I'm hardly a lady," Ling Qi responded wryly, rolling her shoulders only to wince as her damaged one twinged slightly.

Her housemate shook her head. "Nonsense. You walk the Way. You are as much a lady as any of those back there - if a somewhat crude one for the moment."

Now, Ling Qi really did laugh, drawing a questioning look from the girl beside her. "Sorry, I guess I'll just have to work on my manners then when I'm not cultivating." Was it really that simple in Bai Meizhen's view?

The two of them returned home in comfortable silence, and by the time Ling Qi retired to the meditation room, she felt much more settled. Finally, she would get to see what all this trouble had been for. Sitting down, she carefully withdrew the narrow jade slip from inside the moon-scented bottle and let her qi flow into it.

As the world around her faded, she found the meanings held within the tiny piece of jade impressing themselves on her mind. It still felt strange to her. She had only done this once before with the Zephyr's Breath art. However, if Zephyr's Breath had been a pamphlet filled with exercises and diagrams, this jade slip was a tome big enough to brain someone with.

She felt instinctively that only the the most basic surface understanding of its contents was open to her. There were depths of knowledge hidden far beyond her reach. Yet even what content she did have access to was enough to shock her. The slip contained not one art but three: a movement art; a cultivation art; and a combat art.

The movement art, Sable Crescent Step, exemplified elegance and subtlety, allowing the user to step through shadow and moonlight as a blur barely visible to mortal eyes. It required an open leg meridian to begin practicing and cultivated a 'darkness' element. Curious, Ling Qi pressed further, trying to understand this new concept. From the depths of the jade slip, words churned up to meet her questing thoughts.

*'Darkness has no form nor presence. Those who master it learn to cast these things aside and embrace the absence and silence of the empty night.'*

Even this idea felt incomplete, like seeing only a single facet of a gem. However, she put it aside for the moment. She still had two other arts to review.

The cultivation art, Eight Phase Ceremony, allowed the user to absorb the light of the moon and stars into their dantian. It granted great speed to cultivation performed at night and improved the cultivation of Yin-aspected arts. There was a deep well of further meaning there, but Ling Qi could not comprehend it. She understood then that her spirit and body were not yet ready for this art. As she was, stellar and lunar qi would only poison and sicken her.

The final art was Forgotten Vale Melody. It was part of the chronicle of a long dead

wanderer, composed into music and offered to the moon. It spoke of mist-covered valleys hidden deep in the mountains, the mischievous and hungry spirits that waited in the dark, and of the loneliness of the wanderer's path. It brought to mind images of wild, untouched places where spirits roamed free in the damp mist under the light of the moon. The art worked to obscure and confuse the senses of those who could hear the melody. It required the opening of both heart and lung meridians to channel the darkness and water-natured qi the technique required.

The last bit of information she was able to extract from the slip was the use of the pills. Each of the Sable Light pills would not only greatly increase her ability to open new meridians or cultivate Yin-aligned arts, but it would simultaneously expand her qi pool. It was a little overwhelming. Was this what it was like for wealthier cultivators? Why someone like Bai Meizhen was so far beyond her?

She put that thought aside for the moment and returned the slip to its bottle. Right now, she needed to meditate on what had happened to her during the test.

By the time she opened her eyes, it was late at night, and Ling Qi felt refreshed. She was still worried and still nervous, but... she would survive, just as she always had before. The bundle of clothing and coin she had acquired had all vanished. The only things that remained from the test were the staff, the moon spirit's gifts, the things she had taken from the boy, and strangely, the tokens.

Ling Qi gathered it all up and stood to go to bed. She had passed her first obstacle, but things were still just beginning.

# Chapter 20 - Foundations 1

Ling Qi awoke to a faint fluttering sound and the feeling of something slapping against her face. Letting out a surprised yelp, she thrashed in her bed, bolting upright. Her right hand was already on the hilt of the knife she had slipped under her bedding. Then, the thin sheet of paper that had covered her face fell away, leaving her blinking and confused in the faint pre-dawn light filtering in through the tiny window of her room.

Yawning groggily, Ling Qi plucked the page from her lap and squinted down at the words written there. It first informed her that Elder Zhou's lessons would begin in one hour's time. Second, it said that Elder Su's lessons would be moved to the afternoons so that lesson times would no longer conflict.

Grumbling, Ling Qi sleepily climbed out of bed and began to prepare for the day. She had gone through too much trouble to be late for her first day. The first thing she did was check her shoulder, discarding the bandages when she found that only a thin white scar remained of the wound. Nothing was left of her more minor injuries.

Slipping outside, Ling Qi supposed that the one benefit of being up so early was the small number of her fellow disciples who were out and about. It allowed her to quietly leave the residential area without any unfortunate encounters. All the same, every small sound and flickering shadow was making her second-guess herself.

Arriving at the training field, Ling Qi spied her much reduced class, now numbering just over twenty. Han Jian, his cousin, and Gu Xiulan were all present, as were Sun Liling and the boy who had approached the red-haired girl after the second test. Of the others, the only ones she recognized were the long-haired girl who had stared her down during her walk to the stage, the girl's looming male companion, and the scarred boy. She could also feel the unfriendly looks of at least a half-dozen others.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, given the atmosphere, she had no time to greet her... friends - if they could still be called that after her encounter with Fan Yu. After her arrival with the last few stragglers, Elder Zhou barked out an order to follow him as he turned and began to run.

What followed was the single most grueling half hour of running Ling Qi had experienced yet. Elder Zhou lead them on a run at a punishing pace even as the narrow road carved into the side of the mountain grew steeper and colder until her breath was coming out in puffs of steam. Straining to keep up, she used the sight of Gu Xiulan's back to motivate herself to not slow down. As the exercise went on, she was gratified to



see that she was neither the only one struggling nor at the rear of the pack, managing to stay near the middle of the group until the very end.

The run ended in the middle of a wide, grassy field, strewn with pale blue flowers that she didn't recognize. When Elder Zhou finally stopped and called for a halt, she nearly stumbled but managed to stay upright. She wasn't the only one gasping for breath or swaying on her feet, and even Han Jian and Gu Xiulan were red-faced and breathing heavily.

"With this, the days warm up run is complete!" Elder Zhou announced, looking as if he had not exerted himself in the slightest.

"It is now time for me to speak to you of my expectations and the differences that will exist between this class and the lesser one for those who failed the third test."

Ling Qi frowned. Those who failed the third were still receiving lessons of some kind? That was... remarkably generous. She doubted Elder Zhou was teaching them though.

"These lessons will not be easy. I will not coddle you as I have done in the last month." That was ominous. "You will report to the field at the same time every day until the end of the course. I will not tolerate tardiness. If you fail to arrive for the lesson without clearing the matter with me, do not bother coming back.

"However," he added, his stern gaze scanning over the recovering disciples, "you have earned the right to further resources to aid your training in addition to my teachings."

Ling Qi blinked as Elder Zhou made a sweeping motion with his left hand. An entire table laid out with cups filled with steaming black liquid appeared on the grass in front of him, settling in with barely a clink or a ripple. How...?

She squinted then noticed a pale gray ring on the Elder's finger. Han Jian had mentioned something about dimensional rings before, but she had not fully considered the breadth of their utility. Ling Qi eyed the piece of jewelry with fascination and greed. The things she could do with something like that...

"This is Bear Marrow Elixir," Instructor Zhou continued, unaware of Ling Qi's longing thoughts. "Each of you will be granted one cup each morning after the warm up run. It will fortify your body for the trials ahead and enhance your cultivation of qi to build the foundation necessary to break through to higher ranks. Be thankful to our Medicine Department for their kindness!"

“Sun Liling, Cai Renxiang, Kang Zihao.” He announced three names, raising a finger to point at each disciple in turn. The first Ling Qi obviously recognized. The second was the girl with the intense eyes from before. The third was a boy of middling height with a proud bearing, handsome features, and shoulder length dark brown hair.

“A higher ranked elixir, more appropriate to your cultivation, has been prepared for you three. Come forward first.”

She supposed that she now knew who was at the top of the class. Lining up with the rest, Ling Qi came to be thankful that she had not been at the front. Even with the disgust of her fellow disciples as a warning, she was barely able to restrain herself from gagging as she chugged down the viscous, incredibly bitter liquid.

She could not complain at the effect. Her fatigue vanished within seconds, and she felt her body burning with energy. Her muscles quivered as if in anticipation of being used.

The lesson that followed was much more in-depth than what Instructor Zhou had provided before. Many of the exercises were the same, but he now combined them with more detailed and interactive explanations and corrections on how to control and diffuse one’s qi to strengthen the bones and tissues. It was more in line with Elder Su’s educational lectures than the taciturn Instructor Zhou’s previous lessons.

The exercises themselves took on a more martial bent. In the latter half of the lesson, the group was divided in two. Ling Qi found herself among a group comprised of roughly one third of the class, none of whom she recognized. It became clear why they had been separated from the others when Elder Zhou began their instruction.

While the other students were paired off for sparring, their teacher began to harshly drill Ling Qi and the others in basic unarmed combat techniques. Again and again, Ling Qi was put through her paces, learning simple blocks, footwork, and other foundational exercises.

When the lesson finally wound down hours later, Ling Qi felt wrung out physically and mentally. The constant exertion and the focus required to keep her qi circulating and diffusing during those exercises was tiring, but she didn’t allow her exhaustion to distract her from her goals.

Knowing that she had made a mistake the previous day with Fan Yu, Ling Qi knew she had to approach the others and offer an explanation. She would have to hope that she had not burned this bridge; she had so few people willing to consider taking her side as

it was. So as the other disciples sat down in the field to rest and meditate, she hurried over to where the three Golden Fields disciples stood.

“Han Jian, Gu Xiulan, Han Fang,” she greeted them as she approached, doing her best to sound cheerful, despite her tiredness and the worry stewing in her gut. “I’m glad all of you made it through.”

Han Jian smiled at her, but she thought it looked just a bit strained. “It wasn’t easy, but yeah, we made it.” He scratched the back of his head. “I don’t blame you for not waiting for us. I heard things were a little hectic outside.”

“Yes, I did hear about a bit of a scene,” Gu Xiulan drawled, studying Ling Qi.

“I am sorry for my fiance’s temper. His failure was not easy on him,” she continued apologetically, although the words didn’t sound genuine. “Luckily, things were broken up before they got too far. I admit, I was surprised when I heard what had happened.”

Han Fang’s response was simply to shoot Ling Qi a concerned look before continuing to idly scan the rest of the field. Ling Qi was glad that she had been given a chance to explain herself even if some part of her had foolishly hoped the issue would be dismissed.

“Yes. I... guess I lost my temper too.” She didn’t like admitting any fault for the situation. “Is he alright?” she asked carefully. While she had only seen him go pale and silent, it couldn’t hurt to ask.

Han Jian grimaced, looking distinctly uncomfortable, and even Han Fang looked briefly troubled. It was Gu Xiulan who answered though.

“His right arm was still useless when we emerged.” She sounded somber when she spoke, but Ling Qi was sure she saw a flicker of some other emotion in the other girl’s eyes.

“I didn’t know you were an ally of the Bai family,” she added in a lighter tone. “Do you know if he will recover? I’m afraid that after we saw him and confirmed your story, he stormed off somewhere. I have not seen him since.”

Ling Qi felt her eyes widen even as she tried to mask her reaction.

“I - Ah - We’re just housemates and... kind of friends? She didn’t mention doing anything. I thought that he had just frozen up like everyone else usually does around

her.” Ling Qi responded in a rush. Had Bai Meizhen actually crippled someone for laying hands on her? She wasn’t sure if she should feel horrified at that or not.

Things were quiet between them as the group digested that until Han Jian spoke up.

“I... think he should recover fine. The Bai family’s toxin arts are very precise in their effects. I doubt she would openly break the Elders’ truce. “I’ve met members of her clan once or twice. They aren’t really the type to do something excessive out of passion.” There was a hint of doubt in his voice. Ling Qi wasn’t exactly sure what he was doubting though.

“Father did entertain Bai Suzhen during the last great expedition into the Solar Wastes,” Gu Xiulan mused, studying Ling Qi with a hooded gaze.

“It was quite an extravagant event, but that woman was the picture of control and moderation,” she continued thoughtfully. “I am certain it is nothing serious. I will have to console my poor Yu whenever he rejoins us.”

Ling Qi caught Han Fang glancing at the other girl with a hint of disapproval as she dismissed the possibility of her fiancé’s injury, but it was gone so fast she couldn’t be sure if she had imagined it. Ugh. She really didn’t know what to make of this group’s internal politics.

“I will apologize to him the next time we meet.” Despite the awkwardness, Ling Qi forced herself to press forward. She needed all the allies she could get. “In any case, I was wondering if your invitation was still open, Gu Xiulan? This first day was pretty difficult so I thought...” Ling Qi cursed the way she had bumbled awkwardly through that sentence.

The other girl’s eyes brightened and she smiled, seeming genuinely pleased. “Oh? I admit I had been a bit disappointed when you refused before. I have not had a chance to relax and chat with another girl since I came here. It’s so difficult, you know, keeping these three focused and civilized.” Her tone was light and teasing as she gestured at Han Jian and his cousin.

“Is that so?” Ling Qi responded with well-masked doubt. She found the idea that Gu Xiulan didn’t already have other friends among the female disciples... unlikely.

“I thought it might be fun myself,” she added, not quite lying through her teeth. She was still too suspicious of the other girl’s motives to really consider letting her guard down

around her. "I haven't really done anything relaxing since I got here." Unless one counted playing her flute at night.

"Well, you girls try to have some fun then," Han Jian said. "I guess Fang and I will finally have a chance to get up to some proper manly things since you won't be tagging along, Xiulan." Ling Qi really wished she was better at reading people. He had seemed annoyed before, but now, he was friendly and playful again. "What do you say, cousin? Want to go find a few bears to wrestle?"

Han Fang shot Han Jian a bemused look and shook his head, gesturing up toward the mountain peak, before following it up with some odd gestures.

"I guess climbing up there would be a pain. Doing some grilling does sound like a better idea," Han Jian responded cheerfully, clearly understanding what the other boy 'said'.

"Really. Just try not to get into any trouble, you two," Gu Xiulan said with a theatrical sigh. "And do not follow us. Lechery will be punished with execution," she added with a queenly air.

It really did make Ling Qi feel like even more of an outsider when Han Jian brushed off the 'threat' with rolled eyes and a laugh. As much as she liked to think they were allies and Han Jian a friend, she still didn't really understand them.

Gu Xiulan glanced at her then and smiled, gesturing for her to follow along as Han Jian and Han Fang set off back toward the residential area.

"You really are too tense, you know," she commented lightly once they had set foot on one of the paths leading further up the mountain. "You are going to give yourself wrinkles that even cultivation won't fix."

"I think I have a good reason to be on edge," Ling Qi pointed out peevishly. "Given how things have been going."

"Perhaps so," Gu Xiulan allowed. "But a lady should do her best to smile and be charming. It is one of our most valuable tools."

"Well, maybe for you. Not all of us have the talents for that kind of thing." She knew perfectly well where she stood in that regard. She was not going to start messing about with 'charm' now.

Gu Xiulan arched an eyebrow at her. "Talent is but one part of the result. A little work can go quite a long way. I still believe you may wish to relax. Things are likely not as bad as they seem."

"How do you figure?" Ling Qi responded dubiously as the two of them rounded a corner and passed by a pair of male disciples. She could feel their greedy, calculating gazes on her back as they left them behind.

"Half the mountain is going to be looking to stab me in the back," she added dejectedly. She still half expected Gu Xiulan to be one of them.

The other girl pursed her lips as she took them down a weedy side path.

"You are not exactly alone. Bai Meizhen is a powerful ally. I am hardly someone to be ignored either." She gave Ling Qi a look of playful reproach.

It was Ling Qi's turn to fall silent while studying the other girl intently. She didn't understand her.

"Why would you side with me? I humiliated your fiancé, nobody else seems to like Meizhen, and it would just get you a lot of enemies. And don't tell me you aren't interested in what Elder Jiao said."

"Less than you might think," Gu Xiulan responded with a haughty sniff. "Besides, Jian is hardly the type to approve of betrayal." That sounded more believable to Ling Qi.

"That doesn't answer the rest," Ling Qi replied.

"Fan Yu is... headstrong and prone to fits of temper," Gu Xiulan began carefully. "But he values the opinions of Han Jian and I. He can be brought to see reason. After all, it was merely a small matter of two tempers getting the better of their owners, was it not?"

Ling Qi didn't quite believe that, but she gave a grudging nod anyway.

"As for the rest... I think you have the potential to complement me quite well, and I do feel a certain excitement at the idea of being in the center of the little storm that our esteemed Elder has kicked up."

Gu Xiulan flashed that same vicious, predatory expression she had right before she immolated the girl who had flung ice shards at them. Strangely, Ling Qi found that frightening expression relieving. It seemed more honest than any of the girl's other

faces.

Conversation quieted down as Gu Xiulan lead her on a circuitous path that passed through a small wood full of brambles and undergrowth. They soon arrived at a narrow crack in the mountainside from which the bubbling sounds of a spring issued.

Actually soaking in the spring with the other girl was a mixed experience. With no obstructions, it was even clearer how much Gu Xiulan exceeded Ling Qi in the realms of femininity. At the same time, the other girl seemed content to just chat with her about nothing of any particular relevance.

The warm water tingled nicely on her skin, sapping away her fatigue and fortifying her qi. Gu Xiulan seemed content to carry the conversation with only minimal input from her, going from minor gripes about their male teammates to prodding her about things she hadn't thought of in years like hair care and the sort of cut and colors she liked in her clothes.

It was a little disheartening not to have much in the way of answers, but it was nice even if she had a sinking feeling that she wouldn't be able to avoid Gu Xiulan sitting her down to style her hair 'properly' if she continued going out with her. Gu Xiulan seemed like a pushy girl.

She could put up with that if it meant having another ally on this mountain.

## Chapter 21 - Foundations 2

The days that followed were a blur of training and cultivation, and for the first time, Ling Qi had some room to experiment with her resources. Lessons with Elder Su had indicated that a cultivator could begin using more than one spirit stone at a time as they advanced through the stages. Each stone added after the first up to the number equivalent to one's stage gave a more potent boost to the user's cultivation.

Although the increased flow of energy was uncomfortable at first, Ling Qi found herself acclimating quickly. She was careful to follow the Elder's instruction and was cautious with the intake lest she rupture and damage her single channel or dantian. At only the Mid Red Soul stage, two Spirit Stones remained her limit.

Her mornings were consumed by Elder Zhou's instruction and her evenings by Elder Su's class. This left her only a few hours of the afternoon and the length of the night to herself, forcing her to put off her planned exploration with Li Suyin and Su Ling until she could adjust to her new schedule.

In those days of adjustment, Elder Su made her first announcement of those who had won her reward pill for the week before. Ling Qi was not among them. The award went to the boy with the burn scar on his face from the first day, Cai Renxiang, the girl who had stared at her during Elder Zhou's test, and a tall, whip-thin boy with silver hair and a slightly unsettling mien.

Ling Qi did not allow her failure to bother her too much. She was confident that she would be able to earn Elder Su's reward once she began using the pills given to her by the moon spirit, Xin.

The trouble was that unlike her other lesson, she had the unwelcome attention of many of her fellow disciples. It made sense in a way. Those who had made it into Elder Zhou's class had less need to be greedy since they had already gained quite an advantage. Everyone else? Well, she wasn't surprised that she had come under scrutiny.

It didn't make it any less irritating when she found herself swatting away the third amateurish attempt at filching her belt pouch. She didn't even have the jade slip or pills stored in it anymore, having hastily stitched a pocket into the underlayer of her gown using the scraps of her ruined one. It was still frustrating.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Ling Qi snapped at the boy who had 'accidentally' bumped into her while they were leaving Elder Su's classroom.



The boy flushed in shame at being called out but quickly rallied and sneered at her.

“Do not flatter yourself, peasant. A servant should be more polite,” he huffed, sweeping past her into the hall.

Ling Qi clenched her hands before she did something unfortunate, like slapping the pride out of his obnoxious face. It seemed that was her reputation now. The snake’s maid. Of course she only had any success because she was playing handmaiden to Bai Meizhen. How that worked when Bai Meizhen hadn’t even been involved in Elder Zhou’s exam was beyond her, and frankly, she didn’t really care about whatever stupid logic they were using. She was going to surpass these petty idiots.

Going by the worried look Li Suyin gave her, she must have looked to be in a foul mood when she met the other girl at the gates.

“Um - Congratulations on entering Elder Zhou’s advanced class.” Li Suyin sounded nervous as if her words might irritate Ling Qi. “I am sorry for not saying it earlier. You have just been so busy...”

On the contrary, after dealing with the implied deprecations and exhausting lessons over the past few days, Ling Qi was pleased to hear something positive.

“Thank you,” she responded quietly as they set off down the path toward the residences to meet up with Su Ling.

“Has anyone been giving you trouble since then?” It wasn’t something Ling Qi would have thought to ask before the test, but the words of the spider’s illusions were stuck in her ear like an irritating melody. She could easily see someone like Li Suyin being bullied for associating with her. The girl was probably the easiest target outside of herself.

Li Suyin shook her head, and Ling Qi didn’t think she was being insincere. “No, not really. I mean... It’s not as if most of the other girls were very friendly to begin with, b-but nothing important. May I ask why so many people seem upset with you?”

Ling Qi noticed that the other girl was practically jogging to keep up with her longer strides, but she couldn’t bring herself to slow down. She didn’t ever really feel safe or relaxed except when Bai Meizhen was home or when she was in a lesson.

"I had a bit of good luck, and Elder Jiao decided to announce it to everyone. I figure they're also embarrassed to have lost to a commoner."

"O-oh, I see," Li Suyin said, growing a little red-faced from the effort of keeping up with the taller girl. "Um... Mother said that Father had to deal with some resentment for his lower status when he entered the ministry as well... It got better with time."

Ling Qi appreciated the sentiment and nodded in acknowledgement. They fell into comfortable silence as they approached the residential area.

"I actually wanted to ask you for something," Li Suyin broke the silence as they turned down the street her hovel sat on. At this time of day, there were few people around, but she sounded nervous.

"I know it is presumptuous, but... Wilyoupleaseinstructmeinphysicalcultivation!"

Ling Qi blinked as the other girl halted in front of her and bowed her head, words coming out in a near unintelligible rush.

"I'm not exactly a teacher," Ling Qi responded dubiously after she had deciphered the other girl's request.

"N-not for free!" Li Suyin hurried to add. Ling Qi could tell that the other girl was flustered from the way the usually polite girl had interrupted her.

"I-I acquired these pills from a production disciple." Li Suyin said, rummaged in her bag, removing a small clay bottle and offering it to Ling Qi. "It's only a small thing, but the pills are supposed to aid students in cultivating the Argent Soul..."

Ling Qi took the bottle in bewilderment. She plucked the cork out, and sure enough, there were four shiny silver pills gleaming like droplets of metal inside.

"How did you even pay for these?" she asked somewhat incredulously, glancing around to ensure no one was nearby.

"I sold a few copies of the treatises on herbal lore that father bought for me," Li Suyin responded self-consciously. "I am not a real scribe, but, um, I suppose the other disciples found my paltry copies sufficient? I was a little surprised. I do not even have the resources to bind them properly, let alone..."

Ling Qi shook her head, feeling self-conscious herself. This was where a better person would probably try to hand back the gift and to tell their friend that she didn't need to

pay them just to get a few pointers... Ling Qi quietly tucked the pill bottle into her sleeve instead.

"It's fine. I can try to teach you a little. Just keep in mind that I'm not really a teacher." Ling Qi glanced away from the other girl.

"And raise your head, will you?"

Li Suyin straightened up immediately, smiling with relief. "Of course! Thank you so much, Ling Qi!"

"Sure. Let's find Su Ling though. We don't want to be out all night," Ling Qi replied uncomfortably. Li Suyin's earnest gratitude gave her an odd feeling.

Ling Qi caught motion out of the corner of her eye and looked up in time to see Su Ling approaching.

"Then you're probably gonna be disappointed." The bushy-haired girl stalked toward them, irritation clear in her demeanor. "We've got a long hike ahead if you wanna do this."

Ling Qi sighed. It looked like she would be burning qi to replace her sleep tonight. There was little more to say as the three of them set out. The trip up the mountain left Li Suyin huffing for breath, and neither Ling Qi nor Su Ling were inclined toward unnecessary speech.

The physical cultivation and training Ling Qi had gone through since her arrival at the Sect paid dividends here. The difficult hike barely winded her, and she found herself able to scramble up even sheer rock faces with little trouble. It made her smile.

Li Suyin was another matter. As much as she was coming to like the girl, Li Suyin was not very athletic, and her performance showed how much she really needed the lessons she had asked for. They were slowed greatly by having to help the blue haired girl keep up.

Eventually, the three of them reached their destination, a thickly forested plateau halfway up the mountain. They paused at the edge of the plateau, mostly to let Li Suyin catch her breath. In the awkward silence that followed, Ling Qi voiced a question that she had been mulling over as she climbed the mountain beside Su Ling.

"So... Why did you decide to go so far out of your way instead of just attending the lessons with everyone else?" Ling Qi asked, crossing her arms to tuck her hands into her armpits. It was chilly up here.

Su Ling shot Ling Qi a sour look over her shoulder as she peered deeper into the woods. "Because I don't want the attention, and I don't want the crowds. Besides, my cultivation is different."

Ling Qi frowned as she kept a wary eye on the trees beyond the frost-coated meadow.

"My roommate is.... different too," she said haltingly, glancing at the girl's bushy tail. "She still goes to the lessons occasionally. What's the difference?"

Su Ling snorted incredulously even as Li Suyin looked uncomfortable.

"Snake girl?" Su Ling said. "She exists 'cause some ancient cultivator decided he'd rather stick it in a snake instead of marrying a human and got his descendants to do it too."

"Me? I exist 'cause a hungry fox decided to play with her food. At least people are too afraid of the snake's family and power to try shit with her. I don't have that advantage."

That was... explicit. Li Suyin chose that moment to speak up in a halting voice.

"W - well, it's true that there's some stigma against spirit born individuals, but I don't think it's quite as bad as you say - at least among cultivators." It was difficult to tell how much of Li Suyin's stuttering was from hesitance and how much was from her teeth chattering.

"But... um, I don't mind sharing my notes with you. If you'd like."

Su Ling shot the blue-haired girl an unreadable look and mumbled something unintelligible before turning away.

"Let's get moving," she grunted, heading toward the woods.

"What?" Li Suyin asked, hurrying to follow. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you!"

Su Ling's shoulders stiffened, her agitation clear.

"I said I can't read. So just drop it," she said harshly. "We're here anyway." Su Ling gestured toward a pair of tall evergreen trees that had grown together high above their heads, forming a 'natural' arch. "If we pass through here, we'll access a pocket of woods with a bunch of spirit beasts. There's a few stronger ones as we go deeper in, but if we stick to the outskirts, the worst we should run into is some territorial Azure

Hawks.”

Ling Qi glanced at Suyin, trying to silently convey to Li Suyin that she should drop the other line of inquiry for now. Li Suyin seemed to take the hint and nodded, but she seemed sad.

“Well... I can feel veins of qi flowing from these two trees so if we follow them, we might find something.”

Trudging through the forest with only the light of the mostly full moon was a tense experience. Though the whispers Ling Qi had expected were absent, the darkness felt like it could be hiding any number of dangers. She glimpsed eyes in the underbrush and pale shapes fluttering among the canopy, their soft cries echoing in the dark.

Ling Qi and Su Ling kept Li Suyin between them, and their presence seemed enough to deter any hostility. Hours passed in their search.

Ling Qi had just begun to wonder if they should start heading back when Li Suyin stopped, her head turning toward a hill rising to their right.

“Ah! There is something there!”

“You’re sure?” Ling Qi asked, fingering her knives and keeping her eyes on the shadows around them.

“Yes, the mountain’s qi is much closer to the surface here.” Li Suyin replied.

“Better not be another false alarm,” Su Ling grumbled. She followed the blue-haired girl without any resistance though.

Searching around the perimeter of the hill, they soon found a root-choked crevice in one side, just barely wide enough for them to shimmy through. The sound of bubbling water reached them as the passage opened up, revealing a softly lit chamber under the earth.

“Looks like you were right, Li Suyin,” Ling Qi breathed as she observed the clear spring bubbling in the center of the chamber. The water glittered with the light of the dull crystal growths emerging from its banks. She could feel the potent qi in the air and earth. Standing this close, it tingled on her skin.

“Guess this was worth it after all,” Su Ling added grudgingly. “Woulda never found this place on my own. Couldn’t scent a bit of this till I was already inside.”

Despite their success, Li Suyin was frowning.

“Yes, this is definitely a locus, but...”

“Something wrong?” Ling Qi asked warily, peering around. “Was there a spirit here?”

“No, it’s just... I can definitely sense a connection to a more potent site. It’s ... somewhere in the deeper forest,” Li Suyin replied.

Ling Qi and Su Ling shared a look.

“I think this is enough for tonight,” Ling Qi said gently. “We can come back another day, right?” She should probably give Li Suyin the physical cultivation lessons before they did.

It was another goal to work toward.

## Chapter 22 - Foundations 3

Perhaps it was the influence of the qi locus they had found, or the burning of medicinal energy in her dantian from the pills and notes Li Suyin had gifted her, or simply her determination to succeed, but Ling Qi found the cultivation of the third stage of the Argent Soul Art coming to her easily.

In the third stage, Ling Qi had to compress the qi she cultivated, carefully pressing it against the surface of her dantian until it began to congeal into a flexible layer reinforcing her dantian against rupture and damage. This thick qi could then be drawn away in strands and woven into muscle and bone, further fortifying her body.

Ling Qi spent her afternoons between lessons on this process, gradually accumulating the Argent Qi in more potent quantities as she mastered the third stage.

In the evenings, Ling Qi tutored Li Suyin in physical cultivation. Li Suyin's own efforts had taken her close to a breakthrough. Once she had grasped Elder Zhou's initial lessons as relayed by Ling Qi, Li Suyin reached the first level of the Gold Physique.

Elder Su's lessons continued to be trying due to Ling Qi's other classmates, but they were fruitful as well. The Elder was beginning to delve into more complex aspects of qi, which included something that had confused Ling Qi. Namely, she got an explanation for what a 'Yin Aspected' art was. Despite there being dozens of qi types beyond the basic elements of earth, wind, water, fire, mountain, lake, thunder, and sky, all arts fell into one of three categories.

Yin, Yang, and Balanced.

As the basis for everything which existed, the study of these concepts was a deep and complex subject, and even Elder Su's lessons were only a beginner's primer. Yin was reactive, passive, or absorbent and was more used in internal and support arts. Yang was active, aggressive, or impenetrable and was more used in the 'flashy' external arts typically associated with immortals.

There were many details and many exceptions due to the sheer number of arts and the unconventional ways in which qi could be expressed. Ultimately, the most important thing was that Elder Su taught them how to feel the difference between Yin qi and Yang qi.

Argent Soul, the Sect-given cultivation art, was an example of the third option, Balanced. Balanced was neutral with Yin and Yang equally present.

Her other arts were exclusively yin. That wasn't particularly surprising for the moon arts she had gained - given the moon's traditional association with yin - but she had been unsure about Zephyr's Breath.

Ling Qi thought she had caught Elder Su eyeing her and Li Suyin speculatively once or twice over the course of the week. She had a good feeling about placing in the top five for the prize. She needed to keep striving for excellence. Despite how busy she was, Ling Qi had not forgotten the other task which she had set for herself in the lead up to Elder Zhou's test. She was more determined than ever to find a way to give back to Bai Meizhen.

One cold and windy evening when their schedules had coincided in both of them being home, she found her opportunity to ask.

"Are you sure you don't want any?" Ling Qi asked as she loaded her plate with the meal - extravagant for her - she had cooked. A few months ago, the idea of roasting an entire chicken for herself would have been ridiculous. Even if she had managed to steal and strangle one of the vicious, feathery little monsters, she certainly wouldn't have eaten the whole thing. Now, she found that even if she didn't eat often, when she did, she tended to be voracious.

Bai Meizhen eyed the well-cooked poultry on Ling Qi's plate with ill-concealed disgust from across the fire. It was a little insulting. Ling Qi didn't think her cooking was that bad, especially since she had access to decent seasoning.

"I am sure. Thank you," the pale girl responded politely, belying her expression.

"Alright." Ling Qi wasn't going to push, even if it was a bit depressing that she couldn't even give the other girl back something as simple as a meal.

"So... About those two from my physical cultivation lessons...?"

They had already spoken earlier on Fan Yu's... injury. While the poison Bai Meizhen had inflicted would permanently cripple a mortal, someone with qi could apparently clear the paralysis after a time spent circulating their energy and meditating. The other girl had seemed baffled at the implication that even that might have been excessive.

"Kang Zihao, I have not personally heard of," Bai Meizhen said, nursing a cup of tea as she usually did, Cui coiled loosely around her neck like a jade choker. "The Kang family



is prominent in the capital and well favored by the Imperial court. I believe Kang Guanzhi is the current head of the Palace Guard, although that is a position with a high rate of turnover. I'm afraid I could not say if he is one of the man's younger sons or merely a cousin however. As for Cai Renxiang, I am somewhat shocked that you do not know of her." Going by Bai Meizhen's raised eyebrows and stern expression, Ling Qi felt like she was being scolded for ignorance again.

"Why would I know of her?" Ling Qi asked defensively after she finished swallowing her current mouthful of food.

"One should at least maintain basic civic awareness," Bai Meizhen responded with disappointment. "Really, if this is the state of education in these southern cities..." Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably, suddenly reminded that she had never really clarified exactly how low her birth was.

"Cai Renxiang is the daughter and heiress to the Duchess of this province," Bai Meizhen said. "The Cai family is very new, of course, at a mere three generations from their first cultivator, but Cai Shenhua is the youngest White cultivator in the Empire. It is not surprising that the Cai seized the governorship of a province."

Ling Qi really hoped that the girl's interest in her wasn't malicious then. "Er... I think I can guess, but what exactly does being a 'White' cultivator denote?"

Bai Meizhen sighed.

"It is the eighth and highest realm of spiritual cultivation one can achieve in the mortal plane. To go beyond it or the physical equivalent is to become a great spirit. There are typically around ten such cultivators in the Empire at any given time."

Ling Qi had thought it was something like that, but the idea still boggled her mind. A person could become a great spirit? "Has that ever actually happened before?"

"Of course. In fact, the last ascension was quite recent. The previous Emperor ascended to become an aspect of Death and is now the Great Spirit Inexorable Justice." Bai Meizhen's tone was grudgingly respectful even as she spoke of something absurd.

Things like that were way too far beyond Ling Qi for her to worry about. She needed to bring the conversation back to the real reason she wanted to speak with her housemate

“Right. That’s... Thank you for the lesson. Putting that aside, if you don’t mind, I wanted to ask you about something else.”

Bai Meizhen nodded, seemingly content with the change in subject, although she wrinkled her nose as Ling Qi continued eating.

“Go ahead. Is there someone else you feel concerned over? I noticed that you seem to have stirred up the rabble of lesser nobles somehow.”

“Nothing like that,” Ling Qi responded.

“Actually... I talked with Cui a couple weeks ago because I wanted to do something for you since you’ve been helping me so much, you know?” The little serpent flicked her tongue at Ling Qi as she awkwardly stumbled through her statement.

Bai Meizhen glanced down at her companion, who flicked her tongue a few more times and twisted her head to the side.

“That is unnecessary, but I suppose I thank you all the same. I am somewhat surprised that you managed to speak with Cui. She is impatient and lazy after all.” Ling Qi didn’t think she had ever seen a snake manage to look affronted before.

“I really do want to do something,” Ling Qi responded quietly. “Cui mentioned that you had your eye on a talisman? A jade dragon pendant some girl was wearing? I can get it for you if you want. I’m sure it wouldn’t be too hard.”

Bai Meizhen blinked, then blinked again, apparently trying to remember the girl in question. This didn’t do much for Ling Qi’s confidence that Bai Meizhen actually wanted the talisman.

Then, something strange happened. Bai Meizhen’s golden eyes widened, and she... blushed? Her unnaturally pale cheeks went pink, and she glared down at Cui.

“T-that won’t be necessary. Cui was simply exaggerating a passing interest.” The last words came out almost as a hiss and seemed to be directed more at her serpent companion than Ling Qi. It was odd to hear Bai Meizhen sounding almost flustered.

Ling Qi didn’t really understand what was going on between Bai Meizhen and Cui, but surely, there had to be something she could do.

“Alright. So you don’t want the necklace. Is there something you do want?”

The flush was already fading from Bai Meizhen's cheeks as she considered Ling Qi's question.

"... I am sorry, but there is nothing at the moment." Ling Qi's shoulders slumped slightly. Was she really that useless? "Once you break through into the Yellow Soul or Silver Physique however... There is something you can assist me with then." Bai Meizhen seemed slightly uncomfortable with making the request.

"... Alright," Ling Qi responded, looking down at her half-finished meal. "I won't take too long."

Ling Qi felt surprisingly warm when Bai Meizhen nodded as if she really believed her.

## Chapter 23 - Foundations 4

As Ling Qi stood and walked to the front of the lecture hall, she wondered how she had forgotten the part where the ones who earned the prize were called down to receive it in front of everyone. She supposed even more attention couldn't exactly hurt at this point, but she could do without the feeling of multiple hostile looks burning a hole in her back.

At least she wasn't alone down here. She fell in beside the first person to be called down, Ji Rong, the shaggy-haired boy with the burn scar on the side of his face.

As the Elder called out Li Suyin's name, Ling Qi studied the boy. She had first noticed Ji Rong in the hall on the first day at the Sect as a fellow "street" kid. Since then, Ji Rong had been called down the previous week in Elder Su's class. He stood with a slouched posture, hands tucked into the pockets of his robe, looking for all the world like he didn't want to be there. It was a sentiment that she could share.

He glanced her way as Li Suyin stuttered out a thanks and began to come down the same stairs Ling Qi had. He didn't look for long, simply rolling his shoulders and going back to looking ahead.

Ling Qi could interpret the gesture well enough. 'Keep to your own business. I'll keep to mine.' He didn't want to catch any residual attention, which was fair.

She turned her attention to Li Suyin, doing her best to smile encouragingly as the other girl, looking flushed and nervous, sidled up to stand next to her. Ling Qi was pretty sure her own expression was a little anemic.

The next name Elder Su called was Huang Da. Ling Qi didn't recognize it, but she had never been great at keeping track of names. The name's bearer turned out to be the boy with short silver hair and an unsettling air who had received a pill last week. She was fairly certain he didn't even blink once on his way down from the back row of seats. Now that she got a closer look, she could see that his eyes were oddly misted over. Was he blind?

His blank eyes swept over her without pause, narrowed at Ji Rong, and stopped on Li Suyin as he reached the bottom of the lecture hall. It was the closest thing Ling Qi had seen to a real reaction from the boy. He took up a place next to the fidgeting, blue-haired girl.

"You have lovely hands," Huang Da commented quietly in a perfectly toneless voice.

“E-eh?!” Li Suyin looked befuddled and embarrassed, quickly slipping her hands behind her back. Ling Qi shot the boy a suspicious look as well. What kind of comment was that?

She almost missed Ji Rong glancing their way and muttering under his breath. “Fucking creeper.”

Whatever else might have been said was silenced at a glance from Elder Su as she called down the last of the winners, Gan Guangli. It was the tall, broad shouldered, and tanned blond boy who she had grown used to seeing in Cai Renxiang’s company. He marched down the stairs with military precision and stood ramrod straight, hands clasped behind his back, beside the strange blind boy. His gaze was fixed firmly on Cai Renxiang, who sat regally in the back row, her hands in her lap.

Ling Qi shook her head slightly as Elder Su removed a small jade case from her sleeve and began to hand out the pills. Was every notable cultivator weird in some way?

Ling Qi tucked away the pill she received, using sleight of hand to make it appear as if she had put it into her belt pouch when she had actually placed it in one of the increasing number of hidden pockets in her sleeves. She returned to her seat along with the others.

Li Suyin was still fidgety and nervous, probably because the weirdo was staring fixedly at her even after he had sat back down in his own seat. She hoped her friend hadn’t picked up a stalker. The girl’s nerves wouldn’t handle it well, and Ling Qi was hardly in a position to be helping out others with their problems given her own.

“You are all progressing acceptably well,” Elder Su began. “Some much better than others, of course. I do not find myself *too* disappointed with the progress you have all exhibited so far.”

A handful of students squirmed uncomfortably under the Elder’s gaze. Ling Qi felt a stab of vindication when she noted that one of them was the boy who had tried to steal her pouch the other day.

“I imagine a fair number of you will be reaching your breakthrough into the Yellow Soul Realm in a matter of months.”

Ling Qi wasn’t sure she numbered among those. She had so many things to cultivate that she didn’t know when she would be ready. According to previous lectures, breaking through to a new realm was an intense and time-consuming endeavor.

“You have all mastered the basic exercises I have provided so I believe it is time that we moved on to other subjects.

“Today, we will be discussing spirits and their binding.” As Elder Su lectured, she gestured with one voluminous sleeve. A dull red mist began to seep out of her garment, gradually solidifying into a crimson-furred ape. Even seated on the floor and hunched at her side, the ape towered over the Elder by nearly a meter. The thing was big enough that Ling Qi thought it could probably wrap one of its leathery hands around her waist and touch finger to thumb.

It bared its teeth at the disciples staring at it and let out a low, threatening growl, causing several of the closest students to lean back nervously. It ceased the moment Elder Su gave it a quelling look.

“This is one of my spirits, a fifth grade beast from the western jungles. Her species, as listed in the imperial bestiary based on her natural abilities, is Heart-Rending Ape.” Elder Su didn’t seem to feel the need to elaborate on that. “As you can see, despite being a spirit beast, the most physical of their kind, I am still able to store her essence within my dantian when it would be inconvenient to walk about with her at my side.”

The ape gave an irritable grunt at her words but calmed down when Elder Su rested her hand on its massive forearm.

“The ability to store a spiritual essence in one’s dantian is the key to spirit binding. A cultivator below Yellow Realm simply lacks the capacity to bind even the weakest spirit. Without sufficient cultivating foundation, even a Yellow Soul cultivator might fail.

“In truth, one’s cultivation art is a large factor in the type and strength of spirit one is able to bind. For example, Argent Soul, when mastered to the fourth layer, will allow for the binding of most first grade spirits once the cultivator has reached Yellow Soul Realm.”

Ling Qi blinked, leaning forward in interest. This was another reason to keep mastering Argent Soul. It made her wonder what kind of spirits she could bind with the Eight Phase Ceremony cultivation art in the jade slip from Xin. The idea of being able to materialize a displeased spirit bear out of thin air would do a lot to ease her paranoia about getting trapped alone and away from potential allies.

“The best method for binding a spirit is one where both parties enter into the contract willingly,” Elder Su continued. “Binding an unwilling spirit or beast is possible with the correct formations and sometimes necessary when dealing with entities below human

intelligence, but a struggling spirit will tax your qi considerably more than a quiescent one. A bond of genuine respect and partnership will produce the least strain of all.”

Ling Qi felt frustrated. Why did things keep coming back to her social abilities?!

“I have prepared a number of tame Root Tunneler Rats for today’s lesson.” As the Elder spoke, a cage full of bright green rodents appeared atop the lectern. The massive ape beside the Elder eyed the cage hungrily. “Though many of you cannot yet form a binding, you may still practice the qi exercise necessary to form a bond...”

Ling Qi listened carefully as Elder Su continued to discuss the finer points of binding spirits and the technique involved in doing so. It seemed Elder Su was focusing only on willing bindings for this lesson, and she would discuss the basics of formations and spirit traps in the following lessons.

It was a good thing that she was used to the presence of rodents, Ling Qi mused as Elder Su began to call them up to get their ‘practice spirit’. Some of the girls, and even some boys, looked positively distressed at the idea of handling rats.

Slipping out of the lecture building at the end of the lesson, Ling Qi’s thoughts turned to a troubling matter. Having gained the Qi Foundation pill, she now had a bounty of medicinal aids and other resources, most of which she wasn’t even sure how to use. The other disciples were currently stymied due to the ban on physical confrontation, but she had no illusions of what would happen if she was still sitting on her resources when the end of the truce came.

Luckily, she did have someone who could give her some advice on the matter.

Opening the door to their home, Ling Qi searched for signs of Bai Meizhen. There was a fire burning in the hearth, but she couldn’t see her housemate anywhere.

“It’s just me!” she called, not wanting to alarm the other girl if she was in the kitchen or her room. After shutting the door, she collapsed next to the fire with a groan. Between Elder Zhou’s lessons in the morning and the impromptu rock climbing sessions to avoid her fellow disciples in the afternoon, she was quite tired.

Ling Qi allowed herself to relax while she contemplated if she wanted to bother cooking or if she wished to simply eat some of the fresh fruit she had picked up from the storehouse the other day. Just as she was considering standing back up, Bai Meizhen emerged from her room, looking as pristine as ever.

“Good evening, Ling Qi,” she said with a slight nod as she began to move toward the kitchen. “You should not sit in such an undignified manner.” The pale girl wasn’t even looking at her.

Ling Qi looked down at herself and grimaced. Her gown had ended up hiked almost to her knees due to the lazy sprawl she had collapsed into. She supposed it was a little indecent, but it wasn’t like there was anyone but Bai Meizhen here to see it. She drew her legs in and tugged the cloth down anyway.

“Good evening, Bai Meizhen.” Ling Qi returned the girl’s greeting politely, mindful of her housemate’s position on manners.

“Hey, do you think I could ask you to take a look at a couple of things? I have some pills and a couple of talismans I picked up during the test that I’m not sure about.”

“I am no apothecary, but I will look them over. You would be better served going to the market for this, however,” Bai Meizhen called back from the kitchen.

Ling Qi didn’t even know that such a place existed. She hadn’t exactly ranged very far on the mountain, sticking to only the necessary areas. “Well... I don’t really want to go out too much. It’s kind of related to what I wanted advice on.”

“Oh? Are the other disciples still troubling you? They cannot do any harm for another month yet. Such trash is better ignored.” The pale girl returned with her tea set in hand and gracefully knelt down across the fire from Ling Qi.

Ling Qi thought Bai Meizhen’s views were a little skewed. She might be able to ignore the other disciples, but Ling Qi couldn’t.

“I know they can’t. I’d rather not deal with confronting them though. Wouldn’t it just be a waste of time?” she asked as she fished around inside of her gown for the hidden pocket containing the pills. The cards were tucked under her sash between the outer and under layers of her gown.

Bai Meizhen eyed her critically as she removed the loot from her hiding places then pursed her lips and averted her eyes until Ling Qi finished laying out the items.



"I suppose you are not wrong," she mused as Ling Qi handed her the container holding the blue pills. Bai Meizhen took a moment to tap one out into her palm, studying it carefully before raising it closer to her face to sniff. She lowered her hand to let Cui study it as well. After holding a silent conversation with the snake, she nodded.

"These are common pills. The quality is a bit amateurish, but they are serviceable enough," Bai Meizhen said dismissively.

Catching Ling Qi's raised eyebrow, she added, "Gushing Spring Pills. They are primarily used by beginners to aid in the cultivation of water arts."

Ling Qi wasn't sure how useful the pills would be. It would help with Forgotten Vale Melody but nothing else. It wasn't really surprising that the random pills she had looted weren't a perfect match for her arts.

"How about the cards?"

"Qi Cards, if somewhat ornate ones," Bai Meizhen responded immediately.

"They can be charged with simple techniques to be used at a later time. They are empty at the moment, but they are of decent quality. "Do you mind?"

So she could store a technique and use it later? That could be useful.

Ling Qi shrugged and gestured for Bai Meizhen to go ahead. Bai Meizhen picked up one of the cards and stared at its reflective surface. Ling Qi felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as Bai Meizhen's intimidating aura seemed to flare, making her breath catch.

"Hm. It seems these cards can hold techniques of reasonable power. But the cards were quite heavily used before you acquired them. Each card will crumble after another activation."

Ling Qi blinked as Bai Meizhen handed her the card. She could feel the power from the stored technique humming in the metal, and a simple understanding of the effect entered her mind. Imperious Serpent's Majesty focused the user's will upon an enemy, freezing them like a mouse before a snake.

"H-heh, are you sure it's fine to give me this?"

"It is a trifle. I will have recovered the qi spent in a matter of hours," Bai Meizhen

responded dismissively, already moving on to the staff. Bai Meizhen turned it over in her hands, studying it with considerably more interest.

“Now, this... is definitely of acceptable quality as a talisman. It is quite old as well. A few more years of use and it will likely develop a heirloom spirit.”

Ling Qi thought back to her lessons with Elder Su.

“That’s... when an object or a building develops a mind of its own through continuous exposure to human qi, right? “Doesn’t that take a really long time though?”

Bai Meizhen nodded and Ling Qi was glad to not disappoint her with ignorance once again.

“Typically, it takes a century or so to begin the process and much longer to achieve real power. In any case, the staff’s use is simple enough. It empowers wood techniques and provides some of the energy required for them through its own internal stores. It is also rather sturdy. I doubt a cultivator below the Third Realm could break it through brute force given the durability enhancing formations etched into the wood.”

Ling Qi let out the breath she had been holding. That pretty much confirmed her worry. It was unlikely that the girl who had lost this would just let it go. If she held onto it, she was going to have to prepare herself for the inevitable attempt to retrieve it. Pawning it off for something useful before that would probably be for the best.

“Thank you very much,” she said as the other girl put the staff down with a clunk and busied herself with preparing tea.

“I feel like I have had so much more to worry about since the end of that test. It’s good to have one less. Maybe now I can finally make use of my good fortune.”

“I am interested to see what has the worms so agitated,” Bai Meizhen admitted, looking up from her tea. “Envy for another’s success and fortune are powerful motivators for that sort. Just what did you gain in that test?”

Ling Qi grimaced. Even now, she couldn’t quite bring herself to show off her prize. Still, Bai Meizhen deserved an explanation.

“I... acquired a jade slip with some arts. The problem started because Elder Jiao announced it. He convinced Elder Zhou to give me a pass on the third part of the test and implied that I could become his personal disciple if I took advantage of it.”

Bai Meizhen's eyes widened slightly as the words spilled out of Ling Qi's mouth in a rush. She stared at Ling Qi as Ling Qi fidgeted as if she were Li Suyin.

Was this it?

Was Bai Meizhen going to reach out and disable her then search her for the jade slip? Ling Qi would try to get away, but she knew she didn't have a chance.

"I see," Bai Meizhen finally said.

"I suppose I can understand their envy somewhat. Sima Jiao was a venerable and respected director of the Ministry of Integrity before his retirement. A position as his apprentice would be much sought after."

Ling Qi thought Bai Meizhen sounded rather unhappy.

"It..." Bai Meizhen pursed her lips in a displeased manner as she broke off and went silent.

"I hope you will not allow yourself to focus over much on that. You are young, and I am sure you will have many other, better opportunities," she finally said.

That wasn't really what Ling Qi was expecting at all. Bai Meizhen didn't seem jealous or envious of the chance. If anything, she seemed frustrated and unhappy.

"Well... I don't know about any apprenticeships or anything like that. I was just going to focus on learning the techniques on the jade slip that I received."

"That is for the best," Bai Meizhen replied, seeming slightly relieved.

Ling Qi nodded, glad to have headed off whatever that was. "Thank you for all your help."

"It was no trouble. Perhaps once you master these arts, you might share an insight or two with me."

"Oh? Um.... sure," Ling Qi responded with surprise and warmth. She had no idea where the other girl's confidence in her came from, but she was glad for it.

## Chapter 24 - Foundations 5

The exhausting routine of Elder Zhou's training the next day passed by in a blur. The Elder worked them to the bone, drilling the basics of unarmed combat into her and the other students unfamiliar with it on top of the usual physical conditioning and qi diffusing.

The training was rewarding. Ling Qi could feel herself gradually growing stronger and tougher with every day even as her dantian continued to grow as well.

That didn't mean she wasn't relieved to finally settle into the mineral spring with Gu Xiulan afterward. The water felt amazing as the warmth seeped in and sapped the aches and fatigue from her limbs.

She almost felt a little bad for kind of tuning out on what Gu Xiulan was actually talking about. Gu Xiulan had gone off on a tangent about some kind of skin cleansing and protecting oils from her home province, how she wished she had brought more to the sect with her, and how she was worried she might begin to tan. Ling Qi wasn't foolish enough to actually ignore the other girl, but it could be hard to keep her attention on Gu Xiulan's inane ramblings.

"That aside, I hear you managed to receive a prize from Elder Su yesterday afternoon. Congratulations. It's good to see that you aren't satisfied with only excelling in one branch of cultivation."

Ling Qi forced herself to focus on the blurred form of her companion through the steam rising from the gently bubbling spring.

"Ah, yeah. I need all of the advantages I can get, right?"

"Thank you. I just wish I hadn't had to stand up in front of everyone and make even more of a target of myself." Ling Qi sank further down into the water with a gloomy expression.

"I will never understand your aversion to attention." Gu Xiulan responded with a sigh, resting her cheek in her hand as she looked at Ling Qi through the steam. "But I suppose that is a different kind of charm. Perhaps it is for the best anyway."

Ling Qi didn't want the other girl to start rambling again so she quickly changed the subject. "Why don't you attend Elder Su's lessons anyway? I've seen Han Jian there a

couple times and now that I think about it, Fan Yu and Han Fang as well never you though. How come?"

"Well as much as an Elder's teaching is useful, I know the majority of what she is teaching already." Gu Xiulan shrugged, idly brushing a few damp strands of her loose hair out of her eyes.

"My family has a strong focus on the spiritual arts so I have quite a lot to practice as it is. I intend to master the second technique of my clan's movement art soon. I have been preparing to open another channel for it this week."

"Oh," Ling Qi responded, leaning back against the wall of the chamber. "Should I be focusing more on arts instead of the lessons?"

"No. For one of your station, they are quite necessary. I imagine I could learn quite a lot about the theory if I took the time to attend. I admit, I have no talent for such things, and I have little use for academic minutiae," Gu Xiulan said. Ling Qi had a sneaking suspicion that Li Suyin and Gu Xiulan wouldn't get along.

"Spiritual cultivation should be a thing of passion and instinct, not rote memorization and repetition. I could hardly master my clan's arts with such a mindset."

Ling Qi frowned, feeling a little offended on Elder Su's behalf, but she knew Gu Xiulan probably had more reasons than she was sharing. "Alright. Do you know if Han Jian has any free time?"

Gu Xiulan gave her a sharp, dangerous look, and Ling Qi winced.

"I was wondering if you and the others were getting together for any training is all," Ling Qi hastily clarified. "I - I thought that we could try to share some insights and work on our group tactics or... something?"

Gu Xiulan's expression softened, and she nodded.

"Hm. Now that Yu has come back out from seclusion, I believe Jian was considering something like that for this afternoon. I suppose you can come along."

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Later, when descending the mountain with Gu Xiulan, they met up with Han Jian and Han Fang.

“Oh, Ling Qi?” Han Jian greeted politely. “I didn’t know you were coming.” Han Jian’s cousin merely gave her a curious look from where he stood behind Han Jian.

“I shall have to take responsibility,” Gu Xiulan replied airily. “I thought I might like another sparring partner.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Han Jian said with a pleasant nod.

“Congratulations on winning Elder Su’s contest this week,” the tall boy said sincerely.

“Thank you,” Ling Qi replied with a small bow.

“If you’re going to join us, you should know that I’m going to be absent for most of next week,” Han Jian said with a wry smile. “So this will be the only session for a little while.”

Ling Qi fell in beside Han Fang as they began to leave the training field, returning the mute boy’s friendly nod as she did so. “What do you mean? Did something happen?”

Han Jian’s smile grew proud. “I plan to break through to the Yellow Soul Realm soon. I’ll have to inform Elder Zhou just in case the breakthrough stretches on a bit,” he responded cheerfully. “Maybe once I do, I can get that so-called tiger of mine to actually join me instead of lazing around the house like a big furry lump.”

“Hmph. Heijin is adorable and you should not speak of him so,” Gu Xiulan replied playfully. “Still, I am happy for you, Jian,” she added with a genuinely affectionate smile. “I will not be far behind you.”

It looked like Ling Qi couldn’t get complacent. Even if she was advancing, everyone else was too. She watched quietly as Han Fang clapped his cousin on the back.

“Congratulations, Han Jian,” she said afterward. “Where are we going though?”

“There’s another training field further down the mountain that’s a little more private. It has a view sealing formation and everything. I managed to reserve it,” Han Jian explained.

“A sealing formation means nobody can watch the field from outside, at least not with the sort of arts young cultivators like us have access to. It’s better not to show off all your tricks in public, you know?”

Ling Qi nodded in understanding. That was a good thing. She certainly couldn't trust random observers to have benevolent intentions. She glanced at Gu Xiulan, wondering what the other girl thought of it. She preferred showing off, didn't she?

Gu Xiulan caught her look and pouted at her. "Come now. It's not as if I cannot understand the importance of timing and presentation. New moves should be revealed when properly mastered, not when they are half finished."

"Sorry," Ling Qi responded, not quite joining in as Han Fang cracked a smile and Han Jian chuckled.

"Will Fan Yu be joining us?" she asked. It was probably better to get this out of the way.

"... He's probably already there," Han Jian responded, smile fading. "Yu's been going a little nuts with training since the test." She thought he looked conflicted.

"Look... We talked to him so try to keep calm, alright?"

She nodded, but she would be lying to herself if she said that she didn't dread this a bit. The rest of the walk went by quickly enough, their chatter turning to idle things until they reached a set of high gray gates that opened onto an empty grassy field.

It was surprising watching Han Jian vanish as he stepped between them, but she had already decided to trust the group, so she didn't hesitate to follow. She felt an odd tingling on her skin as she passed through the gate and entered the field, bringing the others back in sight.

That included Fan Yu.

The broad shouldered boy stood opposite Han Jian, a heavily weighted training spear on his shoulder. He was positively drenched with sweat, and she briefly wondered just how long he had been here. It only took a moment after she entered the field for his eyes to shift to her.

Ling Qi found herself growing tense as his expression soured. She clenched her fists, but nonetheless, she spoke up, keeping any quaver out of her voice. She didn't want to let this jerk ruin things between her and the others.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you," she said flatly. "And I'm sorry that Bai Meizhen went too far." She did her best to sound sincere despite not really feeling it.

Fan Yu's nostrils flared and he scowled, his own fists clenching. "It is nothing," he

ground out. "I apologize for my accusations."

"Well," Gu Xiulan cut in, voice light. "Let us not dwell on such minor things. We are all friends here." She gave her fiancé a pleading look.

Ling Qi had to hold back a snort of laughter as the other boy's expression immediately softened. Gu Xiulan had the boy wrapped around her fingers.

"Alright," Han Jian spoke up.

"So, this training thing... I was thinking that we'd work on our coordination and response times and get used to working with everyone's arts running at the same time. Between Ling Qi and I, the increase in everyone's ability is pretty significant, and that can throw us off if we're not used to it."

Ling Qi let out a breath and relaxed. Fan Yu obviously still disliked her, but he was willing to hold his peace for Gu Xiulan's sake. She almost felt a moment of pity for the boy. It was becoming clear that he had actual feelings for the other girl, which she was almost certain were not returned by Gu Xiulan.

She put such thoughts aside as Han Jian began to direct them to different positions. She spent the rest of the afternoon with Han Jian and the others practicing her marksmanship with Gu Xiulan's help and improving her ability to act in concert with others while following Han Jian's commands.

It helped to simply get more combat experience as well. Despite the other girl's statement, she found herself sparring mostly with Han Fang. Han Jian, perhaps wisely, put Gu Xiulan and Fan Yu together while switching in and out of the pairs himself when someone needed a breather.

For all that he easily faded into the background, Ling Qi found that she enjoyed Han Fang's company. The mute boy was patient and good natured about her occasional blunders in their spars and partner work. She could appreciate the quiet, which allowed her to concentrate on her own efforts.

She really felt that she was improving.



# Chapter 25 - Foundations 6

Ling Qi found it hard not to be distracted.

Those two were glowing for goodness sake! She glanced nervously again at the wide section of the field reserved for the two strongest girls in class.

Sun Liling had a savage grin on her face as she faced Cai Renxiang. For once, her stance wasn't lax and loose but taut and ready, her hands splayed out like the claws of a beast. Red mist seeped from the girl's pores, lazily twining around her limbs.

Her opponent stood straight and tall, the hilt of her long, curved saber clasped in a ready stance. Cai Renxiang looked as if she were standing in a shaft of bright sunlight, which formed a white corona behind her head and cast a long, ominous shadow across the field in front of her.

"Miss Ling!" She twitched as a booming voice called her attention back to her immediate surroundings. She refrained from grimacing as she turned back to meet the reproving gaze of Gan Guangli, her partner in this sparring exercise.

"While I understand the desire to gaze upon Lady Cai's resplendence, I must ask that you not allow your attention to wander so!"

The boy's voice was loud, and she winced when she saw gazes flicking their way. Still, she was glad that Instructor Zhou had taken their abilities into account when setting up spars. Now, if only her melee partner wasn't so... bombastic.

"Hmph. Don't you have it backwards there, big guy?" A relaxed voice called from across the field where their opponents stood.

The one who spoke was Lu Feng, the effeminate boy she had seen with Sun Liling before. She found him kind of irritating, partially because despite being a boy, he managed to be significantly prettier than her. His shoulder length black hair was shinier than Gu Xiulan's, and that was just unfair.

"She was obviously captivated by the princess, not that ice sculpture you call a lady."

Gan Guangli swelled with fury, and she meant that literally. She had thought she was imagining things the first few times it had happened, but seeing it up close confirmed her thoughts. When the blond boy became emotional, he literally grew. He was normally

the same height as her, but he was now several centimeters taller. It seemed there were some strange arts out there.

“Still your forked tongue, western devil, else I make your beating all the worse!”

Spirits, did he have any volume below shout?

Ling Qi looked to the other girl present, a noble armed with short, paired guai made out of pale white stone. Hong Lin was short and petite with streaks of cherry blossom pink in her dark hair. Given the way she turned up her nose at Ling Qi, Hong Lin was uninterested in providing any solidarity in response to their bickering male comrades.

That was fine, Ling Qi thought. Gan Guangli might be obnoxiously loud, but at least he was unfailingly polite. He hadn't once referred to her as anything but Miss Ling although that felt more strange than good. When had she ever been called something like that?

She put that out of her thoughts, focusing on the upcoming spar. The scenario was simple. They were to fight until the other team was disabled while staying within the confines of the painted box on the field they had been assigned.

Instructor Zhou's voice rang out, signalling the beginning of the match.

Gan Guangli barreled forward with a shout, the heavy iron gauntlets on his hands shimmering with metallic qi, and Hong Lin darted forward to meet him. His swinging fist passed over her head as she ducked, and her stone guai rose to strike him in the ribs. He merely laughed at the blow, swelling up another centimeter in height and bulk.

Ling Qi caught movement in the corner of her eyes and flicked a knife into her hand as she turned her attention to her own task. Lu Feng was circling the battle in the center, eyeing the two combatants as he raised his black gloved hands. Ling Qi caught the barely visible shimmer of the wires which extended from the tips of his gloves and threw her knife at him.

She grimaced as Lu Feng leaned lazily out of the way as her wind-coated knife flew by him. His right hand gestured, and Gan Guangli let out a shout of frustration as gleaming wires wrapped around his forearm, preventing him from bringing his fist down on his much smaller opponent.

Ling Qi let another knife fall into her hand as Hong Lin executed a rapid combination on her bound partner. The other girl's stone weapons drove Gan Guangli back as they cracked repeatedly against his ribs and free arm, drawing a grunt of pain from Gan Guangli even as he continued to grow bigger.

Another knife flew as she dashed toward Lu Feng, but he again swayed to the side, easily avoiding her technique, and danced backwards, not giving her more than a glance.

Ling Qi's only warning of what came next was Gan Guangli's shout as his leg was yanked to one side, and the towering boy fell to the ground with a crash. She glimpsed a blur of black and pink, and then, her world exploded in pain.

Everything spun as she felt herself flung backwards to land in the dirt, reflexively clutching her ribs as she wheezed in pain from the blow the other girl had landed. At least one of her ribs was broken, Ling Qi thought dizzily, probably more. Looking through eyes tearing up from the throbbing pain, she saw her opponent looking down at her before turning away with a haughty sniff to show Ling Qi her back.

Ling Qi struggled to reach for one of her knives, to sit up, to do anything, but it simply hurt too much. She could feel something wet bubbling in her throat, and a groan escaped her lips.

She was helpless again, and she hated it!

They lost after that, of course. Gan Guangli struggled, but with his limbs bound, he couldn't really fight back.

Luckily, Instructor Zhou had called an older disciple from the Medicine Department down to provide healing after the spars. Instead of three broken ribs, Ling Qi merely had to deal with some incredibly painful bruises across her chest.

The lengthy spars broke up the physical training now, and despite her feelings about her loss, she knew they were helping. Her reflexes and handling of her weapons was improving. It grew easier to draw her knives and she found the blades fitting much more easily in her hands. She began to notice the little tells that told how a person was going to move, both in herself and others. She did better in other bouts, but never great.

Elder Su's lessons were less painful but all the more crucial. If Ling Qi was to avoid being humiliated like that again, she would need to be able to use her new arts.

She had begun feeling out the channels she would need to open during the lessons' meditation sessions, slowly tracing their paths with her mind's eye. The channel she had already opened wove a lazy course around and through her heart, shining brightly in her perception. Picking out the path of the three channels she planned to open was far more arduous. However, she had not used her medicines yet so she did not begin

carving.

Besides, before she threw herself fully into cultivation, she had a question to ask. Ling Qi didn't feel comfortable derailing the class with an unrelated question, but Elder Su typically remained behind for a few minutes after the lessons ended on the first and second days of the week.

As the other students filed out, she murmured a goodbye to Li Suyin and slipped down the stairs to approach the Elder, who was watching the others leave with a small smile, hands clasped loosely behind her. Her expression didn't change when Ling Qi reached the bottom of the stairs, doing her best to ignore the looks from the remaining students. Ling Qi stopped a respectful distance from the older woman and bowed politely, drawing on half remembered lessons from Bai Meizhen on proper etiquette.

"Did you have a question about what we covered today, Ling Qi?" Elder Su asked kindly. She had been lecturing on the nature of environmental qi and its effects on cultivation. Ling Qi actually felt she understood it pretty well; she had to be careful if she cultivated in areas with strong environmental qi to avoid having it warp and unbalance her own. She had mostly grasped the exercises Elder Su had given for that too. "I am afraid you should have asked during the lesson. I have many tasks to see to."

"I am sorry for delaying you, Elder." Ling Qi internally cheered as she managed to avoid stumbling on the formal words.

"I actually have a question regarding my personal cultivation," she continued, keeping her voice steady. She could feel the eyes of others on her back, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Elder Su regarded her quietly, her expression still friendly and open, but Ling Qi felt an unsettling pressure as if the matronly woman was looking through her.

"You have not advanced much of late despite your diligence. Have you found yourself in a bottleneck then? I suppose I can spare a moment to aid a promising student, particularly one willing to provide teaching to another." Elder Su sounded approving. Ling Qi didn't even bother wondering how the woman knew about her tutoring Li Suyin in her physical cultivation, just relief that she wasn't being dismissed out of hand.

"Not... exactly?" Ling Qi said unsurely. "I slowed down this past week to prepare. I had some things to take care of before I could really focus."

Elder Su raised an eyebrow curiously. "Oh? Well, I will not say cultivating in such a way

is wrong. I did encourage other pursuits. I will have to ask that you speak your question though, young lady. I was not jesting when I said that I still have many tasks to see to."

"Of course," Ling Qi hurried, keeping her head bowed. "I just wanted to know if there were any drawbacks to reaching the Yellow Soul stage before fully mastering Argent Soul or the reverse. The scroll does not specify so I wanted to make sure I was cultivating it properly."

Elder Su's smile grew slightly warmer, and Ling Qi thought she sensed more approval. "That is a good question," Elder Su began. "And an ambitious one. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It is advisable that you reach the late stage of the Red Soul before attempting to form the next layer of that art - if only so that you do not fall behind your peers. The Argent Soul and its more advanced forms are one of the foundations of our Sect, but it is important not to forget practical matters."

Ling Qi nodded in understanding. "So I should try to complete the next layer before breaking through?"

"It will improve such attempts," Elder Su concurred. "While even cultivators of extremely low talent can expect to break through to the Yellow realm in time given sufficient resources, it is still no easy thing.

"Certain benefits will be lost if you choose to break through first, but it is a matter of weighing your desires and needs. To go beyond the fourth layer will not provide benefits at the Red Soul realm."

"Thank you, Elder Su," Ling Qi murmured, finally raising her head and straightening her back.

"It was no trouble. Go on, now. I will be observing what your preparations accomplish this week," Elder Su answered simply, stepping gracefully past Ling Qi with a whisper of silk.

Ling Qi nodded and turned around to find the older woman already gone. She really wished she could do that. Hopefully, the Sable Crescent Step art would be the start.

## Bonus 4: Growing Unease

Han Jian restrained the urge to put his head into his hands as Yu stomped away from the table of their shared abode, a glower on his face.

Why had he volunteered to be sent to the Sect again? He had promised himself that he would be more dedicated in the future of course, but couldn't he have done that at the training yards and meditation halls of his home? Surely coming out here where his only points of familiarity were a boy who regularly got on his nerves and a girl who he really, really should have been keeping his distance from.

He knew perfectly well that the situation between the three of them was untenable, even if Yu was outwardly oblivious to it. Xiulan... he still remembered their first meeting, and the mutual childish affection that had bloomed there. They were past the point of putting such things aside though. He just wished she could see that. He doubted Yu was so dull that he would miss the way Xiulan looked at him forever. Their families had made the arrangement and that was that. Han Jian was still unengaged, but that was only because Father bucked tradition a bit, and saw no reason to finalize arrangements that wouldn't be resolved for decades yet. Han Jian would probably end up betrothed to a nice woman a few decades his senior when the time came, or perhaps someone with a good political connection or two at a younger age if they could be found.

Of course, that wasn't even the only problem anymore. Fan Yu had failed Elder Zhou's test, and it felt like oil had been poured on the fire. Xiulan had never exactly been... friendly, toward her fiancé, but the fit of self pity Fan Yu had sunk into afterward, with his arm crippled by a confrontation with a Bai of all things, had magnified her dislike into outright contempt.

Then of course there was Ling Qi. She was a nice enough girl, in her own odd way, but something about her irked him. He didn't regret his kindness, not the least because an excuse to spend a few precious hours away from Yu were welcome in those early weeks. Yet... she had asked after him less and less. In the wake of Elder Zhou's test, he saw her only at training, she was apparently in the sphere of that Bai. He was a scion of the Han family, marquess' of the Ashen Wastens. He was not as far below the great ducal families as most... but it left him feeling useless, knowing that even his charity could be one upped so effortlessly.

Han Jian blinked as a calloused hand fell on his shoulder, shaking him from his thoughts. He looked up, and met the steady gaze of his 'cousin' Han Fang. The taller boy offered him a crooked smile, and made a few signs.

Han Jian let out a short bark of laughter, straightening up his shoulders. "You're not wrong, beating up some targets on the training field might help."

Han Fang just nodded amiably, stepping back to give Han Jian room to push out his chair and stand up. He made another sign.

"It's nothing you need to worry about," Han Jian assured him. Han Fang was the one person from home who he could rely on implicitly. The good feeling soured as Han Jian's eyes traced the scar on his cousin's throat. Of course, he didn't deserve even that.

Han Fang gave him a curious look, and Han Jian shook his head. "Sorry, woolgathering again. It's just one of those days." He deliberately turned his thoughts away from the memory of the boy lying still in a pool of blood, and the screams of the assassin as his father tore apart the room and scoured the flesh from the man's bones in a howling dervish of sand and ash.

Even if it seemed useless, with all these talents standing above him, he couldn't let himself backslide. He'd made a promise to himself that he'd pay back that devotion by being someone worthy of it. He was putting everything he had into improving and cultivating. He was behind, that was true, but surely that effort had to count for something?

"Why don't we go hunting afterward?" He suggested as he headed for the door, not betraying his thoughts on his face with the ease of long practice. A consequence of his lacklustre efforts in past meant that his allowance was... less than optimal. It stung that his Father didn't trust him to wisely use more expensive resources. He would have to supplement it in these last few weeks before the mail opened back up.

Han Fang nodded enthusiastically as they left the house, signing animatedly.

"...What is with you and bears," Han Jian laughed. "I know we don't have them at home, but you're being a little silly now," he knew the other boy was mostly trying to lighten the mood, but he didn't see any reason not to play along.

As they walked toward the exit though, Han Jian found his smile once again becoming strained as he saw what lay ahead of them in the street. There was a small crowd around the entrance, at the center of which stood Kang Zihao. Who stood chatting with several other boys, with a smile on his handsome face.

Han Jian felt a stab of envy, Kang Zihao was in a lot of ways everything he wanted to be. A dedicated and talented cultivator, and a leader who attracted followers easily.

Something about the other boy pissed him off though, even if he couldn't quite put the finger on why. It wasn't purely a matter of envy, or so he hoped.

Kang Zihao, looking over the heads of the other boys met his eyes then. "Sect Brother Han, I hope the day finds you well. Did you catch word of the gathering I was planning?"

"I'm afraid not, Sect Brother Kang," Han Jian replied back smoothly as the group around Kang parted seamlessly to allow him to step forward. "I have been focusing on my cultivation, I was just about to go on a little hunting trip with my cousin is all."

"Admirable dedication Sect Brother," Kang replied, a slight patronizing edge to his tone that set Han Jian's teeth on edge. "I was just instructing some of our less well off brothers, before we took a trip of our own. It is important that everyone remain on guard for the ne'er do wells in our midst after all. You are welcome to join us."

"Thank you for your offer," Han Jian replied evenly. "It is admirable that Sect Brother Kang would take the time to help our other brothers so," it was a fairly standard tactic, find the somewhat talented commoners, offer them scraps and build a sense of loyalty. Not too dissimilar from what he had done, now that he thought about it.

...That was different though, he hadn't helped Ling Qi for that reason. No one wanted to come back to Golden Fields anyway.

"I will have to decline however, my cousin and I are looking into more dangerous game," the lie came easily. Han Jian just didn't want to deal with other people right now, and Kang Zihao even less.

"A shame, Brother Han," Kang Zihao comiserated, though it didn't sound very genuine to Han Jian's ear. "Perhaps another time then."

"Perhaps," Han Jian replied, offering a small bow before resuming his walk. Han Fang remained behind him like a silent shadow. Han Jian envied his cousins ability to fade into the background during social situations sometimes.

Though that wasn't really an option for him, Han Jian supposed. In any case, they would soon be away from people and their troubles. Han Jian looked forward to the more straightforward challenges the wilderness brought.

Who knew, perhaps Han Fang really would get to wrestle a bear this time.



## Chapter 26 - Foundations 7

The Gushing Spring pill tasted of clear fresh water, the Qi Foundation pill of some spicy herb she didn't recognize, and the Sable Light pill tasted of fresh cream... but the flavors were quickly forgotten in what followed immediately after. A painful surge of energy filled her dantian, straining its confines, even as her limbs jumped with sudden energy, her nerves sang, and her senses almost overloaded. She felt like she was aflame from the inside, the light from the candles in the meditation room lanced painfully into her eyes, and the sound of her own heart was almost deafening in her ears.

Letting out a trembling breath, Ling Qi closed her eyes and slowly forced her breathing back under control. She needed to cultivate.

The next few days were a blur in her mind.

Ling Qi vaguely remembered showing up for her lessons. Sneaking in and out of the residential area. Stumbling on the steep cliffs. The worried expression on Li Suyin's face and a curious glance from Bai Meizhen as they passed one another in the hall leading to their rooms. The feeling of the pool of energy at her core deepening, expanding, and stretching the limits of her dantian, making her ache in a way that she hadn't since her first growth spurt.

What she truly remembered, however, was the sharp feeling of carving new channels for the surging qi within her, one coiling through her lungs and out through her throat and the second spiralling down her right leg.

The days following the opening of her first and second channels released some of the pressure clouding her body and mind, and Ling Qi found herself growing coherent once more. A cup of Bai Meizhen's herbal tea, left out for her on the table one evening, soothed the raging energies surging through her body even further, and its flavor seemed to be less bitter to her tongue than before. Opening the final channel, another winding meridian extending outward from her heart, reduced the burning in her core to manageable levels.

It allowed her to remember her obligation to Li Suyin. She was coherent enough to feel guilty about the concerned looks the other girl had given her throughout Elder Su's lesson that evening.

"Are you feeling better today, Ling Qi?" Li Suyin asked as she caught up with her in the

hall, glancing at her nervously. "It's just... um, you kind of... growled at me yesterday when I tried to talk with you. I couldn't really understand what you were saying. Are you feeling ill?"

Ling Qi winced internally. Li Suyin had tried to talk to her yesterday? She didn't remember that all.

"I guess I am," she responded neutrally as they exited the building. "I'm sorry, Li Suyin," she apologized after a moment. "I used some medicines to help my cultivation, but it looks like I might have taken a little too much at once."

She would definitely space out her dosage in the future. That or do the whole 'closed door' cultivation she had heard about. Was that why people shut themselves in meditation rooms for days at a time? To work through the drug-induced haze in peace and quiet?

"O-oh, I see," Li Suyin replied, seeming relieved. "I was a little worried that I had done something to make you angry. Did it work?" she asked, drawing a confused look from Ling Qi. "I-I mean, did you accomplish what you were trying to do?"

Ling Qi glanced around, noting that there were still plenty of others in earshot. She then decided that she didn't care, at least when it came to this.

"Yeah," she said with only partially false confidence. "I got the three meridians I was working on open, and I even managed to almost double the size of my qi pool." She deliberately pitched her voice to carry. Let the assholes eyeing her like prey chew on that.

"Really? That's amazing! I've only recently gotten my fourth channel open. And you've done so much else besides," she added under her breath, almost too low for Ling Qi to hear. "I haven't even properly mastered an art yet."

"Why is that anyway? Why open so many channels without even learning an art?"

Li Suyin looked glanced around the plaza at the other people present, some of whom were occasionally looking their way.

Ling Qi got the picture.

"Well, I guess it's none of my business," she said instead. "We can get back to practicing together if you want."

"That's fine," Li Suyin replied hurriedly before clamming up, fidgeting with her bag and keeping her eyes on the path ahead.

Ling Qi eyed her for a moment and shrugged, falling silent as well as they proceeded back to the residential area. As the two of them entered Li Suyin's home, the other girl finally spoke up.

"I... do have a good reason," Li Suyin murmured as she shut the door behind them. It looked like Su Ling was out again today.

"I wasn't going to say anything. If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to."

"It's okay. I trust you," Li Suyin said looking down and shuffling her feet. "It's just - I don't like fighting," Li Suyin admitted, looking back up at Ling Qi. "So I know I don't really... fit here. I wanted to be a scribe or maybe a physician's assistant."

Ling Qi shifted from foot to foot. She probably wasn't the best person to trust, and she had a feeling Li Suyin was going to reveal something personal.

"I can understand that. I don't really like fighting either, but I'd rather not get pushed around, you know?"

Li Suyin nodded unhappily.

"Yes, I understand. That's why I asked you to help me cultivate my body." She sighed before straightening her shoulders and visibly steeling herself.

"Mother is from a cultivating clan that was eliminated some time ago. They lost all cultivation resources... but great-grandfather managed to hold onto one of the family arts even after his dantian was broken," Li Suyin said in a rush.

Ling Qi looked at her blankly. She wasn't sure what kind of reaction the girl expected.

"Alright. I guess you need a lot of channels open to practice it then? It must be a pretty complex art."

Li Suyin seemed nonplussed at her lack of reaction, but then, she smiled weakly.

"R-right. I also, um... need someone to practice on. It's a medical art." Her eyes widened. "Just the diagnostic part though! I asked Su Ling to capture a few animals to practice the other parts on."

Ling Qi felt like she was missing something.

“That sounds fine. It’ll pretty much just be what we normally do then, right?”

The other girl nodded in relief, and the two of them got started with their practice.

However, despite the fact that Li Suyin had revealed that she had her own valuable art - which, on reflection, was probably why she had been nervous - Ling Qi couldn’t bring herself to share knowledge of her own ‘secret’ techniques. Instead, she waited until the dead of night, her newly expanded reserves burning away her fatigue, and practiced then.

The first part of Sable Crescent Step, she came to understand, was a manual on leg movements and techniques for moving silently as well as qi exercises for drawing the cool, calm qi of night and shadows around herself like a cloak. Darkness was absence, and by becoming one with it, she could be wherever she wanted. What were barriers and obstacles to something which had no form?

Simply mastering the movements quickened her steps and sharpened her reactions, and the night sky overhead only made her feel more alert and energetic. Of the actual techniques she mastered in secret, the Trackless Step allowed her to move without trace, her footsteps bending not so much as a blade of grass in her path. Crescent’s Grace let the cool, comforting dark qi she had cultivated flood through the channel in her legs, blurring the edges of her form and allowing her to move short distances in bursts of great speed.

Ling Qi knew she was far from the understanding that which would allow her to truly become immaterial as she moved, but even the occasional glimpse allowed her to simply flicker from one position to the next with no intervening motion when she executed the qi flows perfectly.

It felt very strange.

Forgotten Vale Melody came easier to her but was strange in its own way. Sneaking out to the mineral spring she had shared with Gu Xiulan with her flute tucked into her sleeve was odd enough on its own. Actually playing on her flute once she was there, sitting on one of the flat rocks that jutted from the water, was stranger. She was no great

musician, and she had only grown rustier over the years since she left Mother, but the music sheet laid out in her mind by the jade slip seemed to come to her naturally.

Perhaps it was misplaced pride, but she found the song she played as she worked through the internal exercises eerily beautiful - at least when she wasn't making mistakes. The feeling of the icy qi flowing through the channel in her lungs to charge the air around her mingled with the water qi drawn from the pool. It allowed her to flood the cave with a thick and cloying mist that moved with her as she played.

With some effort, she could charge the mist with further power, confusing the senses of those within such that they would find themselves unable to leave it.

With her qi flowing through her channels, old and new, and the knowledge of her techniques in the back of her mind, Ling Qi found herself looking out over the deep night of the mountain wilderness and found it as bright as if it were lit by the noonday sun. The colors were washed out, but darkness no longer hindered her sight.

Was this what it felt like to be a real cultivator, she wondered?

## Chapter 27 - Foundations 8

Ling Qi once again found herself standing at the front of the lecture hall. The line up was rather different this week. She supposed it had been last week too; she had learned from Li Suyin later that Li Suyin and Ji Rong had managed to get it again the past week.

This week, it was Ling Qi, Ji Rong, that creepy and possibly blind boy, another girl she vaguely recognized from Zhou's lessons, and Han Jian, who offered her a friendly nod over the others' heads as she took up a place at the far end of the line.

He had probably broken through to the Yellow Soul realm then. She eyed him out of the corner of her eyes. He didn't really seem different, maybe a little more confident? She turned attention back to Elder Su, bowing her head and murmuring a thanks as the older woman passed her the reward for her hard work.

Returning to her seat next to Li Suyin, she acknowledged the girl's quiet congratulations with a nod. Anything else that might have been said was silenced as Elder Su began to speak.

"Today begins the final month of the lessons offered to new students. My colleague has already winnowed away much of his class as is his wont." Her words caused a slight stir that might have turned to grumbling in another situation. Ling Qi certainly saw a lot of unhappy looks, some of them directed at her and the other students who were in Elder Zhou's class.

"As I am sure you have concluded by this point, I am not quite so harsh in my standards or prone to dramatic shows as he." Elder Su paused, seeming to briefly lose herself in thought before sighing wistfully as if from a pleasant memory.

"But, all the same," she continued, "I also believe that the drive to improve oneself is the most important factor in a cultivator's success, and thus, for some of you, this will be your last day in my lessons."

That stirred up some murmurs that were swiftly silenced by a look from the Elder. Ling Qi was suddenly glad that she had won a pill this week, and Li Suyin began to nibble her lower lip nervously. She was... pretty sure she was safe from the upcoming expulsion.

"While I have encouraged your success with rewards, I prefer to see how my students can motivate themselves. How far they will push themselves even when crises do not

loom.” The older woman’s gaze grew cold, and the strict tone she had taken in the early lessons returned.

“Some of you have disappointed me greatly, meandering along your path with little ambition, almost idle in your cultivation. Compared to others in this lesson - to those who have put their full effort into improving themselves in some way every day - you do not deserve my teachings any longer. Perhaps in the future, when you have reflected upon and corrected your flaws, we will speak again.”

Ling Qi wouldn’t lie to herself and say that she didn’t feel satisfaction as the Elder began to list off names, one after another. She did glance at Li Suyin and bump their shoulders to draw the other girl’s attention and give her a reassuring smile. Ling Qi felt the blue-haired girl was being a little ridiculous to worry about her own position; she strongly doubted that anyone who had earned a pill would be among those kicked out.

Sure enough, she was right. The room was emptied by half when the Elder was done. Elder Su’s pleasant countenance returned as the last of the disciples she had named slumped dejectedly out of the room.

“Now that we have resolved that unpleasantness, allow me to describe the curriculum for our final month together.”

“First, I intend to ensure that each of you becomes grounded in the knowledge of the three thousand common characters of the formation arts as a cultivator should always be able to perform at least basic identification of talismans and wards in the field.”

Ling Qi felt some dread along with anticipation. It would be one more thing she didn’t need to rely on Bai Meizhen for, but on the other hand, she was only barely literate as it was. Even if her time here had dusted off the rust that had accumulated on those skills, learning three thousand more characters was daunting.

“Secondly, we will be reviewing the necessities and difficulties of breakthrough to new realms of cultivation and the basic structure of the eight realms which comprise the Path of Cultivation,” Elder Su continued.

“Much of our effort shall be spent on your cultivation of the Argent Soul Art. All of you have progressed well in forming an understanding of the foundations of the art, but as a master of our school’s techniques, I do have certain insights that you will find of use.”

Ling Qi felt excited about that. The next stage of the technique had seemed quite daunting, and she was worried about how long it would take her to ‘mold the foundation of her World’, particularly since she hadn’t yet been able to puzzle out what that meant.

“Lastly, to further encourage you, in addition to the weekly prize of a Qi Foundation pill, a permanent pass to the first floor of the Outer Mountain’s archive shall be given to the three students who have impressed me the most at the end of this month. Do work hard.”

Did that mean they could go in and use the jade slips in the archive whenever they wanted? That sounded really good. Ling Qi glanced at Li Suyin, and sure enough, the scholarly girl’s eyes were burning with determination.

... It was honestly kind of weird seeing that kind of expression on Li Suyin’s face.

When the lesson was over, Ling Qi left with Li Suyin. Walking openly as she did with the other girl made her nervous and twitchy, but at the same time, it was nice to not have to skulk. The other disciples had ceased much of the open hostility by this point, and she hadn’t had to fend off a pickpocketing attempt in some time. Still, she could feel the dislike in their gazes and could hear the disparaging comments directed her way.

It seemed they were simply holding off until the end of the truce when they could put some actual force behind their attempts to bully her.

She put it out of her mind for the moment. While the end of truce was fast approaching, right now, she needed to focus on preparing.

Li Suyin seemed to be of the same mind. She agreed far more easily than Ling Qi expected to another forest expedition later this week.

Ling Qi would need to finish up the other girl’s physical cultivation lessons first though. Hopefully, the practice with the other girl would also help her figure out what was holding her back from achieving the next level of Zephyr’s Breath. As Ling Qi was not quite ready to openly show off her new arts from Elder Zhou’s test, she needed to further polish the one which everyone knew she had.

While training Li Suyin, something finally clicked, and the part of Zephyr’s Breath that had been out of her grasp came to her. She understood the corrections she needed to make to her stance, breathing, and qi circulation, perfecting the timing of the pulses of qi to guide the wind around her. Zephyr’s Breath was much less limited now with the doubling of her control range.

While she liked the sound of the ‘Shielding Gale’ technique left in the art, Zephyr’s Breath, even with the improvement, wasn’t as impressive as the new arts she had



gained from the moon spirit. There did seem to be more advanced arts that built on it though.

Feeling that her combat arts were polished enough, Ling Qi threw herself into her lessons and the cultivation of her foundation. She was close to the late stage of the first realm in both body and spirit. If she was going to make it through the coming storm, that was the least she needed to achieve to be able to stand up in the face of her fellow disciples without having to constantly rely on Bai Meizhen or Han Jian and his friends.

Her efforts were rewarded soon enough. Surging qi and the feeling of broken barriers filled her as she finished her weeks meditations. Reaching the late Red Soul and Gold Physique stages were not as dramatic as previous breakthroughs. Instead, it felt as if she had simply reached the end of a path well paved... and now stared up at a sheer cliff. The true difficulty and change would lie ahead when she prepared to breakthrough to the next realm.

She wasn't going to have to run and hide forever.

## Chapter 28 - Foundations 9

Amidst her preparations, there was one thing Ling Qi was chagrined to think she had forgotten about as the end of the week approached. She had not spoken to Gu Xiulan for almost two weeks now, and she needed to make sure that the haughty girl did not think she was being snubbed. She couldn't afford to alienate one of her tiny number of allies.

Ling Qi suspected she would have to finally go along with Gu Xiulan's not-so-subtle prodding to clean herself up further to earn forgiveness. At least she would finally get a chance to see the outer sect market. She really hadn't had time to explore the mountain's amenities in the past two months. This was why she found herself making her way over to Gu Xiulan after Instructor Zhou's lesson ended.

One thing she had noticed while spending time with the girl and observing her during lessons was that Gu Xiulan seemed to genuinely lack any other close female friends. She chatted and mingled with the others far better than Ling Qi ever could, of course, but there weren't any other girls she invited along to their soaks at the mineral spring, for example. Ling Qi wasn't too surprised to catch the other girl alone as the sparring groups broke up.

Ling Qi had been paired with Gan Guangli again today, which she generally liked. He was still very loud, but she appreciated his politeness and good nature. Their arts worked reasonably well together too, and he didn't seem to resent her when they lost, bidding her farewell at the end of the sessions with the same booming enthusiasm he greeted her with.

"Gu Xiulan," Ling Qi called out as she approached the other girl. Gu Xiulan somehow managed to look as pretty as ever, even glistening with the sweat of their recent workout.

"Are you busy today?"

Gu Xiulan glanced up, having paused at the edge of the training field to adjust the laces on her elbow-length glove talisman.

"Oh, Ling Qi? Have you joined the rest of us in the land of the living then? I had worried that you had been replaced with a corpse doll," Gu Xiulan said reproachfully.

Ling Qi hunched her shoulders defensively.

"I'm sorry about that," she mumbled, looking away. "I underestimated how strong the pills I was using were. And I'm also sorry I haven't talked to you in a while. I didn't mean to be rude."

Gu Xiulan hummed thoughtfully as she gave the laces one last tug. Satisfied, she stopped toying with the glove and faced Ling Qi properly.

"I was a bit put out," she admitted, meeting Ling Qi's eyes and resting her hands on her hips. "Really, if one is going to perform heavy cultivation, it is only polite to inform your friends first. You are such a difficult girl sometimes."

Ling Qi thought that was a pretty unfair assessment coming from Gu Xiulan, but she chose not to say so.

"I'll remember next time," she assured the other girl. "I've just been really focused. I really am sorry." She wasn't used to apologizing, but it seemed the right thing to do.

"I will forgive you this time. I suppose allowances can be made given the situation." Gu Xiulan waved her hand, already seeming to have dismissed her irritation.

"Did you wish to accompany me to the mineral spring today? I did notice you had been using it in the last week. Have you gained a preference for late night baths?"

Ling Qi glanced around. There were still a few people in earshot so she decided to keep her answer vague.

"It's been helpful with what I've been cultivating lately. Thank you for showing me the place. I wouldn't mind a dip, but I actually wanted to see if you wanted to do something else today."

Gu Xiulan raised an eyebrow.

"Water, then? I suppose that does suit you," she mused quietly. "Well, I don't mind doing something else although I hope you will show me the fruits of your labor at some point. I am quite curious as to what has caused you to be so driven."

"What did you have in mind then?"

Ling Qi grimaced internally as she steeled herself to say the words that would bring her doom.

"I was thinking about what we've talked about, and... I wanted to ask for your help." She clasped her hands in front of her stomach and bowed, remembering Bai Meizhen's chiding lessons on etiquette.

"Do you think you could help me... ah, clean up a little?" she continued awkwardly, raising her head and gesturing vaguely to her hair.

She didn't like the way Gu Xiulan's eyes lit up or the teasing grin that appeared on her features.

"Really?" Gu Xiulan drew the word out as amusement danced in her eyes. "And what brought this on? Ah, is it that Gan fellow? Or maybe the Zhang boy?"

"I had noticed the way you stare at Instructor Zhou on occasion. I had thought your attention seemed unusually rapt. Is that your type then? I personally prefer a more refined kind of man, but I suppose the rough and burly look isn't bad."

Ling Qi let out a strangled sound even as she flushed darkly. Who even was this Zhang person Gu Xiulan mentioned? If Gu Xiulan had noticed her looking at Elder Zhou, did that mean *other* people had seen her looking at Elder Zhou? Had *he* noticed? Damn her nonexistent ancestors, of course he had; he was an Elder.

"N-no, I mean, I'm not really. I just get distracted sometimes and focus too much on the lesson-" She found herself gesturing uselessly with her hands.

"And this is really nothing like that! I just thought it would be-" She couldn't exactly say she was just doing it to appease Gu Xiulan, which lead to her trailing off rather pathetically.

"No worries now. There's nothing wrong with appreciating fine sights. It's not as if you are the only one," Gu Xiulan said comfortingly. "Why don't we go clean up, and I shall see what I can do to help afterward? It'll be fun."

Gu Xiulan seemed pretty pleased so Ling Qi supposed that was mission accomplished.

She wasn't a fan of the teasing though. Even if she could get... distracted sometimes, she shouldn't even think about things like that given who she was. It was the same reason why she was reluctant to do this outing with Gu Xiulan in the first place. The last thing she wanted was to give the impression that she was willing or interested in being someone's accessory or even worse.

Even a noble like Gu Xiulan couldn't escape it. Gu Xiulan was engaged to that jackass Fan Yu after all. In comparison, Ling Qi wouldn't even have the advantage of getting any respect due to her family name.

Still, Ling Qi had set herself on this course so she endured Gu Xiulan's teasing, eventually steering the conversation to other things while they took the time to soak a bit. Once she had been deflected to other topics, chatting with Gu Xiulan was more pleasant and allowed her to catch up on what she had missed in recent days.

Han Jian had advanced to Yellow Soul, and was preparing himself to begin working to advance into Silver Physique. He was actually off with Han Fang working on that now. The mute boy's spiritual cultivation lagged, but it seemed he too was ready to begin the physical breakthrough.

It wasn't too hard to detect that Gu Xiulan was a little miffed to be left out of that. She would need a little more time to ready herself for Yellow though.

As for Fan Yu... he had thrown himself into training hard. Gu Xiulan didn't seem interested in talking about him.

It wasn't too hard to convince Gu Xiulan to show Ling Qi around the mountain's market area under the excuse that she wouldn't want to always have to borrow things from the fiery girl. It did unfortunately steer things back to the topics she had been avoiding as they walked the wide path that wound around to the south side of the mountain's base.

"...The price is a tad much, but I really would suggest the rose petal oil I mentioned. You've let yourself grow so unkempt. You really need something with rejuvenating qualities to fix those split ends before we worry about straightening." Gu Xiulan chatted cheerfully at Ling Qi's side as they approached the large stone gate that marked the beginning of the market.

Ling Qi could see a number of other disciples, many older than her, moving through the neatly laid out streets beyond the gate. A waft of strange scents reached her, along with a mixture of perfume, medicine, spice, and other things that often plagued open markets.

"I suppose," Ling Qi responded noncommittally. "How much are we talking about? I have no idea how much a spirit stone is worth as money," she added with more interest since that was more useful information.

Gu Xiulan paused, giving Ling Qi a look of slight frustration. Ling Qi winced. She really needed to work on appearing more interested in what the girl was talking about.

“Well, you should not worry. I can spare a few stones to allow you to have the necessities,” Gu Xiulan said dismissively. “The ban on communication will be ending along with the truce soon after all.

“But to answer your question... I think it’s about one hundred silver to a red spirit stone? That sounds right if I recall my lessons correctly.”

Ling Qi’s eye twitched at that blithe statement. One hundred silver... she had felt rich after stealing close to thirty. She was pretty sure you could feed a family of six or seven on one hundred, or rent a room on a nice street for a year.

“Oh,” she responded faintly. “How much do the things you were talking about cost?”

They had passed under the gates now and were among the crowd. For once, Ling Qi didn’t feel nervous. It seemed the older disciples either didn’t know or didn’t care about her.

Or they were better at hiding it.

“All together? Perhaps two or three spirit stones once we haggle them down a bit. No more than a trifle. I still have a good supply of the allowance Mother and Father gave me.”

It was hard for Ling Qi to not let out a frustrated sigh at that answer. Even now, with the value of hundreds of silver in her pockets, she was still poor.

“You don’t have to buy me anything,” Ling Qi said as they passed a stone hut advertising ‘Fatty’s Medicine Feasthall’. What kind of name was that for a shop?

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back.”

Gu Xiulan gave her one of those measuring looks out of the corner of her eye.

“And I have said that you need not worry about it,” she replied lightly. “Something as small as this is not worth quibbling over. Of course I want you to look your best - and not just so you can catch the eye of those rugged fellows you like so much.”

Ling Qi’s cheeks colored again even as she hunched her shoulders.

"I told you it's not like that. But fine. I won't keep refusing," she relented, knowing that the other girl would probably feel insulted if she kept refusing. "Anyway, do you know if they buy talismans here?"

The noble girl blinked at the sudden change in subject as the two of them turned a corner, moving away from the smaller shops near the entrance to enter a street lined with signs advertising less practical and more feminine products.

"I suppose so. If at a price much reduced from the value. Have you made an acquisition recently?" Gu Xiulan asked curiously.

"Well... I was thinking about that staff I got during the test. I'm not sure it's really suited for me, you know? I thought maybe I could trade it for something that fits me better." Ling Qi really hoped the other girl wasn't going to take offense. There were other reasons to get rid of it too, but she didn't want to say them aloud for fear her companion labeling her a coward.

Gu Xiulan tilted her head to the side as she continued to lead Ling Qi through the street.

"Is that so? I suppose I can understand now that I know you better. You are rather unsuited to Wood techniques.

"Still, you will lose most of the value of an item like that by simply selling it. A direct trade might be better if you could manage it. Perhaps a Water enhancing talisman? That would be appropriate for someone in your position as that element contains many useful support arts."

Ling Qi was relieved that Gu Xiulan hadn't taken offense.

"That would probably work better," she replied. "So I'll just have to try and find someone willing to trade?"

Stopping in front of a particularly flowery shop, Gu Xiulan smiled.

"Yes, that would likely be for best, but let us leave that aside for now. We are here," she continued cheerfully, heading for the door. Ling Qi sighed as she followed her. At least she knew where the market was and could come back on her own.

The next couple of hours were spent pretty unproductively. Ling Qi did her best to remain interested and invested as Gu Xiulan showed her a dizzying array of scents and oils and other cosmetics, chattering happily about their effects and which ones would suit her best. In the end, she ended up with a small leather case containing a number of

little clay bottles, application brushes, and other things she wasn't quite sure what she was meant to do with.

That didn't mean she was done. Gu Xiulan insisted on at least helping her get her hair in order, which was a nerve-wracking hour where she had to sit still with another person's hands on her scalp. The 'rejuvenating' hair oil Gu Xiulan had bought her was applied, followed by her recalcitrant locks being braided in a manner similar to the other girl's style. It didn't really look bad, she supposed, after looking into the other girl's mirror. Her normally frizzy hair was shinier and less flyaway.

Ling Qi begged off of using the rest of the stuff, citing the need to get to her lessons. She was not going to be able to avoid it forever though. She was pretty sure Gu Xiulan would feel unhappy and insulted if she ignored her gift entirely. Honestly, she would feel guilty for spitting on the other girl's generosity. She would just have to try and keep it simple.



## Bonus 5: The Great Sects

The History of the Great Sects is a long and honorable one, stretching back to the first dynasty. Though their rise to prominence and prestige is much more recent, the Sect system is one almost as old as the empire itself. However it is only the infinite wisdom of his divine eminence, Emperor An, that has allowed the Sects to become as important and productive as they are in the modern day.

However, it remains important to study and understand the Sects' more humble origins, which provide the foundation for the system which brings such glory to the Empire today. The first sects were humble things founded amidst the misty valleys of Celestial peaks province during the First Dynasty, in the wake of the strife that followed the death of the inimitable Sage Emperor. The Sects were born from the remnants of scattered families and settlements as places to preserve their knowledge and arts against the dissolution of time. More powerful clans allowed these groups a degree of succor in exchange for tribute, and for many millenia, the sects existed as just that, a minor matter beneath the notice of the imperial throne.

Some wise clan heads came to use the Sects as testing grounds, providing them funding, or reducing their tribute in exchange for research into arts and formations, the fruits of which went were delivered the sects ruling clan. The risks inherent in such research were thus passed on to the much less valuable folk who made up much of a Sect's numbers, rather than talented scions of high bloodlines. Some even came to rely upon their sects to train their militaries, in an echo of the things to come. However, those of the first dynasty lacked the superlative wisdom of Emperor An in organizing such matters, and as such the practice fell out of favor due to several unfortunate insurrections brought on by poor management.

Throughout the First and Second dynasties, as well as the modern third, the practice of allowing sects spread throughout the empire, though they remained but a footnote in the annals of the Empire's great clans, toiling ever to study and improve upon arts for their patrons, and taking in those of lesser blood who were beneath the eyes of the great clans, but whose talents might otherwise have gone to banditry or other unvirtuous pursuits.

However, that came to change in the last millenia. The ruling dukes of the Emerald Seas province had grown decadent and foolish, neglecting their duties to the land and its peoples, and as is expected, the perfidious and greedy tribes of the Wall, the great mountain range which marks the southern border of the Empire saw this weakness clearly. Under the Great Khan Ogodei, the barbarians laid waste to the province, riding swiftly through the skies to sack villages, towns and cities alike.

The clans of Emerald Seas scrambled to keep up with the barbarian, without any effective central leadership, their defenses floundered, and the wily barbarians slipped easily through their disorganized defenses. Of course, our wise Emperor Si, father of the illustrious An, was aware of the plight of his people, but the ancient pacts which bind the Empire together held his hands. The foolish dukes of emerald seas insisted that the problem was under control and refused his generous aid, allowing only a trickle of soldiers and men in to 'assist' their poorly led and disorganized forces.

Emperor An, then only Fourth Prince was selected to lead these forces. Our wise future emperor found himself horrified by the waste and hedonism he found in the south. In their high unassailable capital, the Hui of Emerald Seas still behaved as if this were but a minor raid!

It is here that Emperor An made a decision for which many unable to see the virtue of his actions criticized him for at the time. Refusing to accept the orders that he remain at the disposal of the duke, the Prince struck out into more contested lands, unilaterally invoking Imperial authority.

There in the south, which had largely fallen to the barbarian Khan, he found the bastion of imperial strength and resistance. It was not the clans, who had remained embroiled in their squabbles even as they were overrun, but rather, a collection of Sects, who had banded together for survival.

We will not go further into the history of the war with Ogodei in this work. Suffice to say that under the prince's superlative leadership, and the core of strength arising from the Sect's the barbarians were defeated. In the wake of the Khan's death the Great Sect's were born.

When the prince returned to his father's side, even gentle and merciful Emperor Si was horrified by the poor stewardship of servants in emerald seas, and even their ducal peers scorned their cowardice and inaction. So when the emperor decreed that certain lands and privileges would be granted to three sects on the southern border, the complaints of the Hui clan were ignored.

Such is the Great Sect System. Answering directly to the Imperial Throne, these bastions train warriors and research arts as they always did, but now, they also serve the purpose as rallying points from which the Imperial Throne can reach out in times of need. Though the lands of course, remain property of the provinces they stand in, in times of emergency an Emperor or Empress can take direct control in order to organize defenses more effectively, without breaking old agreements.

However, the rise of these sects did not go unnoticed by the clans of the empire, with the backing of the imperial seat, their prestige was now such that many clans wished to enroll their second sons and daughters in the sects programs, in order to expand the clans knowledge and garner favor. This influx of noble applicants multiplied the Sects funding many times over from their humble beginnings.

In the centuries that followed under Emperor An, the concept has since spread far and wide and now each province holds at least one Great Sect, save for Ebon Rivers, Golden Fields, and the recently settled Western Territories.

-Excerpt from the introduction of a scholarly treatise extolling the virtues of the Sect System.

## Chapter 29 - Mountainside Clash

That evening, after Elder Su's lesson, she met up with Li Suyin to begin their mountain expedition. To avoid being followed, they had agreed to meet on a small plateau that was well off the beaten path but also on the way to their destination.

Ling Qi was surprised when it wasn't just Li Suyin who arrived on the windy cliffside. On reflection, she shouldn't have been. The two of them only knew about the icy woods because of Su Ling. Why would Li Suyin leave her roommate out of things?

"Why the fuck do you smell like that?" the surly fox girl said by way of greeting as she reached the top, Li Suyin arrived behind her, red-faced but not breathing as heavily as she had in the previous expedition.

"Do you really think it's a great idea to be wearing perfume for something like this?"

Ling Qi blinked. The oils Gu Xiulan had applied to her hair had a faint floral scent. Was it really that strong? She couldn't even smell it anymore herself.

"I'll wash up in that stream we have to cross on the way. Excuse me for being busy," she replied defensively.

"Don't know why you're using that crap in the first place. Thought you were one of the halfway sensible ones," Su Ling grumbled.

"You need a breather, Li Suyin?" Su Ling asked over her shoulder as the blue-haired girl straightened up with a determined look.

"I-I'm fine," Li Suyin insisted as she caught her breath.

"A-and, I don't think it's a problem that you look... nice? I don't think perfume will be much more noticeable than a natural scent to spirit beasts. Don't most of them have qi enhanced senses?" Li Suyin's voice shrank until she was barely audible by the end under Su Ling's glare.

Su Ling's tail twitched in agitation.

"Whatever. None of my business if you want to smear crap on yourself. It's not like we're hunting," Su Ling huffed. "And Li Suyin's right that the dangerous stuff is gonna be able to scent us anyway. You sure you want to do this?"

“Yes,” Ling Qi responded tightly. “We all need whatever advantages we can get, right?”

“I agree,” Li Suyin added seriously. “I have things I need to accomplish.”

“Fine. Not gonna argue about it. Let’s get climbing,” Su Ling replied brusquely, eyeing the steep path leading further up the mountain.

Ling Qi found herself climbing the steep path with ease, and even on occasion, outpacing Su Ling. She could already feel the soothing rush of being immersed in darkness, and it made it easier to move quickly. Su Ling gave her a few suspicious looks, sniffing uncertainly at the air when Ling Qi passed her.

Li Suyin still proved to be the limit on their pace. Even with her improved physical cultivation, the scholarly girl simply couldn’t keep up with them. However, she was not nearly as slow as she had been before.

Still, Ling Qi didn’t begrudge slowing down. It was only with Li Suyin’s help that they’d have any real hope of finding a better qi locus.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the woods. As the weather was clear and the nearly full moon was bright, the others didn’t seem to have too much trouble.

For Ling Qi, the night vision was still strange. Without light, color was washed out, but she had no trouble seeing just as well as she could during the day. Glancing up at the moon, she dipped her head briefly. Even if it wasn’t the right phase, she could say a silent thanks.

The three of them fell silent once they reached the part of the woods that they had refrained from entering before. The only sound came from Li Suyin’s painfully loud footsteps and the rustling cloth of their gowns. Ling Qi couldn’t do anything but keep a sharp eye out for beasts attracted by the noise.

Being able to see perfectly well at night was useful but also disquieting. It let her clearly see the shapes of the crows perched high in the trees and the dark shapes of predators lurking at the edges of her vision. It wasn’t perfect; several times Su Ling had to stop them with a hissed warning, pointing out patches of creeper vines that were carnivorous or leading them away from places marked by the scent of a mountain bear or other predator.

For Ling Qi’s part, she stopped the fox girl from putting her foot into the burrow of

something hidden in the underbrush, as well as helping the group as a whole avoid a few other blunders.

All the while, Li Suyin squinted into the dark. Ling Qi could tell that Li Suyin wasn't searching with her eyes. This went on for the better part of two hours as they searched the woods. Several times, Ling Qi saw a predator in the dark - a mountain lion, an owl big enough to have claws the size and length of her fingers, and once, something that looked like a scrawny wolf - but none of them attacked, perhaps deciding that their group was not easy prey.

She had an odd itching feeling on the back of her neck though, as if she were being watched.

Eventually, Li Suyin's senses lead them to an open cliff on the far side of the woods that looked out over the southern mountain side and the peaks beyond. The landscape visible was beautiful even at night with seemingly endless peaks extending as far as the eye could see. The cliff was surrounded by high ridges on either side with the thick woods they had traveled through blocking off its rear.

None of that was what drew Ling Qi's eye. Rather, what drew it was the broad crack in the stone cliff from which a faint silver mist wafted. The edges of the cleft were lined with glittering red and yellow crystal that were all too familiar. They were obviously spirit stones, if more than she had seen in one place before and not carved into uniformity.

"A natural spirit stone deposit," Li Suyin breathed out softly, looking at it in wonder. "And... ah, that mist! Can you feel it resonating with your Argent Foundation?"

Ling Qi could feel an odd quivering in the 'skin' that had formed around her dantian when she advanced to the third stage of Argent Soul. Was that what Li Suyin was talking about?

While she was thinking, Su Ling had reached out to grab the blue-haired girl's shoulder, her body language tense.

"Stop. There's something here," she said harshly. "I can't smell anything, but... we aren't alone."

Ling Qi nodded. She could feel it now that she was looking, a strange stillness in the air. A moment later, her instincts screamed at her to move, and she did so, qi surging as she felt the edges of herself blurring into the darkness around her. She landed from her sideways dive in a controlled roll as a thunderous crash broke the silence of the night.

The ridge beside her seemed to have come to life. What she had taken for a large rock formation now rose on two trunk-like limbs, even as it withdrew the 'arm' that it had just tried to crush her with. It was vaguely humanoid and stood nearly four meters tall. Its 'head' was little more than a vague lump with two glittering crystal growths where eyes would normally be.

"What the fuck is that?" Su Ling hissed, backing away with wide eyes.

"It's a Sediment Guardian! T-they often appear around such deposits, seemingly spontaneously generated from the natural qi expelled by the stones. They come in several..." Li Suyin was backing up as well, panic in her eyes. She appeared to be reciting a book passage from memory.

"Can we kill it?" Ling Qi cut her off in a tight voice as she rose back to her feet, backing up as well.

This wasn't a great arena to fight in. The area was barely eight meters from the start of the woods to the edge of the cliff and only twenty across from ridge to ridge. There wouldn't be a lot of room to dodge. At least the spirit didn't seem to be in a hurry as it rose to its full height and took a single lumbering step forward.

"I don't have anything that can hurt a damn rock," Su Ling said as she eyed the slowly approaching thing warily. "I might be able to confuse it though, but hell if I know how that thing senses stuff."

"Vibration and sound," Li Suyin replied immediately. It seemed when Li Suyin panicked, she became an encyclopedia. "Ah... Supposedly, the crystal 'eyes' are a weakness, as well as the nodes on its back, but..."

Ling Qi fought down her own fear as she continued to back away to stay out of the range of the thing's limbs. She was the closest, and Su Ling and Li Suyin were about four meters behind her near the woods. They could probably escape, but then, this expedition would have been all for nothing.

Ling Qi doubted her ability to hurt the thing, 'eyes' or no, but... She glanced toward the cliff. Would it survive falling off? Could she manage to lure it over the edge with Forgotten Vale Melody? Su Ling said she could confuse it too. Maybe if the two of them worked together...

Unlike the bo staff, which Ling Qi had taken to leaving tucked under her bed, wrapped in cloth, Ling Qi had begun carrying her flute with her at all times since she mastered the first measure of Forgotten Vale Melody. She had even taken some effort to design a holder for the instrument in her sleeve so it was as simple as flicking her wrist to get the flute in her hand.

... Well, it was simple *now*. Practicing and adjusting the holder until she could do it without fail had taken more time than she would care to admit.

“Do it, Su Ling!” she snapped, her nerves vanishing the hesitation she would normally have felt at giving someone else an order. “Buy me a few seconds at least. Li Suyin, stay back, alright?”

“Tch.” The fox-eared girl didn’t otherwise protest although she gave the flute in Ling Qi’s hand a curious glance as Li Suyin retreated further. Su Ling’s long fluffy tail uncoiled from around her waist to wave behind her as she glared at the Guardian. She extended her hand, a single finger pointing at the towering mountain of rock. A single wavering ball of ghostly blue-grey fire flickered into view behind her head as she did.

“Get lost!” she growled at the spirit.

Ling Qi wasn’t sure at first what the girl meant to accomplish, but then, fire the same color as the orb behind her flared up around the creature’s crystal eyes and the Guardian jerked in place as if struck. It let out a furious rumble like an avalanche in the making and swiped its arm at the empty air to its left, smashing into the cliff with enough force that Ling Qi felt the vibration under her feet. It stamped one trunk-like leg to much the same effect.

“What did you do?!” Li Suyin asked in panic from somewhere behind as Ling Qi raised her flute to her lips, trying not to let her hands shake. The thing’s furious bellows were intimidating as it flailed its limbs, particularly since it was still moving slowly in their direction even if it paused every few steps to swing at nothing.

“You said it used sound!” Su Ling snapped, her hand shaking as she kept a finger pointed steadily at the thing’s head. Her fire cast her face in pallid light.

“I figured the sound of a few dozen miners pounding on it would keep it distracted!”

“Just try to help me lead it off the cliff! Can you adjust the direction?” Ling Qi called out, ignoring the byplay. It was the last chance she was going to get to talk for a bit because she finally began to play.



As the first soft and almost whimsical notes of the Melody rang out over the cliff, Ling Qi began to circle, moving closer to the cliffside as the mist began to pour from every hole in her flute. The mist rapidly spread in a shadowy cloud to consume much of the cliffside. It took concentration to expand the musician's protection over to Su Ling. She would just have to hope that Li Suyin would hold still. Thankfully, the creature turned towards her almost immediately as she played.

Perhaps it was the qi-charged sound of the song, or perhaps it had to do with the second ball of fire appearing behind Su Ling's head, but Ling Qi definitely had the thing's attention. Now, she just had to hope she could affect the thing with the second technique of her Forgotten Vale Melody. She doubted she could get it to walk off the cliff on its own if its senses weren't further clouded still.

By now, Ling Qi was feeling more confident. The shaking in her hands had subsided, lending the music a clearer pitch as she began playing the next portion of the song. She continued steadily backing toward the edge of the cliff as the Guardian stomped toward her, no longer doing so at a leisurely pace. Although there were no visible effects, she felt her qi sink in through the thing's hide and soak in through its rigid, inflexible channels to mingle with the wild qi of Su Ling's technique.

This seemed to infuriate the spirit even more. Its rumbling voice rose in a roar like a stone being split in twain by a hammer. It suddenly lunged at her with frightening speed, its arms raised to crush the apparent source of its irritation.

Ling Qi jumped backwards on instinct, nearly fumbling the melody as the thing's massive fists smashed into the ground where she had just been. She stood at the very edge of the cliff now.

The rock spirit let out another furious rumble and shook its head like a bull being pestered by flies. Its limbs hammered the ground, apparently uselessly, although the crack of stone worried her. If she could just get it to lunge again, she could do this.

Ling Qi considered fully activating her movement technique, but in the end, she decided against it. The creature wasn't too difficult to dodge, and she wasn't yet at the point where she could afford to spend qi so freely.

Driven to fury by whatever Su Ling was inflicting on its senses along with her song, it wasn't long before the creature lunged again, swinging wildly with its huge club fists. Ling Qi dodged desperately to the side as its rage seemed to have lent it further speed. She winced as she felt the wind of its attack's passage. The close call made her fumble

her flute, the song fading away.

The Sediment Guardian teetered on the edge of the cliff, having managed to stop itself just in time. Ling Qi felt dread pooling in her stomach as it began to turn toward her.

“Will you just fall already?!” Su Ling’s voice snapped from deeper inside the dissipating mist. Ling Qi glanced at her in time to see the twin balls of pale fire behind Su Ling’s head shoot forward like tiny falling stars.

Instincts screaming at her to move, she dove away as far as she could from the guardian. The fires struck the ground and exploded.

The fires failed to do more than scorch the guardian, but the ground was not so sturdy. Dirt and rock crumbled, and the spirit fell as the weakened cliffside collapsed under its weight. Ling Qi held her breath before the creature’s landing resolved with a mighty crash some fifty or sixty meters below.

“Is it dead?” Li Suyin asked nervously as the mist finished clearing, daring to move up beside Su Ling once more. She was wringing her hands, looking decidedly pale.

“I fucking hope so,” Su Ling muttered. “I can’t do too many more blasts like that.”

Su Ling had the same irritable expression as usual, but she seemed tired. The glance she shot Ling Qi held some respect now though.

For her part, Ling Qi was the closest to the edge of the cliff and thus, the one who peered over it... carefully. Sure enough, the remains of the guardian were scattered across the base of the cliff.

Ling Qi kind of wanted to climb down and look through its remains. She could see something glittering in its shattered corpse. It was shiny, and she wanted it.

“It looks like we’re clear,” she called back as she straightened. She could climb down later after they had figured out what the deal with this deposit was. “So, Li Suyin, do you think...”

“What a beautiful melody that was.”

Ling Qi stiffened as she heard a soft, masculine voice speak up from behind her. She whipped around and saw Su Ling doing the same. It took a moment for her to spot the source of the voice because he was seated in the upper branches of a tree. It was the odd boy from spiritual cultivation who had commented on Li Suyin’s hands. Huang Da, if

she remembered correctly.

The thin, lanky boy dropped down gracefully to the ground as she spotted him. He seemed different, more energetic than he was in class. The unsettling lopsided grin on his normally expressionless face didn't help, nor did the sickle clasped loosely in his right hand.

"What do you want?" Ling Qi asked flatly, already falling back into a defensive stance. She could see Su Ling doing the same, one of her curved knives having found its way into her hand. Li Suyin was pale-faced and had slipped behind the fox girl.

"That is a bit of a difficult question," Huang Da responded thoughtfully, lingering at the treeline as he cast his sightless gaze over them. "Had you asked me when I set out tonight, I would have said that I merely wished to observe my lovely scholar for the evening."

Li Suyin made a strangled sound that Ling Qi found entirely appropriate for the situation, even as Su Ling shifted in front of the blue-haired girl, baring her sharp teeth in an unfriendly fashion.

"But then, I saw you," Huang Da continued, gesturing toward Ling Qi with his sickle. "The way you bloomed in the Dark. I had not paid you much mind before. To think there was another such vision of loveliness right under my nose..."

Ling Qi felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickling. She preferred this guy better when he didn't talk and seemed half-asleep. She also didn't miss his emphasis on the word Dark; he must be able to sense the element she was using somehow.

"Thank you. I think," Ling Qi managed, mostly masking her real feelings. She held back from saying what she actually wanted to say due to her interest in not starting a fight.

"Just spit it out already, ya creep." Su Ling was apparently unable to do the same. "If you just wanted to do your shitty flirting, you wouldn't have popped up here."

"Mongrels like you should know better than to bark at your betters. You should control your pet better, Li Suyin," Huang Da responded irritably. "But yes, I'm afraid I can't let this chance pass by. There are only three spots at the top, and that Ji Rong is all but certain to get one. To have to choose between two such beauties... How unfortunate."

Ling Qi bristled. She hated this guy's attitude and the implication that he would just... choose which one of them was allowed to use it. Her emotions were tempered by the

fact that he was apparently confident enough to appear before all three of them like this. There was also the fact that he had managed to follow them without being noticed.

“You know you can’t attack us, right? The truce is still in effect. You can’t make any of us stay away from this place.”

“Rules and laws are relative,” Huang Da replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “And all things are not as they seem. You should know that well enough, Ling Qi. Did not Bai Meizhen harm someone on your behalf only a few weeks ago? The truce is not nearly so ironclad out here in the wild. So I really am afraid that I can only let one of you stay here with me, how sad...”

Li Suyin was trembling behind Su Ling, who looked ready to outright assault the boy physically if her body language was any indication. This was a problem. Ling Qi needed every advantage she could get, but she couldn’t bring herself to play along with this asshole to get it. That didn’t even take into consideration that she would have to betray Li Suyin and Su Ling to do so.

He had to be confident to confront them all like this, but if they all attacked together...

## Chapter 30 - Mountainside Clash 2

It was probably telling that the first guy to ever compliment her looks was both a complete creep and also physically blind, Ling Qi thought irritably. It was an irrelevant thought but one that crossed her mind nonetheless as she thought furiously on how to resolve this situation in her - their - favor.

If she kept him talking, it would give her more time to think. She was wary of being the first one to attack; he could be bluffing about the laxness in the Elders' enforcement of the rules, trying to trick them into breaking truce first..

"So... I'm thinking that I see a few flaws with your plan," Ling Qi pointed out politely, if dryly.

Huang Da cocked his head to the side. Ling Qi's instincts, honed from years in the street and perhaps a little from observing her mother and her clients, told her this guy was bad news. He was the kind of guy who wouldn't just hurt someone because he had something to gain but because he enjoyed it.

"Is that so? I suppose I could explain some of my reasoning if it would gain your favor," he mused, not seeming perturbed by Ling Qi's observation.

It was difficult to keep a straight face, particularly with Su Ling shooting her a suspicious look.

"How do you figure that you're going to keep this to yourself? Whatever you say, I doubt the Elders are going to just ignore two or three people disappearing before the truce is even over. Especially since two of us are in the advanced courses." Ling Qi suppressed a wince at the fox girl's scowl but pressed on. "But if we don't... disappear, we can just share the location, you know. This is assuming I don't just give it to Bai Meizhen."

Huang Da hummed thoughtfully to himself, the sickle in his hand twitching with the tightening and loosening of his grip.

"That is a pretty good point," he admitted. "For all that you lack my lovely scholar's refinement, you have a bit of wit to go with your resplendent qi and grace. I think you may overestimate the Elder's interest in such things. But I may be wrong. Some may cleave closely to the supposed spirit of the rules. Suffice to say, I am confident that whoever leaves this place will not speak of it, even without such permanent solutions," Huang Da finished pleasantly.

Ling Qi swallowed. That wasn't ominous at all. Su Ling certainly thought so given the way the tension in her stance ratcheted up.

"Well, call me convinced," Ling Qi said flatly. "But there's no way that I'm going to willingly stay with you alone or let you take advantage of Li Suyin. You'd probably just slit our throats afterward anyway."

"That kind of accusation is just uncalled for. I'm hardly some barbarian brute," Huang Da replied, sounding affronted.

"U-um, can we please... please not fight? I-I understand that you want to win the competition. I-I don't know why you want access to the archives so badly, but it can't be worth hurting your fellow disciples like this. Couldn't we come to an agreement instead?" Li Suyin asked plaintively. "I would... I would really appreciate that, and..."

Li Suyin trailed off as Huang Da shook his head.

"Your naivety is sweet. A lovely trait for a lovely girl. But no, that is a request I cannot fulfill. I will not be the loser in this competition," he said regretfully. "Now, I think that is enough chatter. Sadly, it seems neither of you seem interested in joining me. I imagine you will be pliable enough once we have some time alone, Li Suyin."

Su Ling began to snarl something, no longer able to keep a leash on her temper, but Ling Qi didn't have time to listen. Her time in Elder Zhou's lessons had not been for nothing; she saw the minute twitch in his shoulders and the change in his stance so she was ready when he moved, rushing her in a shadowy blur.

Even with dark qi flooding her legs and blurring her shape, she was unable to completely avoid what came next. She ducked the initial swing of the straight edged sickle but was unprepared when his other hand clenched and moved. She felt something heavy and spiked smash against her ribs. Although she managed to move with the impact, it left a heavy bruise.

Ling Qi could see a glittering black chain extending from the bottom of the sickle now, and the malevolent-looking spiked weight at its end was now a spinning blur as Huang Da adjusted his footing to face her. Her ribs felt cold and numb where he had struck her, but she didn't have time to think about that or the excited and admiring look she saw on his face. He hadn't been expecting her to dodge even that well.

Ling Qi flicked a knife into her free hand and plucked at the threads of the wind around her before flinging the knife at center mass. She didn't need a perfect hit; even a nick

would be enough to trigger the Zephyr's Breath technique and slow him down. She would be essentially tapped out on qi, but she couldn't afford to hold back at this point.

Her first throw was merely a feint, but it did its job of drawing the spinning chain and weight up and out of position as she dropped her flute and flicked a second knife into her other hand. This one flew true, and she had the pleasure of seeing the boy's blank eyes widen as the knife passed under the sickle blade he'd tried to use to bat the knife out of the way. It struck true on his side but bounced away in a flare of black qi rather than dig into his flesh.

This didn't matter to her though. She felt the currents of air take hold around him just in time for Su Ling to charge into the fray, ghostly fire glittering on her fingers and knife in her hand.

Huang Da dodged to the side to avoid Su Ling's knife, but his movements, hindered by Ling Qi's technique, were a hair too slow to avoid the wispy burst of fire from her other hand. He came out of it with only a few embers burning on his robes and hair and a burn on the hand holding the swinging chain, which seemed to have blocked the brunt of the fire. He looked thoroughly displeased.

"Get out of my way," he snapped, a twitch of his hand sending the glittering black chain darting out. Su Ling avoided it, but she was unprepared as it changed direction mid-air to coil around her arm, leaving her unable to dodge as he brought the sickle blade down. The blade slashed down from her shoulder to her waist with a spray of blood.

Ling Qi went pale at the sight, but instinct drilled into her during training with Instructor Zhou prevented her from freezing at the sight. She stumbled as she felt the bruise on her ribs throb painfully, and the numbness spread from it, making her right arm tremble violently.

Some kind of poison?

This just made it all the more urgent to finish this fight quickly. Huang Da's weapon was still tangled up with Su Ling, and she took the opportunity to fish out the Qi card imbued with Bai Meizhen's technique from where it was tucked under the collar of her gown. She pushed her qi into it, focusing fully on the dangerous boy as she did so.

The brush of Bai Meizhen's qi against her own was like ice in her veins, the numbing, deadly cold of impossibly deep waters. It was a heady rush. For a moment, she felt as if she were a giant staring down at a pathetic insect from on high, his fate entirely hers to decide. It passed quickly enough, but it was clear that it had struck the boy successfully.

He was pale-faced and trembling, not even looking at Su Ling as she slumped to her knees in front of him.

Despite his seeming paralysis, his chain seemed to have a will of its own, uncoiling without a single motion from him. There was still an unsettling intensity in his blind gaze, an undercurrent of excitement and want beneath the supernatural fear she had inflicted on him.

The disturbing moment passed when Su Ling let out a snarl and raised her head.

“D’n’t you fuckin’ ign’re me,” she slurred, clearly in a great deal of pain. “Burn.”

Her final word was very clear, and Huang Da barely had a moment to tear his eyes away from Ling Qi before the tiny embers still smoldering on his robes erupted into blazing blue-grey fires.

Huang Da cried out in pain, stumbling back as Su Ling collapsed to the ground, having expended herself with that last move. The Huang Da that emerged from the flames was decidedly worse for the wear, his robe burnt away to expose his thin physique and angry red burns covering his skin.

“I really did not imagine you were this beautiful. To reduce me enough that a beast could do this. To make me feel this way...” His voice was manic as he stared at Ling Qi. “But it’s time to end this.”

“It is.”

Ling Qi blinked in surprise as she heard Li Suyin speak. She had lost track of the other girl entirely during the fight, so focused she had been on her opponent. So it was shocking to see her standing behind Huang Da, having just laid a hand on his back. The boy arched his back and retched, coughing up blood and bits of flesh, losing his grip on the sickle half of his weapon as he did so.

The boy spun instinctively, backhanding Li Suyin across the face, causing the girl to crumple to the ground with a cry of pain. Whatever poison Huang Da had inflicted on Ling Qi seemed to be fading thankfully as the numbness in her side seemed to subside after another painful pulse that left most of her right side and arm numb and useless.

Huang Da’s breathing came out ragged and wet, trickles of blood running down his chin. Though he was still standing Ling Qi could read body language well enough. He was going to run. Whatever Li Suyin had done had pushed him over the line from thinking he



could win.

The question was if she wanted to allow that or not. He had stalked them, tried to intimidate them, and hurt them. She wasn't feeling very merciful, but she wasn't feeling very strong either. She was out of qi, wounded, and surrounded by potential hostages if she couldn't put him down right away.

The decision was taken from her. Her moment of indecision gave Huang Da time to stumble backwards a few steps and rip something off of his wrist with his free hand, vanishing in a burst of starlight.

"...Damn it," Ling Qi cursed under her breath, hands clenching into fists as she stared at the spot he had been.

Ling Qi hurried over to Li Suyin and Su Ling. Li Suyin was already sitting up, moaning weakly. She had tears in her eyes as she cradled her cheek, which was already swelling and bruising purple. Her lips were bloody where her teeth had cut them.

"M fine," Li Suyin murmured at Ling Qi's concerned look. "Check Su Ling."

Ling Qi nodded distractedly, turning the fox girl over so that she was lying on her back.

"What did you do to him?" Ling Qi asked. "And how did you get so close?"

Su Ling was breathing shallowly, blood flowing sluggishly from the wound that extended from her shoulder to her hip. Fortunately, she had been wearing something like a vest of cured leather under her robe, and although the piece of equipment was ruined, it had prevented the cut from being fatal. Ling Qi guessed that Su Ling had been knocked out by the same spreading numbness that had been inflicted on her.

"I-I studied a movement technique... after... things got hard for you. It lets me avoid others when I... when I need to," Li Suyin explained haltingly. "And...it's easier to break things." Li Suyin's shoulders were shaking and further tears welling in her eyes even as she pulled herself over to help with Su Ling. "I can't heal. I don't have the control... but if I just reach in and twist..."

Ling Qi wasn't sure what to say. She wished that the girl could have just made the bastard's heart explode, but she doubted Li Suyin would want to hear that. Whatever Li Suyin had done seemed to have really bothered her. Ling Qi had a feeling that her friend was only holding it together out of a need to make sure Su Ling was okay.

Instead, she just patted Li Suyin's shoulder silently and helped her get Su Ling bandaged up. Su Ling soon stirred to wakefulness.

"Shit," Su Ling cursed as she cracked her eyes open, taking a moment to focus on their faces. "...I get him?"

"No, but we drove him off in the end," Ling Qi said.

Su Ling glanced from Ling Qi's somber face over to Li Suyin, who had her head down with tears still running down her cheeks, and let out a huff.

"Sucks he got away," Su Ling murmured uncertainty. "Guess we're gonna have to come up here together from now on."

"Yeah, probably," Ling Qi muttered. "We should probably head down by way of the cliff once we figure this place out. It'll be shorter, less beasts. We're not in any shape for another fight."

"Yeah, sounds good. I have some rope in my pack," Su Ling responded with a bit more confidence before glancing at Li Suyin and losing it. "...You still gonna be okay to identify stuff?"

"O-of course," Li Suyin responded, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry for that. I-I'll just be a moment."

The site really was amazing. Just sitting around it for an hour or so while everyone caught their breath was enough for Ling Qi to feel her dantian beginning to refill. She could feel the 'skin' she had created with Argent Soul pulsing in time with the mist rising from the vent, growing infinitesimally thicker with each passing moment. It was worth making enemies over, she thought.

Once they could manage to move, they headed down the cliffside and took a look through the remains of the guardian as well. The shiny crystals she had seen turned out to be spirit stones, which a still-distressed Li Suyin had murmured was normal for such things. They divided the jagged natural spirit stones as evenly as they could by weight.

The expedition could only be called a success, but it was only the beginning. The truce, dubious as she now felt it was, would be over soon, and Ling Qi had a feeling that Huang Da wouldn't be content with just licking his wounds and backing down.

## Bonus 6: Charity

"Will you cease your fidgeting?" Gu Xiulan chided irritably, working her hairbrush through the veritable bird's nest that the other girl's hair had become.

Ling Qi grimaced and stilled herself, clutching the arms of the chair she was seated in with a white knuckled grip. "Sorry, not used to this," she replied stiffly.

"So I gathered," Gu Xiulan replied haughtily. At least the other girl was less tense than she had been earlier, while Gu Xiulan had been applying the rejuvenating elixir. She supposed that it was good to know that Ling Qi was so weak to physical contact. It was important to know the flaws in allies as well as enemies after all.

That was rather the point after all. From what she had observed, Ling Qi was rather easy to manipulate. A small show of equitable treatment and a few stones spent on charity were enough to cement a positive relationship. She was rather glad that she had restrained her more aggressive instincts in that regard.

Mother would be proud of her, she was sure, Gu Xiulan thought smugly as she fought the mess the other girl had made of her hair. It was just good sense to acquire those of good talent. Gu Xiulan had always wanted a handmaiden of her own after all.

"Are you sure we can't leave it at this for today?" Ling Qi asked, squirming a bit in her seat.

"What did I just say?" Gu Xiulan replied. "This will be for naught if we leave things half done."

Besides, there was a certain amusement to this. Gu Xiulan had no younger sisters, but doing this did remind her of time spent with younger cousins. She smirked at the memory of little Xu-Xu complaining while she put ribbons in his hair and used him as a dummy for testing her cosmetics.

Ling Qi was certainly oddly childish about this kind of thing, for all that she had proved a competent cultivator. Gu Xiulan chalked it up to the pride of the deprived. Many lesser clans in Golden Fields that had not recovered as well as the Gu still refused the trappings of civilization, as if they were somehow better for choosing to act like filthy sand diggers, barely better than roving beggars and bandits.

Well Ling Qi was sensible enough not to be stubborn about it, which was one thing that she liked about the other girl. Though she came across as a bit of a cringing coward at times, Gu Xiulan had seen the ruthless pragmatism that lay at the core of her. Though

her father had taught her the methods to strike at the body to inflict maximum pain, and her mother had taught her the art of honing word and gesture into weapons, their lessons agreed on one thing. Once one had decided what they wanted, achieving that goal came before everything else.

Honor, face, and prestige were useful tools, but that was all that they were. She suspected that Ling Qi knew that lesson well, even if she hadn't the skill with the tools Gu Xiulan's parents had given her.

Gu Xiulan pursed her lips as she at last pulled the brush free, eyeing Ling Qi's still curled locks with a critical eye. This was probably as good as could be achieved today. It would take more applications of elixir to straighten her hair entirely. "Well, I suppose that will have to do."

She did not comment at the way Ling Qi brightened up. Really the girl could be such an open book. They would have to work on that. Gu Xiulan would just have to keep heckling her she supposed. "Really? Ah, thank you for your help Xiulan," she hurriedly amended her excited declaration.

"Now, now, I did not say we were done," she replied sweetly, laying her hands on Ling Qi's shoulders. "There are a few braiding techniques you should learn first. You need to be able to take care of your own appearance after all."

Ling Qi pressed her lips together, clearly restraining a grimace. "Alright, well that doesn't sound like a bad idea, friends are supposed to do that kind of thing for each other sometimes, right?"

"Why of course," Gu Xiulan replied smoothly. One's immediate retainers and maids were often the ones a noble was closest with after all. She knew that she cared more for Mother's head maid than she did for her actual aunts after all. She would have to work on Ling Qi's vocabulary though.

"I wonder if Bai Meizhen would let me help her," Ling Qi muttered.

Gu Xiulan felt her smile freeze for a moment. That was the biggest problem with her plan. Ling Qi was tied to the Bai scion, and if it came down to opposing her or allowing her plan to fail there was only one choice. Pursuing a goal with one's full abilities did not mean being willing to dive into a poisonous oasis for it. Still she thought her chances good. The Bai were an insular bunch, they rarely recruited their households from those outside their branch clans. "Perhaps," Xiulan said, not letting her concern enter her voice. "In any case, are you ready to begin?"

Ling Qi nodded firmly, and Gu Xiulan grinned, plucking thoughtfully at Ling Qi's hair. "Hmm where shall we begin then..."

"Nothing too complex I hope," Ling Qi replied looking back over her shoulder.

"Of course not, there is no use in moving directly to advanced forms when the student doesn't even have the stances down," Gu Xiulan replied haughtily. "Well, perhaps the swordmaiden's braid would be the simplest starting point, Neither of us has the art or skill for maintaining the more complex patterns in a fight..."

"I'll take your word for it," Ling Qi replied dryly, and Gu Xiulan narrowed her eyes at the slight jibe. Yes, Ling Qi was one to keep.

"As you should," she replied with a sniff. "Well to begin with, gather your hair at the nape of your neck..." Gu Xiulan began, keeping her motions slow so that Ling Qi could follow.

It was good to have a subordinate one could unwind with.

## Chapter 31 - Mountainside Clash 3

Ling Qi's lesson with Elder Zhou that morning was a bit of a disaster. Seeing as she had only had a few hours to rest after their battle with Huang Da, she was still sore, tired, and numb from his poison. She had recovered some motion in her right arm, but it still made the exercises she was expected to perform incredibly painful and awkward.

She powered through, gritting her teeth and forcing herself to keep up with the rear of the pack on the morning run. She avoided being reprimanded by Elder Zhou, and that was all that mattered. She didn't care about the assholes who sneered at her struggles.

The spars were pretty brutal that day, and with how many times she ended up on her back in the dirt, she wanted to scream by the time they were done. She had not had the time to recover her qi so she could not use her techniques. Soon, she promised herself, she would wipe the smug off of a few faces.

Ling Qi was interrupted from her brooding thoughts in the aftermath of the lesson by Han Jian's voice.

"Ling Qi. Hey, Ling Qi." She startled as she looked up from the weapon rack she had been leaning against as class dispersed for the day to find Han Jian and Han Fang looking down at her with concern. Gu Xiulan stood a short distance behind them with her arms crossed, studying her intently.

"You doing alright? I saw you favoring your left side," Han Jian continued when he saw that he actually had her attention.

"I'm fine," Ling Qi responded instinctively, forcing herself to straighten up despite the pain in her ribs. "Just... had a couple rough encounters while I was out exploring last night. I didn't get back till a few hours before training."

She didn't explain the Huang Da encounter because it would almost certainly involve mentioning the vent, and she hadn't run that by Li Suyin and Su Ling yet. This was mostly because Su Ling had almost collapsed when they got to the bottom of the cliff, and Li Suyin had to support her for the rest of the trip back to the residential area.

Han Jian peered at her with a frown on his face, and she squirmed under the inspection. He could probably tell that she was hiding something.

"Alright, if you think you'll be fine. I was going to ask if you wanted to come train with us. I wanted to work on my Dawn's Courage technique now that I've broken through and

opened some more meridians, but if you aren't up for it..."

That was his heart technique if she remembered correctly.

"Thanks for offering," Ling Qi said regretfully. "I'm going to be really busy for awhile though. I'm aiming to win a spot in the top three in Elder Su's lessons for the Archive prize so I'll be studying and cultivating with Li Suyin a lot this week." Ling Qi paused, feeling awkward as she recalled an issue. "Ah. Have I introduced you to Li Suyin? She's my friend in the spiritual lessons."

Gu Xiulan gave Ling Qi a reproachful look.

"You have not nor have you even mentioned her previously," Gu Xiulan said irritably. "I believe I have seen her around. Is it that waifish girl with the blue hair? I had noticed you speaking to her, but I did not know you were so close."

"I've seen her," Han Jian said, shooting Gu Xiulan a quelling look. "That's fine. Just make sure you're careful with what you're doing. If you hurt yourself badly, it can set you back a lot more than moderating your pace will."

Ling Qi nodded and gave Han Jian and Gu Xiulan an apologetic look.

"I'll be careful," she said to Han Jian then turned to Gu Xiulan. "Sorry. Studying with Li Suyin just never came up. I just... I really need all the advantages I can get, you know?"

That seemed to mollify Gu Xiulan, who sighed theatrically.

"I suppose it would be hypocritical for me to tell you not to strive for high rewards, but you must stop being so reticent." The reproach returned to her tone. "Really. You hardly say a thing about yourself."

"Sorry," Ling Qi muttered, lowering her head. "I'll try to be a little more open." It felt wrong to say that given what she was currently hiding from them, but what else could she do?

They parted ways after that, and Ling Qi began the trek back to the residential area. She needed to speak with Su Ling and Li Suyin about the possibility of bringing Bai Meizhen to the vent. It would make cultivating there much safer.

Ling Qi's trudge back to the disciple housing was less than pleasant. She still felt sore and sluggish, and more than one of her fellow disciples seemed to take that as a sign

that it was fine to ‘accidentally’ bump into her or otherwise cause her trouble. One asshole even knocked her down as he pushed past her without a word in the plaza.

She committed his ratty face to memory along with the faces of the girls off to the side tittering at her plight. Nothing truly concerning happened beyond that, but Ling Qi still had a scowl fixed firmly on her face by the time she was rapping her knuckles on Suyin’s door.

“Li Suyin! It’s Ling Qi. Can you let me in?”

There were some shuffling sounds from the other side of the door and a clattering of clay bottles before the door cracked open a notch, revealing a scowling Su Ling. Her expression eased up a little when she saw Ling Qi’s face.

“Come in,” she grunted grudgingly, opening the door a little wider and stepping aside.

Now that Ling Qi got a better look at the feral girl, she could see the bandages swathing her upper body. They were easily visible under the girl’s gown. Su Ling’s hand kept twitching as if she wanted to scratch at it before the girl would stop herself.

The interior was messier than usual with a pile of bloody bandages in one corner that Ling Qi recognized as the field dressing Li Suyin had done on the mountain. There was also a scattering of clay bottles on the floor around Li Suyin, who sat in the middle of the room with her head down. Li Suyin looked like she was about to pass out where she sat.

“So what is it?” Su Ling asked bluntly as she kicked the door shut behind Ling Qi. “I don’t think we’re getting back up there today unless you want to carry her.” Su Ling, jabbed a thumb in Li Suyin’s direction. The blue-haired girl jerked slightly as if startled by Su Ling’s voice.

“Hm? Yes... I’m sorry. I just... I only just finished cleaning and dressing her wounds properly,” Li Suyin murmured tiredly. “Getting the salves and medicines from the market took some time.”

Ling Qi glanced over at Su Ling as she leaned against the door, arms crossed. The other girl simply shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

“I figured cashing in some savings to make sure I healed up right was worth it. I needed Li Suyin to come along so I didn’t get cheated.”



"I kind of assumed we all needed a bit of rest," Ling Qi responded neutrally, eyeing Li Suyin with some concern. "I actually wanted to talk to you two about what we're going to do about Huang Da though. He isn't going to drop this."

Li Suyin's face fell and she hugged herself.

"Are you certain? I... we beat him. That should be enough, right? The damage I did shouldn't heal easily. I-I targeted his lungs..." Her voice was barely audible, even in the tiny room.

Ling Qi saw Su Ling's hands clench into fists and heard a low growl escape the girl's throat.

"I'm sure he can get medicine too," Su Ling said bluntly. "You did good. But Ling Qi's right. We can't assume he's gonna stay down. We don't go up there alone, I assume. Gonna be a pain in the ass for my hunting."

"I was thinking something a little more," Ling Qi admitted carefully. She liked to think that she had gotten slightly better at talking to people since she had come here. "I think we should tell my housemate, Bai Meizhen, about the vent. If she cultivates up there too, we should be safe from Huang Da."

Su Ling looked distinctly unhappy, but Li Suyin simply continued staring at her lap.

"Yeah, fine, snake girl is strong, I'll give you that. We can't just go handing our prize out like that though. She didn't do anything to help us, and who is going to stop her from just sharing it around with whoever she wants?" Su Ling said angrily. Ling Qi noted that Su Ling didn't completely reject the idea though.

"That card I used to make him freeze was something she gave me," Ling Qi admitted quietly. "He wouldn't have run if not for that."

Ling Qi wasn't dumb. She had been one good hit from falling over. If he had continued fighting, there were good odds she would have also gone down. Ling Qi shuddered to think of what might have happened. "And I don't think she would share the vent's location. As far as I know, I'm the only one she really talks to."

"I am fine with telling her," Li Suyin muttered. "If... if it means we don't have to fight over it again, isn't that better?"

Su Ling tensed, her knuckles going white before she let out a long breath, forcibly

relaxing herself. "Fine. If you want to trust her, we will. Whatever happens is on you."

"Right. We should probably head over to my place then," Ling Qi replied, relieved that they had agreed to it. Ling Qi did her best to conceal the wobble in her stance. The numbness was still fading slowly.

"I figured you two should be there when we talk to her about it."

The two of them agreed easily enough, reluctantly in Su Ling's case and listlessly in Li Suyin's. Ling Qi really hoped that the other girl would be in better shape once she got some sleep. A short time thereafter, the three of them arrived at Ling Qi's home. Ling Qi knocked twice on the door before opening it.

"Bai Meizhen, I'm home, and I have a couple guests. Is it ok to let them in?" she called as she opened the door a crack and peered in.

"Guests?" her housemate called back as she exited her room, a slight frown on her fine features. Her hair was still slightly damp, even if she was otherwise as impeccable as always, so she must have been washing up. Ling Qi wasn't sure how Bai Meizhen bathed in her room given that she's never seen a basin or a tub in the few times she's glimpsed the inside.

"I suppose that is fine. I must ask that you refrain from using our meditation chamber. I currently have some effects in place for my own cultivation," Bai Meizhen said as she shut the door to her bedroom.

Ling Qi stepped inside, leaving the door open for her other friends.

"That's fine," she replied. "We actually wanted to talk to you about something. Well, more like, I wanted to offer you something, and it wouldn't be fair for them to not be here."

Bai Meizhen cocked her head to the side curiously as she regarded the two girls Ling Qi had brought. Su Ling looked both tense and uncomfortable, her pointed furry ears laid back flat against the side of her head as she stubbornly met Bai Meizhen's slit-pupiled gaze. Li Suyin looked to be doing her best impression of a frightened mouse although she, at least, made the effort to bow her head respectfully and mumble an unintelligible greeting.

"...I see," Bai Meizhen replied neutrally. "Do close the door," she added in the same tone, moving off toward the merrily burning fire in the hearth. "I suppose this has to do with why you are wounded, Ling Qi?"

"It does," Ling Qi admitted as she followed her roommate. She gestured for Su Ling and Li Suyin to follow them once the duo had shut the door behind them. "We were doing a little exploring last night and searching for better places to cultivate."

"A worthy pursuit," Bai Meizhen said. "You came into conflict with another disciple over it then?"

"How do you know that?" Su Ling snapped. "What, you get some divination in the package too?"

Bai Meizhen gave Su Ling a reproachful look, which stopped her in her tracks.

"The poisonous qi clinging to the two of you is artificial in design. Obviously, it did not come from a spirit beast. It is beginning to fade already. It will not linger for more than perhaps another half-day."

"T-thank you. I had thought so as well, but I wasn't sure if I had made a mistake or not." Li Suyin flinched when Bai Meizhen's gaze landed on her but continued, "U-um... may I ask, do you think we should go to the Elders about this? I... he attacked us. Isn't that supposed to be against the rules?"

Bai Meizhen's expression was unreadable. "I would not expect much, no. I assume this happened well off the primary paths?"

"Yeah, it did," Ling Qi agreed. "He even said that he doubted the Elders would do anything about it."

"He is somewhat correct," Bai Meizhen replied as she gracefully sat down by the fire, folding her hands in her lap. "The 'truce' is not ironclad. The Elders of the Sect are far too busy to watch every part of the mountain at once. They would investigate a killing, of course, or perhaps even serious and permanent injuries if the disciple in question held their interest. But no, the Empire's justice is far from absolute, whatever its proponents might say."

Li Suyin's shoulders sunk further and she stared down at the floor from where she stood behind Su Ling.

"That sounds about right," Su Ling grumbled, her tail wriggling in an agitated manner around her waist. "You gonna tell her or what?" she asked, shooting Ling Qi a look.

Ling Qi nodded and took a deep breath. She was going to feel really foolish if Bai Meizhen didn't agree to come.

"We found a natural spirit stone deposit. It had both yellow and red veins of crystal and was venting some kind of mist that reacted to our Argent Foundations. I was hoping that you might be interested in cultivating with us when we go there."

Ling Qi was treated to the sight of Bai Meizhen's snowy white eyebrows climbing high as the other girl stared at her.

"The three of you found one of the mountains vents? I had been..." Bai Meizhen trailed off, shaking her head. "Your fortune is rather amazing... but I suppose one with a fox's blood would be useful in penetrating illusions."

"What do you mean?" Ling Qi asked before Su Ling could say something rude.

"There are a handful of such sites on every one of the Sect's mountains. This mountain has the smallest and least potent deposits. It is why the Outer Sect is located here. On this mountain, they are hidden as prizes for enterprising disciples," Bai Meizhen explained. "I had thought I was on the path to one of them, but I was not been able to penetrate the illusory formation around it."

That would explain the ease of the cliffside path, Ling Qi thought. She had wondered why no one had found it from that side, but she had been too distracted to really think about it. She glanced to Su Ling, who shrugged irritably.

"I could smell a bunch of qi in the air meant to lead us off track. Figured it was some beast marking its territory," Su Ling mumbled self consciously.

"I believe I will find the time to join you," Bai Meizhen mused. "It would prove a boon in allowing me to complete the Argent Soul and move on to other tasks." She seemed pretty pleased to Ling Qi.

The four of them spent some time afterward discussing when the best time to cultivate at the vent would be, and in the end, they agreed to meet after Ling Qi's morning lessons. That decided, they broke up and went their separate ways.

Ling Qi went to bed. She needed to rest lest she risk nodding off during Elder Su's lecture.

## Chapter 32 - Mountainside Clash 4

Sleep left Ling Qi feeling refreshed. Her side was still numb, but the motion had largely returned to her arm. She took just a bit of vicious satisfaction in the fact that Huang Da wasn't present at Elder Su's lecture.

She didn't allow herself to dwell though. Instead, she focused on Elder Su's lecture on the function and meaning of the Argent Soul technique. It was interesting if a little hard to follow at times. The Argent Soul technique and its more advanced forms functioned on the principle that every individual was unique and held the potential to find a perfect balance among the imperial elements.

Few ever achieved this potential, but balance remained the core of the technique. It was essentially the reinforcement of the self. The exercises the Argent Soul technique was based on had the purpose of purifying the qi the cultivator absorbed of all elemental essence, leaving only the pure and unadulterated qi of the World. In principle.

What they were actually doing was nowhere near that purity, and their bodies would not be able to handle it if it were. The Argent Soul was designed to allow its users to slowly spread a foundational layer of 'pure' qi throughout their bodies beginning with the dantian then spreading to the bones and organs, reinforcing them to handle larger and denser quantities of qi.

What exactly balance meant differed from person to person as every individual was unique. It was implied, Ling Qi thought, that the strong personalities of certain elders was a result of mastering the Argent Soul line of cultivation arts because it magnified the unique quirks of the individual who used it.

As the lesson ended, Ling Qi once again lingered behind to ask a question of the Elder, this time about her recent experience with cultivation pills. The Elder informed her that as someone of simple background, Ling Qi's body was simply not acclimated to large amounts of medicinal energy. Given her cultivation and her continued use of pills, she should now be essentially fine to use them as she willed although the Elder warned her that some medicines should not be used until certain realms were reached. Ignoring such warnings could have dire consequences.

Ling Qi fell heavily into cultivation as the rest of the week passed. She barely ate or slept as she concentrated on mastering the next exercises of the Argent Soul cultivation art. It was a heady feeling, having the pure qi in her body slowly expand and soak into her bones starting from her spine outward.

With every breath that she spent cultivating, the energy flowed more smoothly and with less loss. It felt like she had been congested her entire life and could only now breathe freely as her Argent Foundation expanded from bone to organ, soaking into and weaving through flesh. It was strange to be so aware of her body and somewhat disorienting at first.

She was glad enough to receive another Qi Foundation pill although it confused her. She didn't think she had advanced enough the previous week to earn it.

Perhaps the Elders *were* aware of the altercation at the vent after all.

Her lessons with Elder Zhou continued apace as well. She was growing faster and stronger every day, the qi reinforcing her body allowing her to improve faster than a mortal could hope to. She was also beginning to do reasonably well in the spars. She couldn't claim that she was winning even close to a majority of them except when the team matchups favored her, but she was getting better and better at making her foes work to put her out of the fight.

She could match them if she worked hard enough. That was the real joy of cultivation for Ling Qi: the fact that it was truly possible to claw your way up from the bottom of the heap with luck and dedication. Huang Da was a good stick to measure herself against; he was strong but she could see his level within reach, unlike Bai Meizhen or Sun Liling, who both lay far beyond her ability to even think about matching. In contrast, Huang Da was someone she felt she could beat if she worked hard enough.

He was fast though, and even one hit could be crippling. So in addition to working on the penultimate layer of her Argent Soul, she channeled some of the energy she had absorbed from her Qi Foundation pill toward opening a second channel in her legs. This would enable her to begin learning the next set of exercises for her Sable Crescent Step art.

If there was one thing that hadn't changed from her mortal life, it was the simple axiom that speed was life. Ling Qi couldn't get beaten, caught, or killed if her pursuers and enemies couldn't keep up with her to begin with.

However, Ling Qi did not focus entirely on training. She was aware enough of those around her to see that Li Suyin was not improving with rest. Li Suyin remained downcast and listless as days went by. Although she continued to improve, breaking through to the fourth layer of Argent Soul during their cooperative cultivation. Ling Qi

saw the growing bags under the girl's eyes and the way she fumbled even basic physical exercises Ling Qi had shown her a dozen times.

Honestly, it pissed Ling Qi off although her temper wasn't directed at Li Suyin. No, she was pissed at that lanky creep who had affected her friend so badly. At least he had been out of Elder Su's class for a few days now, even if his absence was starting to set off her paranoia.

Li Suyin was only growing more withdrawn by the day so Ling Qi found herself in the unenviable position of needing to start an uncomfortable conversation. She chose to wait until after they had finished cultivating at the vent for the day, leaving Su Ling and Bai Meizhen behind to continue.

After they had descended the cliff face and began to walk the winding path back to the plaza, Ling Qi gathered her resolve to speak.

"You don't have to keep worrying, you know? We have the vent. We're going to get those passes and rub his face in it." Ling Qi intended to do more than that, but there was no reason to alarm the pacifistic girl with violent promises.

Li Suyin startled at her sudden words, glancing at her in askance as they walked down the sun-dappled mountain path. The bruise on her cheek was fading though it still made for an ugly mark.

"I... yes, of course we will," Li Suyin responded quietly before lowering her head and returning to staring at the ground ahead.

Ling Qi frowned and crossed her arms, leaving her hands hidden in her sleeves, a gesture she had copied from Bai Meizhen. Having one's hands hidden was a useful thing. She supposed that was why they gave everyone these billowy sleeves. Finally, she sighed explosively.

"Look, I know that isn't your real problem. But I'm not sure what to say. You did what you had to do. If you hadn't, he would have put me down next and then done... whatever he wanted to us afterward." Even if his intentions were probably not vulgar given his insulted reaction, she still felt disgust at the idea of being at the creep's mercy.

"I'm glad you did it, but I'm not happy that it's making you so depressed. So help me understand, will you?"

Li Suyin clutched the front of her gown in her hands and didn't look up.

"It wasn't right to use my art that way. It is not what it is meant for. I shouldn't have felt satisfied when I felt his pain. I shouldn't have felt happy when I saw his blood. I-I don't want to be like that. Things shouldn't be like that. We shouldn't be willing to hurt each other so much over things like this. We're all imperial citizens. Cultivators are supposed to be virtuous!" Her voice started out quiet, gradually growing louder and more distressed until her last words, which were practically shouted as she came to a stop on the path.

"The law isn't meant to be to be ignored or circumvented, or..." She gestured helplessly. "Papa... Father always read me to me from the classics, and I thought... I thought cultivators were supposed to embody the Virtues, but... Maybe that's why Mother never read from those."

Ling Qi was silent. She didn't really have any base to understand what the other girl was saying.

"Before I came here, I already knew things weren't like that," she began tightly. "The world isn't fair, and people will trample on others the second they feel like it will benefit them." Ling Qi kept the guilt out of her voice. She had done the same after all.

"To me, cultivators were just people strong enough to do whatever they want. I remember the first time I saw a cultivator. It was when a couple of guards from the outer gates came by the brothel where my mom worked when I was young. I saw the bruises on her and the other women the day after, saw the shit the guards broke, and saw that the one new girl lost half her teeth when a guard slapped her. No one ever called them on it."

Li Suyin had looked up and was staring at her in horror. Ling Qi wasn't surprised. The other girl was pretty sheltered.

"Such excesses are supposed to be... That is... I mean..." Li Suyin trailed off into incoherency. She wrung her hands, clearly having no idea what to say.

Ling Qi let out a slightly bitter laugh. "Yeah. Lots of things aren't supposed to be the way they are." Even if Li Suyin didn't want to talk to her after this, it was fine. Li Suyin couldn't afford to keep believing in fairy tales.

"The point is: you can wring your hands and complain about it, live with it, or try to do something about it. I'm not the type to try and change things, but maybe you are. You won't ever be able to do anything about it if you break down the first time you run into trouble. Isn't facing evil supposed to be virtuous too?"



Ling Qi walked on, grimacing now that Li Suyin could no longer see her face. What the hell was she even saying? She was a bit surprised when she heard the other girl's footsteps, hurrying to catch up to her.

"I-I'm sorry for making you mention something like... that," Li Suyin apologized as she caught up. She still looked downcast, but the horror had faded from her expression. She also looked uncomfortable as she peered up at Ling Qi, and that hurt more than Ling Qi thought it would.

"You are right though," Li Suyin added. "Turning my face away from corruption is hardly better than being a part of it. Father would be disappointed in me if I came home now. I will just need to be careful not to allow myself to grow complacent."

Ling Qi shot her a surprised look. Li Suyin had been thinking of leaving? That was more extreme than she expected. Shaking her head, Ling Qi bumped her shoulder against Li Suyin's, feeling relieved when the other girl didn't flinch away.

"Glad to hear it. Now let's get going. We don't want to be late."

Li Suyin made a sound of agreement and picked up her pace, practically jogging to keep up with Ling Qi's longer stride.

Although Li Suyin's demeanor improved after their conversation, the week did not end on such a positive note. On the last day of the week, Ling Qi entered Elder Su's lecture hall early, only to find herself face-to-face with Huang Da. Li Suyin had split with her earlier in order to retrieve some notes before the lesson so she was alone. Well, they were in a reasonably crowded room, but it didn't help her feeling of isolation.

"Hello," Huang Da said in a remarkably friendly manner given how their last meeting ended. He looked rather exhausted as he leaned against the rearmost row of benches, studying her intently. "You are looking more lovely than ever."

She scowled at him, itching to draw one of her knives. "Go to hell," she hissed quietly. "I have nothing to say to you."

The corners of his lips quirked up in amusement, and she had to restrain the urge to punch him. "No need to be rude. I underestimated you far too much. Li Suyin as well, I suppose," he mused.

"You cost me quite a bit," he added in a more dangerous tone. "My escape talisman, two dozen red stones worth of treatment... It was really an expensive night."

"You forgot denying you the prize," Ling Qi replied vindictively, crossing her arms.

"Why yes, I suppose I did never get the chance to hold you, my sweet night flower." Ling Qi flushed as he raised his voice just enough for others nearby to hear, drawing looks their way.

"I'm afraid I have been making use of the other thing though," Huang Da said more quietly. "It's not as if you and your companions use it all day."

Ling Qi glared at him. She hadn't thought of that, and it really pissed her off. "We offered that in the first place, you..."

Huang Da waved a hand dismissively. "What reason did I have to allow myself more competition than necessary?" he asked rhetorically. "In any case, I would rather put that behind us. Would you like to come to dinner with me tonight?"

She gaped at him, poleaxed by his sheer arrogance and delusion. "No, you creep. Why the hell would you even ask?"

Huang Da frowned, managing to look truly put out. "I wanted to celebrate my breakthrough, and as the muse that finally drove me to break through the peak, I thought it only fitting"

Ling Qi stiffened, backing up a step from the boy, suddenly leery. "You're bluffing."

Huang Da pushed himself up to stand straight, 'looking' her directly in the eye. "I'm afraid not. I achieved Yellow Soul just yesterday. It's all thanks to you, which is why I'm willing to waive past debts," he said, a smile playing on his lips.

"Li Suyin was more dangerous than I expected, but you... The two of them could not have even *touched* me without you. I have decided that I want you," he continued, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as he raised his hand as if to cradle her cheek.

She swatted his hand away, ignoring the increasing number of stares they were receiving. "Don't touch me," she hissed. "And I don't care what you want." She turned away deliberately, trusting that he wouldn't attack her in the middle of the lecture hall.

"That's fine. I knew you wouldn't submit easily," he said, making her flush further. "I hope we can both enjoy the chase."

It was pretty hard to concentrate on the lesson after that.

## Chapter 33 - Dwindling Peace 1

"Is that offer of training with you all still open?" Ling Qi asked after Elder Zhou's lesson had ended for the day. She had drifted over to where Han Jian and the others stood at the base of the cliff that formed one of the borders of the training field.

She wanted to work on strengthening her arts this week, and practicing with Han Jian and his group was her best option for that. She wasn't quite ready to begin using the new techniques in the class spars, but she wanted to start by the end of the week, which meant polishing her skills beforehand.

Han Jian paused in signing something to Han Fang and looked over to her with a smile. "It is. Got things polished enough that you're willing to show off a bit?" he added, making her flush slightly in embarrassment. Of course Han Jian would be perceptive enough to tell that she had learned a few new tricks.

"Something interesting, I hope. You will need it to keep up," Gu Xiulan interjected from where she sat on one of the benches nearby. "I wouldn't want you to be left behind. I intend to complete my breakthrough to Yellow Soul by this time next week."

"And Fang and I should both be reaching Silver by the time the truce ends or soon after," Han Jian said. Han Fang grinned widely at this, straightening his shoulders proudly.

"With your new techniques, I figure you'll be fine as well," Han Jian added reassuringly.

"I do have some pretty good options that I haven't shown off," Ling Qi admitted, feeling some worry. The ranks of those who had reached the second realm in one or both forms of cultivation was growing, but she still felt like she wasn't quite ready to break through. "They do need some polishing in real combat though."

"Well, that's what these sessions are for," Han Jian said, studying her carefully. "That said, everything going well for you? I heard you had an argument in Elder Su's lecture hall the other day."

Ling Qi scowled at the reminder of that encounter. Every time she thought of it it just made her angrier. Huang Da didn't have any right to talk to her like that or act like they were anything other than enemies.

“Yeah. I actually wanted to warn you about that. That Huang Da guy and I had a disagreement over some resources, and that somehow turned into him deciding that he...” Ling Qi trailed off, expression screwing up in disgust.

“He decided that he’s going to... pursue me. He’s a creep. He was stalking my other friend, Li Suyin, before he switched to me. You might want to watch out for him. I don’t really know what he’s going to do.”

“You’re not interested then?” Gu Xiulan asked curiously. “I suppose he is hardly your type. And pushy men are so boorish.

“Still, the Huang family is quite wealthy and prestigious as I recall, if a little odd. You could do worse.” Gu Xiulan paused thoughtfully then amended, “Perhaps not if he really changed his mind so quickly.”

Ling Qi stared blankly at the other girl. “No. I’m not interested at all. He tried to get Li Suyin and I to split up and choose him over each other and Su Ling like the arrogant jackass was someone we should have fought over. He then attacked us when we didn’t oblige.”

“Ugh.” That seemed to convince her, going by the way Gu Xiulan made a face.

“Even so, you should try not to dip into vulgarity like that,” she chided. “No one will respect a lady who speaks like that.”

Han Jian coughed to draw their attention. Both he and his cousin had awkward expressions, likely at the direction that the conversation seemed to be heading. “I’ll keep an eye out for him. Don’t worry. I’ve started working on my family’s sword art, and I’m not exactly helpless in a fight. None of us are.”

“I know. He’s just a sneaky bast...” Ling Qi glanced at Gu Xiulan’s raised eyebrow and huffed irritably. It wasn’t like the girl was wrong about talking like a commoner; it made other people look down on her. “He’s stealthy and has some kind of poison effect on his weapon. That might be a technique. Just keep your eyes open.”

“We will,” Han Jian replied. “If you want to join us, head down to the training field we met at before in about two hours. We start around then and go until Elder Su’s lessons start.”

Ling Qi nodded. That would give her some time to cultivate at the vent with the others and talk to Li Suyin and Su Ling about possibly joining Han Jian’s group to train. She

wanted to make sure they were interested before trying to convince Han Jian and the others. If the joint training session went well, maybe she could convince Li Suyin and Su Ling to let Han Jian's group share the vent in return for further training sessions.

There were so many things she still needed to do.

Ling Qi's stress levels were not helped by the atmosphere on the mountain. Everywhere she looked, there were the signs that her fellow disciples were training furiously and otherwise preparing for the end of truce. The greedy looks she had gotten in the immediate aftermath of Elder Zhou's test were returning. More and more, she felt hemmed in and surrounded by enemies.

It didn't help that her ears caught the word going around. That stupid conversation with Huang Da in Elder Su's hall had apparently fueled all sorts of rumors, most of which painted her as the spirit stone-digger for leading on a wealthy scion for her own gain. It looked like the bastard even had fans among the other girls, going by the cold looks she got and the muttered words she heard in her passing.

By the time she joined up with Bai Meizhen and the others to head up to the vent, Ling Qi was definitely in the mood to hit something despite having just been in Elder Zhou's lesson.

Ling Qi ended up leading an impromptu lesson in physical cultivation for Li Suyin and Su Ling, who were both looking to make improvements in that regard. Bai Meizhen was content to simply sit beside the vent meditating, the silvery mist swirling about her in a wide spiral.

Su Ling took to it more; while Li Suyin listened in, it seemed she was focusing on reaching Late Red Soul for the moment. It seemed that Li Suyin had been neglecting her base cultivation in favor of expanding her qi, opening meridians, and learning arts.

Ling Qi raised the idea of group training during her time at the vent. Li Suyin had been receptive to the idea, but Su Ling had been more reluctant. Between the two of them and Su Ling's own worries, Su Ling eventually agreed to give it a try.

Despite feeling a bit better, Ling Qi was still feeling high-strung and agitated as she descended the mountain afterward. When she arrived at the concealed training field and passed through the barrier, she was surprised to find that she was early. The only one there was Han Jian, who was crouched in the middle of the field, talking to the tiger cub she had seen with him a few times during their initial meetings.

“Heijin, we’re really partners now, aren’t we? You have to start working with me here. I need to be able to work you into my tactics.” The handsome boy pleaded with the cub, who was curled up at his feet, apparently ignoring him.

Ling Qi cleared her throat awkwardly. “Hello, Han Jian. Am I... interrupting something?”

Han Jian blinked and looked up, hands resting on his knees.

“Ah, Ling Qi, No, you’re not. I’m just trying to get this lazy bones to work with me,” he said with a note of frustration. “I already had to carry him here, and now...” Han Jian stopped as the tiger cub stood up, still with his back to the boy, and padded over to Ling Qi.

Ling Qi looked curiously down at the cub, which had paused at her feet, looking up at her with feline arrogance. The cub stared her down before sitting down again and brushing a paw against his ear before beginning to groom it.

*‘The female may pet me now.’*

Ling Qi twitched as a voice that sounded like an arrogant young boy seemed to echo in her ears. Having ‘spoken’ to Cui before, she wasn’t completely taken off guard, but she was surprised at how clear his voice was. Was it perhaps because she had grown closer to Yellow realm and had mastered the fourth layer of Argent Soul?

“Why should I? You’re giving Han Jian trouble, aren’t you?” Even knowing that bound spirit beasts understood her, she still felt rather silly talking to an animal.

Heijin seemed nonplussed. *‘Pet me. The slacker has naught to do with it.’*

The little feline was definitely demanding.

“Sorry about that,” Han Jian said as he approached, shooting his ‘cousin’ a dirty look. “He always was spoiled along with the other cubs at home so...”

*‘The slacker is merely jealous, and wishes his fur was silky enough to be petted,’* the cub cut in haughtily. *‘Now, pet me, Cold One. It is hot.’*

Ling Qi bit her lip, holding in a laugh at Han Jian’s expression, but attempted to look sternly down at the cub.

"If I pet you, will you listen to what Han Jian is saying?" Ling Qi asked. She felt like she should be more annoyed by the spirit's demanding and haughty tone, but she couldn't quite bring herself to be. He was only a kitten after all.

Ling Qi got the impression that the tiger cub was pouting at her despite the limited expressiveness of his face. '*...That is acceptable,*' he replied with great dignity.

She sighed and crouched down to scratch behind the cub's ears before giving Han Jian a pointed look. Heijin's fur really was amazingly soft and silky, and the cub pushed his head up against her hand as she petted him.

Han Jian roughly scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"Thanks," he said, glancing to Ling Qi before focusing on Heijin. "Now, look. I get that you don't really respect me, but this has to stop. I need you to work with me. Do you really just want to laze around all day without getting stronger?"

*'The slacker cannot say such things,'* the tiger cub replied, peering up from under Ling Qi's hand with disdain. *'Where were those words when you wasted away your time under your Father and mine?'*

Ling Qi felt uncomfortable as Han Jian's expression contorted into a frown.

"...Yeah, I wasted some opportunities," he replied evasively. Ling Qi didn't miss the way he looked briefly at her. "But I told you I wanted to start making up for that, didn't I? How am I supposed to catch up if you won't even give me a chance to try? I'm responsible for the ones around me: Xiulan, Fang, Yu, and others too once I get back. I need your help with that."

Ling Qi wasn't entirely sure how she felt to be left out of that list so she concentrated on the soothing feeling of soft fur as she brushed her hand down the cub's back.

Heijin did not reply immediately, nuzzling at her hand. *'I suppose I have been bored. Very well. I will grace you with my presence,'* he answered imperiously. *'Besides, it would not do to deny the others my magnificent presence.'*

Han Jian rested his face in his palm briefly, giving the tiger cub another frustrated look, before looking back at Ling Qi. "Sorry you had to hear that, but thanks for getting him to hear me out."

"It's no problem," Ling Qi replied awkwardly. "That said... do you think I could ask you



for a favor?”

Han Jian nodded easily. “I suppose I owe you one. go ahead,” he replied, gesturing for her to continue even as Heijin butted his head against her hand to remind her to keep petting.

“I was hoping I could bring by Li Suyin and Su Ling, my other friends, to train here too sometimes. We could all use a little work on our fighting skills.” That was an understatement, particularly in Li Suyin’s case.

“Well, I don’t mind you using the field. But I assume you mean training with us.” Han Jian grimaced, scratching the back of his neck as he often did when thinking. “Let me talk to the others about it. Give me a day or two, alright?”

“Sure,” Ling Qi responded, scratching Heijin behind the ears one last time as she heard the sound of others entering through the barrier. It was time to get started on the actual training.

It was a little nerve-wracking to be at the center of attention. Facing them, Ling Qi could see Han Jian’s and Han Fang’s curiosity, Gu Xiulan’s calculated interest, and Fan Yu’s dour dislike.

“So, this first art is...” Ling Qi began nervously, letting her flute drop into her hand. “Area control, I guess? It makes me harder to hit and confuses people’s senses. I can include others in it, but it’s more tiring.”

Han Jian hummed thoughtfully, giving her flute a curious look. “Don’t tire yourself out. Fang, you want to try and tag her?”

The bald boy nodded amicably, stepping forward and adjusting the practice wraps across his knuckles. As the others retreated, he fell into a neutral stance, fists raised in guard.

Ling Qi studied him, Elder Zhou’s lessons allowing her to pick up the nuances of his starting stance. It leaned defensive, but he could snap into a more offensive mode quickly if he got the opportunity. Ling Qi held back a self-deprecating laugh as she raised her flute. It felt strange to know even that much.

Mist billowed from the gaps in her flute as the first melancholy note of the Forgotten Vale Melody rang out. In mere moments, the field around them grew as dark as an overcast spring morning, the light mist swirling outward to engulf them both. Han Fang’s expression grew tight with concentration as the mist rolled over him. Ling Qi began to

circle him as she continued to play, and Han Fang's narrowed gaze hesitated before flicking to follow her.

Cautiously, he advanced on Ling Qi, quickly eating up the short distance between them. The faint sound of thunder rumbled in her ears as a shimmering heat haze began to arise from his bare scalp, pushing away the cloying mist. When he seamlessly shifted to an offensive stance and lunged, she was ready.

Cool, dark qi flooded through the meridians in her legs, and the edges of her being grew fuzzy as she flowed around his opening strike and the one that followed it, gracefully dodging with barely a stutter in her song. As she leaned out of the way of his third punch, she dodged to the side, disengaging from melee range impossibly fast as her limbs blurred and wavering shadows trailed from the hems of her gown.

As Han Fang spun to face her new direction, already moving to close the distance she had made, she began the second technique of the Forgotten Vale Melody. The mist grew dark and thick. Han Fang jerked, glancing around in bewilderment as the shifting shapes in the mist drew his eye and allowed Ling Qi to slip away even further, fading into the misty shadows. Her song echoed, seemingly from everywhere now, and gave little indication of her position.

Still, she found herself at an impasse. Han Fang advanced cautiously through her mist, searching for her, but she had little in the way of offensive options if she wanted to attack while maintaining her mist. In a real fight, that would be a problem, but in a simple demonstration spar...

Her song cut off, and Han Fang immediately fell into a defensive crouch. It was not enough as a blunted training knife struck between his shoulder blades with a thump.

"That's my hit," Ling Qi said impishly as the mists began to dissolve under the light of day, revealing her position.

Han Fang gave her a chagrined grin as he bent down, picking up her knife. He gave her a friendly bow as she approached and took it back.

"Looks like we need to get you started on a perception art, Fang," Han Jian's voice rang out from outside the clearing mist. "That's a good art," he added, complimenting Ling Qi

Ling Qi smiled, warmth budding in her stomach. Fan Yu was still glowering at her, of course, but both Han Jian and Gu Xiulan looked mildly impressed.

"Shall I provide her with some power then?" Gu Xiulan asked lightly, glancing at Han Jian.

"If Ling Qi's ready for a full match," Han Jian agreed.

Ling Qi nodded decisively as Gu Xiulan sauntered over, a slightly cruel smile blooming on her lips.

She almost felt a little bad for the boys in the coming spar.

## Chapter 34 - Dwindling Peace 2

Between Elder Zhou's lesson, continuing to cultivate her physique at the vent, and practicing with Han Jian and the others, Ling Qi was feeling quite bedraggled by the time she slumped into Elder Su's lecture hall. She suspected she looked it too given the sweat-darkened spots on her gown and the scuffs, dirt, and other marks of heavy exercise she had picked up. Ling Qi was thankful that the rose scent that Gu Xiulan had bought her was strong enough that she didn't smell completely terrible on top of that.

Ling Qi was relieved to be called down at the start of class despite the disdainful looks she received from the other disciples. They could look down on her all they wanted; she was the one getting the prize. Both she and Li Suyin had made the cut again, along with the seemingly undefeatable Ji Rong, who shot her a pitying look as she moved down to stand beside him.

Ji Rong's reason became clear when Huang Da joined them at the bottom of the hall and shouldered his way between her and Li Suyin. She scowled at him, but he just smiled back and brushed his hand against hers. She snatched it away before he could do anything more. The last of their number was Gan Guangli, who was apparently working hard in these final weeks.

Once the actual lesson had started, Ling Qi was able to relax and actually focus. They were finishing the formation characters today and moving on to the meanings of basic character chains and combinations. Ling Qi was glad Elder Su had decided to teach this. Now that she had some basic understanding of formations, she wouldn't have to rely on Bai Meizhen to identify any talismans she found.

Perhaps if she got the archive pass reward, Ling Qi would consider looking into the art more. At the very least, being able to set up alarms around her home seemed like a good idea... and she might need to know how to disable such things if her half-formed plans for revenge on her detractors were to bear fruit.

The next few days passed in much the same manner, a constant blur of cultivation, training, and practice. She could feel her body continuing to grow stronger, absorbing the qi she dispersed into her skin and muscles. She was growing closer to some sort of limit, qi starting to press against the outer bounds of her body.

When she was too tired to practice any further, usually well after nightfall, she would sit and practice with her flute, slowly mastering the next measure of her Melody. It was hard, but she felt she was progressing quickly. She could see and feel it in her mind's

eye, the trials and travails of a new traveler, lost in the dark, surrounded by hungry eyes. It seemed the second measure was meant to show that anxiety and fear and bring it into the world within her mist.

Ling Qi decided then that she would begin using Forgotten Vale Melody in Elder Zhou's class when she fully mastered this new verse of the song. Until then though, she had other concerns.

Han Jian had said that it would be alright to bring her friends along to training today. She really hoped things went well, but it was starting to look unlikely given the increasing reluctance and tension Su Ling was showing as they approached the field.

"Will you just relax already," Ling Qi said irritably, glancing at the girl on her right. Su Ling's ears twitched violently at the sound, and the fluffy tail waving agitatedly behind her stiffened. "Even if this doesn't work out, no one is going to hurt either of you. Han Jian wouldn't do that."

"Says you," Su Ling snorted. "You think you're the first girl to believe a pretty noble was a nice guy? The only reason I'm here is because you two kept badgering me about it."

Li Suyin also looked nervous, wringing her hands as she peered at the formations on the gate. "If Ling Qi says it's fine, I'm willing to trust her, and we really do need some more practice with ... this kind of thing."

Ling Qi was glad she had talked to Li Suyin last week. The other girl still didn't want to hurt anyone, but Li Suyin was at least willing to learn to better defend herself.

"Like I keep saying, it will be fine. This is just training, and the field doesn't lock or anything. You can leave whenever you want."

Su Ling still looked reluctant, her ears falling flat against her head as she glared at the gate, but she didn't continue to object as Ling Qi lead them onto the field. This time, everyone was already present and waiting. Han Jian and the other boys were in the midst of chatting about something, and Gu Xiulan was seated on a wide stone, meditating. They all looked up when she and her friends entered.

It took all of her willpower not to hunch her shoulders defensively, but she managed it. The reactions were largely what she expected: a scowl of dislike from Fan Yu with a healthy helping of disdain; neutral friendliness from Han Jian and Han Fang with a hint of wariness in the mute boy's narrowed eyes as he regarded Su Ling; and Gu Xiulan studied both of the new girls with sharp eyes, her painted lips set in a thin line. Ling Qi

held in a sigh as she heard the low growl coming from Su Ling's throat behind her.

"Good afternoon, Ling Qi." Han Jian was the first one to break the silence, his tone upbeat. "Same to you... Su Ling and Li Suyin, was it?"

"U-um, thank you very much for your invitation," Li Suyin responded, dipping into a hasty and somewhat clumsy bow.

"What she said, I guess," Su Ling grunted, crossing her arms and looking anything but grateful.

"Tch. Well, at least one of them is polite," Fan Yu snorted as he glared at Su Ling. "Expecting more from a beast was probably futile."

"Go fuck yourself," Su Ling snapped. "I'm no more a beast than you are."

As Fan Yu puffed up furiously, Gu Xiulan spoke up. "As vulgar and unnecessary as her words were, there was no need to get worked up over it, Yu dear." Gu Xiulan stood up, brushing off her gown.

"Right. No need for things to get heated," Han Jian replied, his tone slightly strained. "Why don't you two tell us what you do? We can figure out how to work you into our exercises."

Ling Qi's friends were both silent until she looked back at them with a pleading expression. "Guys, please. We aren't going to get anywhere if they don't even know what you want to work on."

"I intend to focus on healing arts," Li Suyin replied in a small voice. "I haven't quite mastered it well enough to fix anything more than minor scrapes yet. I have been practicing a water-based movement technique as well. It, um, is rather simplistic though."

Han Fang looked interested and even Fan Yu nodded in her direction, although he continued scowling at Su Ling. Gu Xiulan simply smiled enigmatically.

"Illusions and foxfire," Su Ling said shortly. "The fire's stronger if I have the target under my illusion."

"As expected of a fox," Fan Yu sneered. "Little use except for leading men astray and

playing trickster.”

“You wanna try it, fatty?” Su Ling replied darkly. “I’m sure you’d make a good meal.”

“As if I would even be tempted,” he scoffed, turning to Han Jian. “Must we waste our time with this? The other girl I can understand - healers are useful and require much talent - but is this rude creature to join us?”

“S-she’s my friend. Please don’t speak of her like that,” Li Suyin said with only a bit of a tremor.

“I can see Yu’s point. Between Ling Qi and I, she has little to offer that we do not do better,” Gu Xiulan said clinically. “I’m not certain about the other either.

“Are you certain you even have the nerve to stand on a battlefield?” Gu Xiulan asked, turning to Li Suyin. “I understand you have been leaning on Ling Qi to advance as far as you have and wish to remain with her, but perhaps you would be better suited to a role in the background.”

Li Suyin’s shoulders slumped, but before she could reply, Ling Qi cut in.

“Gu Xiulan, please don’t be rude to my friends,” she said flatly. “Li Suyin stood with me when we fought Huang Da. She’ll do just fine with some practice. Su Ling too.

“I’m not asking you guys to let them join your group permanently. I’m not even asking you to be friends with them. I just want to help them practice and polish their skills.”

Gu Xiulan’s sharp gaze met hers, but Ling Qi didn’t waver, staring straight back at the other girl.

“I suppose I can trust your judgement on this,” Gu Xiulan replied slowly. “Really though. The girl is shaking like a leaf. You will have to let her stand on her own at some point.”

Ling Qi nodded once, getting the picture. She was going to have to talk to Gu Xiulan later. She had expected the other girl to not like her other friends, but there might be something more to her dislike.

“Fan Yu, I understand your objections, but I ask you to trust my judgement in this. As Ling Qi said, they are only temporary sparring partners. There is no need to get so worked up about this,” Han Jian said soothingly to the other boy. “The more opponents we practice against, the stronger we’ll be, right?”

“Fine,” Fan Yu ground out in defeat. “As you say, Han Jian. It is not as if I have any right to contradict you,” The boys shoulders slumped, but his blustery scowl was back a moment later.

“Thank you,” Han Jian said, seeming relieved. “Anyway, for the first round, let’s split up like this...”

The following training session was awkward and difficult, but she felt like Li Suyin and Su Ling at least got something from it. Between her and Gu Xiulan’s coaching as well as some advice from Han Jian, Li Suyin began to incrementally improve at avoiding attacks, and Su Ling seemed interested in the way Han Jian wielded his sword. By the time she left, Su Ling was glancing down at her sheathed knives thoughtfully.

When they showed up to train the next day, Su Ling had acquired a sword and set to practicing with it, studiously ignoring Fan Yu and the others in favor of prodding Han Jian for advice. The fox girl’s close attention to Han Jian put Gu Xiulan in a poor mood, and when the two were on opposite sides of a spar, things got heated rather quickly. Su Ling’s tail ended up on fire that day, and Gu Xiulan lost one of her sleeves to the other girl’s embers.

Li Suyin suffered from more than one waspish comment about her lack of confidence and physical fitness. Although she improved, Ling Qi noticed her becoming more withdrawn as the week went on.

The results were mixed at best, but Ling Qi believed the joint training sessions to have been worthwhile. However, she couldn’t in good conscience try to set up another session

With how much training and cultivating Ling Qi was doing, it was late in the week by the time she got around to the final thing on her to-do list for the week, namely, heading down to the market to take a longer look around and finally offload the staff. Her time was cut down even more when she decided to try and find out the status of the original owner. She had no doubt that the girl was going to want the thing back, but she had had so many other things to worry about that investigating the matter had slipped her mind until now.

It took some poking around but eventually she learned a few things. The girl who was the owner of the staff had survived their encounter and was named Zhu Mei, and the boy who had been with her down there was Zhu Fong, her twin brother. The both of them had disappeared into near isolation in the wake of the test, which was why she had not seen either of them out and about.



The new information didn't change her calculation so she simply brought the staff to market to sell. Ling Qi had spent the entire afternoon dithering back and forth on the possibility of trading the staff in for a single expensive talisman or as collateral for a custom item, but in the end, she chose to simply shore up her immediate weaknesses with the proceeds from the sale of the staff: a set of fine steel knives inscribed with formations for sharpness and durability; a protective vest similar to what Su Ling had worn under her gown; and a defensive talisman. Ling Qi spent the rest of that afternoon trading for various pills to help her with her planned training in the coming week.

Finally, as the week was coming to a close, Ling Qi mastered the second measure of the Forgotten Vale Melody, which enabled her to use two new techniques, Diapason of the Lost Traveler and Dissonance in the Night. Her first match the day afterward found her in familiar company. She and Gu Xiulan were paired as the support and range for Gan Guangli. They were facing Lu Feng, Hong Lin, and a third boy whose name she didn't know. The unknown boy was armed with a bow and hung behind the other two.

"Did you really have to pick up such a plain piece of equipment?" Ling Qi sighed as Gu Xiulan spoke, looking her over with frustration. "I understand that you think they are useful, but plain brown leather? And the feather patterns are so uneven - clearly amateur work - not mention how thick they make your wrists look..."

"I told you they're just temporary until I can afford better stuff," Ling Qi replied, fingering the flute in her hand as she eyed their enemies across the field. "Besides, you wear a glove too."

Gu Xiulan sniffed haughtily. "*My* glove is the finest of Ashwinder skin, cut to be perfectly form-fitting and not impede my range of motion in any way. It does not compare at all," she replied, sounding affronted.

"Miss Ling, Miss Gu," the tall blond boy standing in front of them rumbled. "This is not the time to converse about such things. While it is true that the importance of good accessorization and coordination of equipment cannot be understated, now is the time to focus. I will require your full attention to watch my back while we battle that devious western devil and his vicious compatriots."

Gan Guangli's stern and serious expression were the same as ever. He was actually serious.

"Oh, I am certain that Ling Qi will be keeping a very close eye on your back," Gu Xiulan

replied brightly, shooting Ling Qi an amused look.

Ling Qi flushed, glaring at the other girl. Gu Xiulan just would not drop that idea.

“We won’t lose today,” Ling Qi confirmed, pointedly turning away from the other girl. “I have some new techniques to try. They won’t know what hit them.”

Gan Guangli eyed her curiously but nodded as he turned back to face the other team. “As you say, Miss Ling, Miss Gu. I shall entrust the rear of the field to you! None shall pass nor touch a hair upon your heads while I yet stand today!”

Ling Qi winced. There he went getting loud again.

The match started soon after, and Ling Qi began to play. An arrow was sidestepped, pushed aside by her refined control of the currents of air around her, and her music rose in volume, carried on that same wind to overcome even Gan Guangli’s battle cry. The mist rolled forth, and she grimaced as she felt the qi drain from excluding both Gu Xiulan and Gan Guangli from her mist’s effect.

She heard the rumbling crack of Gan Guangli’s oversized fist cratering the ground, and the the metallic clangs as Hong Lin struck him a half dozen times in turn. Gu Xiulan’s lances of flame cut burning lines through the mist as Ling Qi moved for a better vantage to control Lu Feng’s movements.

Steadily circling away from her starting position, Ling Qi shifted into the next verse and let herself flow with the mist. This time she wouldn’t be taken out so easily. Completing the second technique, Diapason, and darkening the mist, she felt a jolt of satisfaction as she saw the archer boy try to retreat from the mist only to find himself running in circles.

Then, for the first time in true battle, she began the third technique of the Forgotten Vale Melody, Dissonance in the Night. A high, sharp note heralded its beginning, and the mist came alive. Clumps of roiling fog darkened, forming frightening beastly visages and tearing claws. The shadowy phantoms swarmed her enemies, eyes aglow with a dull red light.

Their immaterial claws and fangs were weak yet, barely doing more than tearing cloth and scratching skin, but the distraction of being mobbed by shadowy foes was more than enough to give her team the advantage.

Hong Lin fell first, grabbed bodily in a gigantic hand and spiked into the ground like a child’s ball. Lu Feng and the other boy fell thereafter, weathering withering bolts and

bursts of flame from the laughing Gu Xiulan, and unable to do more than annoy the juggernaut that Gan Guangli had become by the end of the fight.

Ling Qi hadn't noticed before, but it seemed that his art grew stronger the longer the battle went on with corresponding effect on his height and mass. Gan Guangli had been nearly four meters tall by the end of things.

It was one of her new knives though that had ended the battle. She sent Lu Feng spinning to the ground with a blade buried in his shoulder.

Ling Qi felt exhilarated with the victory. She could do this. She might not be the strongest... but she wasn't weak anymore either.

## Bonus 7: Spite

That damn scar still itched.

Su Ling clenched and unclenched her hands, resisting the urge to scratch as she picked her way through up the collapsed cliff face. She had to be careful not to dislodge the loose rock and dirt under her feet, or she'd be in for a nasty slide. Her ears twitched then catching a sound, and Su Ling stopped dead, pale blue flame blooming at her fingertips as she whipped her head around.

Only to see a little brown rabbit escaping into the underbrush. Su Ling let out a ragged sigh, scrubbing her hand through her hair. She had to get her nerves under control, it wasn't helping her. She knew all too well that if you reacted to every little thing, you'd end up missing the real danger, out of exhaustion if nothing else. So, letting out a shallow huff, she forced herself to relax a little and get back to climbing.

She didn't know why she was surprised. Of course the truce was a bunch of bullshit, meant to give the ones who were already strong cover. That was all rules and laws ever were. The rules hadn't stopped that creep anymore than it had stopped those shitheads from taking everything after Gran died.

She could practically hear the creaky old bat's voice in her ears reminding her of what she already knew.

*"Want to be left in peace girl? Then you make yourself too big a bone to swallow. Someone wants to do you wrong? Make them choke on it. And if you can't manage, then you keep your head down and stay outta sight, you hear?"*

So when some shithead kid stomped on her tail, she sent them home crying with a bloody nose and chipped tooth, and when their parents came to whine, Gran would tell them to piss off or suffer a price hike. The advantage of being the only halfway decent apothecary in the village. Being too big a bone to swallow.

'Course it broke down after she died, but then you got to the second piece of advice, didn't you? Stay on the edges, keep your head down. Scavenge, fight, live. Make sure you were too much trouble to come after.

That wasn't enough though, not here. The people around her were too strong, and resources too few. She could probably get by in the short term, finding a hole and hiding in it, but she'd always stay small, always stay weak if she did that. She didn't have any illusions about the limits of her ability. She'd never be one of the folks lording over things from on high, that wasn't her goal. No, she just needed a solid core of strength, enough

to survive getting thrown at barbarians for half a decade and change. Then she could go off and 'retire' like that old drunk of a militia captain back home.

The problem, Su Ling mused darkly, was Li Suyin. Narrowing her eyes, Su Ling bent her knees and jumped, leaping up to catch a handhold on the cliff above. That girl... sometimes Su Ling felt like she was like a dumb puppy. All stupid innocent grins and eagerness, like the world wasn't just waiting to bring the boot down. Yet now, she couldn't help but be pissed off, now that the other girls illusions had been broken.

Su Ling knew perfectly well that she'd been half feral when she'd gotten here, she'd been a shitty housemate, and all around unpleasant, but Li Suyin... That dumb girl had just kept on being nice anyway. It was the first time she'd had a real conversation that wasn't just mockery and threats since Gran had died. With a grunt, Su Ling dragged herself up over the lip of the cliff and peered around.

There was some scrub left, the trees that had been up here had gone down in the rockslide, but this place would still work. As she began to head toward the tiny box canyon that she had come here for however, her thoughts turned back to Li Suyin... her friend. The other girl had been doing better, something that Ling Qi had said she assumed. She still had some mistrust for that one, she recognized another scavenger after all, but...

Su Ling shook her head. If Ling Qi had wanted to betray them, she'd have sided with that Huang creep and then gone to the snake princess to give him the boot, take the prize all for herself. No, she was pretty confident that the girl wouldn't act against them. Still, she thought grimly, things were only going to get worse from here, those pretend rules, weak as they were would be falling soon.

Back in the housing zone, Su Ling could practically smell the resentment and envy that Li Suyin attracted. The girl was always showing off in those elder lessons, though from the way she spoke of it, she didn't see it that way. Yet Su Ling knew that was the way a lot of their 'sect sisters' saw it. Preening little shits, getting mad at being shown up, at getting passed over for praise. Ling Qi was the same, but in regards to the near freakish speed of her cultivation, and the growth of her qi.

Ling Qi had the snake princess though, and in the end Li Suyin had only humble Su Ling. She smiled in bitter amusement at the thought as she reached the back of the canyon, and the narrow crevasse that waited there, leading back into a small cave system that she'd found in her first week. She had some supplies cached here, but it was going to need to be more. She, no, they needed a bolthole, something the cave back here would serve nicely for.. She'd just have to do some work trapping the place.

Winter was coming, and the wolves were out to prowl. Hopefully she could make Li Suyin see that.

## Chapter 35 - Dwindling Peace 3

"I am sorry if the question is presumptuous, but how do I go about earning knowledge of the successor to the Argent Soul cultivation art?" Ling Qi asked with her head bowed. She had considered how to word this question all day, nervous that it would be viewed rude. Although it was easier for her to approach Elder Su - the woman was not nearly as intimidating as Elder Zhou - she still worried.

The medicinal energy surging in her veins, nerves, and channels didn't help. She had gone all out with medicines, even going to far as to use one of her precious Sable Light Pills. Her fingers and toes tingled almost painfully, and her skin sang with sensation at the brush of even the slightest breeze. It was incredibly hard to stand still like this without fidgeting when she felt as if her bones were trying to vibrate their way free of her flesh. Even her thoughts were filled with a low, irritating buzz as her dantian stormed and churned, making her feel uncomfortably stretched.

Elder Su regarded her with a slight smile. She didn't seem perturbed by the question. If anything, there was a hint of amusement in the older woman's eyes. Ling Qi flinched when she felt the Elder's soft, cool hand on her forehead.

"I am surprised you managed to concentrate as well as you did in my lecture. You are burning up, young lady."

Ling Qi couldn't help but fidget uncomfortably as Elder Su removed her hand from her forehead and then pressed two of her fingers to Ling Qi's throat. It was useless to be nervous. If Elder Su wanted to do something to her, she would, and there was nothing Ling Qi could do to stop her.

"I think it is important that I learn all I can about formations while I have the opportunity to do so," Ling Qi replied, swallowing anxiously as Elder Su hummed softly and cupped her chin. Elder Su raised Ling Qi's head so that she could look directly into her eyes.

"... Is something wrong?" Ling Qi asked, unable to hold back the question. None of the pills she had purchased from the market had any warnings to them...

"I am always glad to have a student with a passion for what I am teaching," Elder Su replied, withdrawing her hand. "I had not taken you for the type to focus on that sort of thing to be honest." Ling Qi squirmed under Elder Su's gaze, glancing to the side. She just wanted to make sure she was ready for the end of the truce period.

“Do not worry,” Elder Su continued, ceasing her examination. “I was merely confirming a suspicion. You truly did have good fortune during Elder Zhou’s exam to have acquired such a pill. It is no wonder you can barely hold still.”

Ling Qi stiffened, hoping there was no one in earshot. Which of course there were; others had questions for the Elder too.

“I... won’t deny that,” she admitted carefully.

“No one will overhear you, child,” Elder Su replied kindly. “To expand your qi as much as you have since arriving while rising so quickly in other areas as well? It is rather obvious to one with knowledge of such things. That friend of yours, the Bai girl, would likely consider herself lucky to have such a pill. Do be careful should you have any left.”

Ling Qi swallowed, her mouth feeling dry. The Sable Light Pill was that valuable? She knew it had helped her greatly, but...

“Thank you, Elder Su,” Ling Qi said. She still hadn’t gotten her answer though. “About the successor art...”

“More advanced arts are typically on the second floor of the archive. Like the first, it can be accessed with sufficient Sect Points or an Elder’s pass.”

“Sect Points?” Ling Qi asked. She thought she had seen something like that on the paper slips stuck to the notice board in the building’s main hall.

“The pay for performing duties for the Sect,” Elder Su explained. “The system will be explained at the end of the week, but to put it simply, disciples may perform tasks for the Sect. In turn, they will be rewarded with points, which may be traded for various privileges or simply for spirit stones. I will leave the more detailed explanation to Elder Jiao.”

Ling Qi nodded in understanding. She wouldn’t bother Elder Su about that if it was going to be explained soon anyway.

“So I just have to do some work then,” Ling Qi murmured under her breath. That was simpler than she expected.

“The Argent Genesis cultivation art, the successor art to Argent Soul, is only provided to those who are chosen to become disciples of the inner peaks,” Elder Su continued.



“That selection will not occur until the end of the year, so do not worry about it over much for the moment.

“Now, run along, young lady. You look to be dearly in need of a bit of cultivation.”

Ling Qi hastily nodded and stepped aside, ducking her head again and murmuring a thanks. Elder Su was right; she really needed to burn off some of this energy.

By the afternoon of the next day, she felt significantly better even if she found herself jittering and fidgeting whenever she was still. She could feel the pool of her qi expanding again, the foundation formed by her practice of the Argent Soul stretching and warping to contain the deep, calm lake that her qi was beginning to form. She had chosen to focus on her arts this week, diligently practicing with her knives in Elder Zhou’s training while playing the soothing notes of the Forgotten Vale Melody at the vent with her friends.

Actual solid improvement of either yet eluded her. The next measure of the Melody was more complex than anything she had ever attempted to play, and she could not quite understand the full meaning and feeling in the words that went along with it.

Ling Qi faced a more physical challenge with Zephyr’s Breath. She simply couldn’t manage the flow of the wind well enough to master the spiralling motion necessary for its final technique, Gale Shield - at least not well enough to do more than to kick up dust and send everyone’s clothes fluttering.

Everyone was preparing for the end of truce in their own way... Gu Xiulan intended to break through to Yellow. Su Ling had taken her poor reception at the joint training session in stride, focusing hard on practicing with her new weapon, the sword. She also cultivated physically, occasionally prodding Ling Qi for advice or pestering her to spar.

Bai Meizhen was inscrutable, simply sitting in absolute stillness by the vent. She intended to complete the Argent Soul technique this week. Li Suyin, though, for all that she had broken through to Late Red Soul and Mid Gold Physique, seemed to have withdrawn again. As they strolled to the lecture hall from the vent, Ling Qi breached the subject.

“I’m sorry I pushed you into that training session last week,” Ling Qi began awkwardly. “I didn’t think Gu Xiulan would be like that.”

Gu Xiulan had always been pushy and domineering, but the disdain for Li Suyin had

been unexpected.

“Please don’t apologize. Even if it was a little hard, I benefited from it,” Li Suyin replied before murmuring, “After all, she wasn’t wrong.”

Ling Qi looked worriedly at her friend. “She was. It’s not like you’re taking advantage of me. We’re helping each other.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” Li Suyin said glumly. “I’m... I am not a strong person. I don’t want to be a burden on my friends.”

“You’re not,” Ling Qi said stubbornly. “You’ve helped me just as much as I helped you. You’re keeping up just fine.”

Li Suyin looked like she wanted to protest more, but in the end, she smiled weakly. “Of course. Thank you, Ling Qi,” she said softly.

“It’s no problem,” Ling Qi huffed. Worry about the truce’s end clouded her thoughts. She had only a few days left to prepare herself, but she could not help but wonder, how well would Li Suyin weather the mess that was coming?

## Chapter 36 - Dwindling Peace 4

The rest of the week passed in a blur of training and cultivation. Ling Qi's meditations opened one channel after another, her surging qi burning new paths outward through her body. With the opening of the channel in her head, her eyes and ears burned with new sensation. Even the taste of food seemed to grow stronger, and her thoughts seemed clearer than ever.

The new meridians in her spine and heart also had noticeable impacts. Her body tingled every time qi flowed through the new channel in her spine, and the beat of her heart was ever stronger and steadier.

With Han Jian's help, she mastered the second level of the Sable Crescent Step, learning the trick of activating its full power in an instant while channeling other techniques. This, in turn, helped her complete her mastery of Zephyr's Breath, allowing her to reactively pulse her qi and kick up furious winds to push foes and missiles alike away.

All the while, she could feel the still lake of her qi growing deeper and wider, filling her body with more power even as the excess medicinal energy soaked into her flesh and bones, leaving her feeling strained and... full in a way she couldn't quite explain. She had felt something similar when breaking through to the higher levels of gold, but now she felt a strain as if any more qi would cause her veins to burst apart and her bones to break.

Ling Qi felt awkward as she explained the feeling to Han Jian at the tail end of their training session. His expression was hard to read like he was carefully keeping his reaction in check.

"Have I run into a problem with my cultivation?" Ling Qi asked carefully. "I don't want to hurt myself this close to the end of the truce."

She shifted nervously as she noticed Fan Yu's dark expression and the way he clenched his fists until the knuckles turned white. Han Fang gave her an encouraging smile from where he sat, pausing in polishing his warhammer. Han Jian smiled as well, but the smile was strained.

"No, it's the opposite really," Han Jian said jokingly. "You've reached the peak of this realm. You're ready to work on advancing your physique to Silver."

"Really?" Ling Qi asked in surprise. She hadn't even really put much focus on cultivating

her body outside of lessons. She had thought it would take much longer to reach the peak given how everyone else seemed to regard it. She knew many people had retreated from public this week to attempt breakthroughs to Yellow Soul or Silver Physique, but they had all been cultivating for years. She couldn't help but smile.

"That's great," Ling Qi added, feeling a little giddy and no longer worried about the odd reactions of the others.

"It is," Han Jian replied, his smile a touch more genuine as he chuckled, seemingly amused by her good humor. "Anyway, want to help me finish up advancing my Dust Devil technique? The wind resistance you can cause really helps. I'd like to have the next step mastered before I start my own breakthrough to Silver."

Ling Qi nodded, shaking herself out of her thoughts. "Of course. Just give me a second to prepare."

The final day of the truce came all too quickly. Ling Qi trained alone as Han Jian and Han Fang followed Gu Xiulan's example and retreated for their breakthroughs, only emerging for Elder Zhou's lessons.

On the last day of Elder lessons, Elder Zhou stood before the assembled class in his signature pose, straight-backed and with his arms clasped behind him. The difference between today and the first day Ling Qi had seen him was in his expression. That first day, he had been disdainful, giving them neither regard nor respect. Today, his face did not exactly show pride, but it did hold a certain satisfaction.

"Each of you who stands here today is one who has a chance to truly make something of yourselves in the Sect," Elder Zhou began without preamble. "You have worked hard and diligently, keeping up even as I have pushed you to your limits day after day."

Ling Qi straightened up, feeling pride from the instructor's words. It had been hard; the long runs through the mountain paths, climbing sheer cliff faces weighted down by heavy packs, and numerous other difficult physical exercises flashed through her memory. The spars might have been the most memorable part of the training, but the rest was certainly just as grueling.

"Yet today is still the last I will see of many of you," he continued on evenly. "I am not unaware of the internal workings of the Sect. Some of you will fall at each other's hands."

Some will give up, and still others will end their Path due to the numerous dangers one runs across while training.

“I have been away from the front for too long, and I no longer have the time to guide you. I remain confident that one day, I will see at least a few of you again. Perhaps, at that time, we may strike down barbarian scum together as the fist of the Empire.” Ling Qi liked to think his panning gaze had paused on her for a moment, but she knew well enough that it was simple wishful thinking.

“You are dismissed, disciples. Good luck to you.”

Ling Qi took a deep breath as the instructor turned away and vanished in a plume of kicked-up dirt.

She wouldn't be one of the ones who fell.

She might not look forward to having to fight, but she thought it would be nice to meet the older man again as a grown woman and a cultivator worthy of his respect.

There was absolutely no need for Gu Xiulan to smirk at her like that. For all her good breeding and status, that girl's mind was a gutter.

Only a few short hours later, she was seated in Elder Su's class, awaiting the arrival of the second of her teachers for the final lesson. She felt more nervous here as today, she would find out if all of her hard work had been enough to satisfy Elder Su.

The archive pass represented a vast resource. For one such as her, who had nothing but what she could scrounge together and who often simply didn't know things that her fellow disciples took for granted... She wanted it.

It wouldn't be the end of the world if she failed to do so, but it would be a disappointment, particularly if that creepy ass Huang Da won and she didn't. She would also be much more reliant on whatever she could “acquire” in the coming weeks.

“Good afternoon, my students,” Elder Su greeted them as she appeared in the lecturer's pulpit. Her expression was somewhat wistful today. “I shall not tarry overmuch on introductions as I know what you are waiting for.

“First, I would like to state that each one of you who has managed to stay in this class is a diligent cultivator deserving of respect. However, the world is not fair. Whether it is talent, good fortune, or simply an unusual drive, some will always advance leaps and bounds above their peers. Today, I will be awarding those whose performance has

impressed me most of all.”

Ling Qi held her breath, clutching her knees with her hands as Li Suyin beside her chewed on her lower lip. The whole room was silent as the gathered disciples waited on the Elder’s word.

“Ji Rong, your growth has been truly phenomenal. Reaching the peak of both Red and Gold from nothing within three months time, mastering three separate arts to their fullest extent, as well as your other accomplishments... You have earned a pass to the archives,” Elder Su announced. “I would suggest that you take some time to settle yourself. A prodigy who burns out does nobody any good, particularly themselves.”

The scarred boy’s lips twitched into a scowl, but he bowed his head from where he sat in the front row anyway.

“Thank you, Elder Su. I will heed your advice.” The formal words seemed awkward coming from Ji Rong’s lips. The older woman’s gaze flashed a trace of pity.

“The second pass belongs to one who has been just as inspiring in her growth, if a bit differently so. Ling Qi, you have earned your pass. Though you have not mastered as many arts as Ji Rong, you have grown the base of your qi more than any student I have seen in years while still rising nearly as quickly as Ji Rong in other areas.”

Ling Qi’s breath caught in her throat, and she had to fight down a silly grin as she bowed her head. “Thank you, Elder Su,” she quickly replied, wincing at the sound of her too loud voice.

“Of course, young lady,” Elder Su replied cordially.

“For the last pass, I found myself deliberating over the decision for quite some time. Many of you have done very well, but in the end...” Li Suyin was trembling beside her, her grip on the desk in front of her turning her hands white. “I believe Huang Da has earned it.”

Ling Qi’s stomach dropped as she saw the proud smirk light up the silver-haired boy’s face. Li Suyin slumped beside her with a pained expression.

“Through mastery of several difficult and esoteric arts, as well as reaching the Yellow Soul realm with such a solid foundation and fully mastering the Argent Soul, I have found you to be deserving of a pass.

“However, one’s attitude reflects on their cultivation.” Elder Su shot the boy a stern look. “It is important to learn to temper one’s pride as well.”

“Of course, Elder Su,” Huang Da replied smoothly, bowing his head. “Thank you very much for this opportunity.”

Ling Qi patted Li Suyin’s shoulder, scowling as Huang Da shot her a bright smile. Great. Now he would be even more insufferable.

“All three of you will receive one final Qi Foundation Pill,” Elder Su continued. “Li Suyin and Hong Lin have earned the remaining two pills.”

That announcement hardly seemed to comfort her friend. Her own happiness at winning was damped by Li Suyin’s failure and the looming knowledge that the truce would end the following morning.

Ling Qi was dreading the day and wondering just how she should handle the inevitable outbreak of violence. She did not want to stay around Li Suyin and Su Ling since she would only draw more ire on them. Similarly, she did not want to get in Bai Meizhen’s way if - or when - the most powerful disciples came calling to challenge her.

This left her with very few options.

So, when she was caught up in the wake of an exultant Gu Xiulan on her return to the residential district and dragged off to celebrate the proud girl’s breakthrough to the Yellow realm, Ling Qi was pleasantly surprised.

It seemed like her luck just might hold out - at least for awhile longer.

# Chapter 37 - Truce End 1

Ling Qi startled, nearly dropping the cup in her hand when the sound of a warhorn blared violently, rattling the window panes in Gu Xiulan's home. The first rays of dawn were just beginning to shine through the panes.

Elder Jiao's voice followed, magnified to an ear-splitting volume.

"GOOD MORNING, OUTER DISCIPLES OF THE ARGENT PEAK," the man's obnoxiously cheery voice announced, practically vibrating the air. "TODAY, I SHALL EXPLAIN THE CHANGES IN THE RULES FOR NEW DISCIPLES! DO PAY ATTENTION.

"FIRSTLY, NEW DISCIPLES ARE NOW ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE MOUNTAIN AND MAY GO AS FAR AS THE TOWN AT THE BASE AND THE SURROUNDING FOREST. GOING BEYOND SECT BOUNDARIES REMAINS PROHIBITED. YOU WILL KNOW THE BOUNDARIES WHEN YOU SEE THEM." Ling Qi groaned as the voice pounded on her ears.

"IN A RELATED MATTER, NEW DISCIPLES... WHAT. Xin, stop that. Tch. Ruin my fun, will you." The voice suddenly decreased in volume to a more normal one, taking on a petulant tone.

"Hmph. In any case, new disciples may now make use of the Request Board in the primary lecture hall. Simply take the request note from the board and bring it to the disciple in charge of the Payment Hall once the request maker has stamped it complete for you."

The Elder's voice took on a slyer tone as he continued, "But that is all rather minor, is it not? Allow me to explain the more important changes. While killing or maiming your fellow disciples remains prohibited, you are now allowed and even encouraged to challenge one another. The only exceptions as to where you may do so are inside the Sect buildings, such as the main hall, the archive, and the market. All violence remains against the rules in such areas.

"While a victor does deserve some spoils, it is highly frowned upon for violence or other untoward harm to be laid upon your fellow disciples after they have been defeated. We are not barbarians after all." Elder Jiao's voice was amused despite the dire subject



matter. "Now, please report to the plaza to pick up your spirit stone allowance. As of today, stones will only be handed out from dawn until noon. Do not miss yours."

Ling Qi grimaced as the Elder's voice died down, staring into the cup in her hand. Gu Xiulan had acquired some kind of strange fruity wine from somewhere for her 'celebration' and cajoled Ling Qi into drinking it. Ling Qi didn't care for the overly sweet drink much, and the announcement only made the aftertaste sour in her mouth.

"Why so glum?" Gu Xiulan asked brightly, swirling the liquid remaining in her own cup from across the polished table the two of them were seated at. Gu Xiulan occupied one of the larger homes, and as such, she had a separate dining room appointed with comfortable cushioned benches.

They had stayed up through the night chatting and eating sweets. Well, Gu Xiulan had done a lot of chatting. Ling Qi had just been doing her best not to think about the following morning and Li Suyin's disappointment.

"We can finally stop restraining ourselves. Don't tell me you don't wish to have a few of those ruffians who have hassled you at your feet."

Ling Qi gave Gu Xiulan a sour look, setting down her cup to instead pick up her mostly finished bowl of grass jelly.

"I wouldn't mind a humbling a few of them, but I don't care much for the idea of everyone being allowed to attack me," Ling Qi said flatly, downing the last of her portion of the night's sweets. The sticky, syrupy drink was more to her taste. It had gotten a little warm, but she still enjoyed the soothing flavor. She wondered if it would be rude to use her fingers to scrape up the last traces from the bottom of the bowl.

"You really do worry too much," Gu Xiulan replied. "Once you have proven yourself strong, most of the yapping dogs will fall silent. It is the way of things. Now is the time to stand out and gain glory." Gu Xiulan nibbled daintily on her last piece of crystal cake.

"I'd rather just stick to the shadows until the worst of it blows over," Ling Qi said dryly. "I've never had much use for glory."

After deliberating, she decided that being a little uncouth was fine. She scraped a finger along the bottom of the bowl and popped the resulting dollop of jelly into her mouth. Gu Xiulan gave her an amused but long suffering look as Ling Qi licked her finger clean.

"Well, that was when you were a mortal, wasn't it?" Gu Xiulan responded chidingly. "Mortals have a use for obscurity, and I will not lie and say that there isn't a time for your

talents in that regard. One cannot expect to go everywhere in the world in obscurity though. You cannot mean to tell me that you wish to languish at the bottom forever. I refuse to believe that I have misjudged you so badly.”

Ling Qi glanced to the side, not quite meeting the other girl’s eyes. It was true that she had a temper, and these last few months had made her more prone to indulging it than her previous years. The other girl... wasn’t wrong. What was the point of gaining strength if you were just going to cringe away and let yourself be bullied anyway?

While she didn’t dare compare herself to the top disciples, why should she just allow people who weren’t any stronger than her to do as they liked to her? To talk about her like she was still just gutter trash?

Hadn’t she been in the Elders’ advanced classes? Hadn’t Elder Su acknowledged her specifically?

“There it is.” Gu Xiulan smiled savagely. “You like to play at being reserved, but there is a fire inside you.”

“I’m mostly worried about getting ganged up on,” Ling Qi admitted. “What’s to stop a dozen people from getting together and deciding to put me in my place?”

“I will do my part to help, of course,” the other girl preened. “I have reached the Yellow realm and have mastered the next technique of my family arts.”

“As you’ve said a few times already today,” Ling Qi replied dryly.

“Must you? Allow me my pride, you cruel girl.” Gu Xiulan pouted at her and huffed. “In truth, I doubt such a large group would form unless a stronger disciple instigated it. Who would get the spoils from such a thing? Who would get the glory? That is another reason you should stand out and accept challenges from your peers. It will deter such scavengers.”

Ling Qi sighed. It went against years of instinct, but Gu Xiulan knew more about cultivator culture than she did. It also helped that after weeks of being whispered about and snubbed, she dearly wanted to slap a few people around. She could use their spirit stones better than they could.

“Fine. So what do we do?”

“We walk down to the lecture hall with our heads held high,” Gu Xiulan said cheerfully

as she stood up. "I doubt we will have to wait overlong for a challenge. But if their courage fails them, I'm sure I can arrange something."

Ling Qi stood up herself, expression set in one of determination. She had to face a fight some time.

When the two of them left Gu Xiulan's home and set out into the street, the other female disciples were already out in force, clustered in groups of three or four. Each group eyed each other warily. It was an ominous atmosphere, charged with tension and anticipation.

Then the earth rocked under their feet and a boiling hiss like a thousand teakettles screaming at once sounded from further out. Ling Qi startled as a wave of icy cold and familiar qi washed over her, and a bright red figure shot from the dust cloud now roiling over the rooftops.

Squinting, she could see that the figure was Sun Liling. Malevolent and spiked crimson armor was forming over her torso even as the red mist she emitted in sparring fights erupted and spiralled into her hands, forming a thorny, twisted black and red monstrosity of a spear. It was the first time she had seen the girl with a weapon.

"Someone is starting early," Gu Xiulan mused beside her, squinting upward as the red-haired girl slammed back to earth with a thunderous crash and kicked up another plume of dust, passing back out of sight. "Did you want to go see?" she asked, eyeing Ling Qi.

They both knew who Sun Liling's opponent was. Ling Qi swallowed and shook her head. A fight between Bai Meizhen and Sun Liling? She would just get in the way.

"No, Bai Meizhen can handle herself. I need to deal with my own problems first." Even if Bai Meizhen was wounded in this fight with Sun Liling, she couldn't see her housemate having any other challengers today. Bai Meizhen would be fine.

"Very well. Playing spectator has never been my preference," Gu Xiulan replied with a shrug. "Shall we be off then?"

Ling Qi nodded as another icy cold breeze washed over them and the other nervously chattering disciples. The terrifying hissing sound erupted again.

The two of them set off down the path, leaving the battle in the distance. Ling Qi was glad that she kept all of her important things on her person. She wasn't certain how intact her house was going to be by evening.

The plaza was much the same as the residential area save that the clumped groups were not exclusively female. A great number of disciples were streaming in and out of the lecture hall. Gu Xiulan and Ling Qi passed several other duels in progress, none as flashy as the fight that had broken out between the two top ranked girls. They were able to reach the lecture hall and collect their spirit stones with little trouble.

Ling Qi had her suspicions about that, and they were born out when they left the hall.

“Ling Qi and Gu Xiulan. A beggar and a desert rat. I suppose I should not be surprised to find the ‘nobility’ of the east keeping such poor company.”

The two of them were halted by a loud voice cutting over the chatter of the surrounding crowd. The speaker was Hong Lin, the girl with the pink-streaked hair who had crushed Ling Qi in her first sparring match. Hong Lin stepped out of the crowd, her arms crossed under her modest chest. Stepping out behind her were two faces Ling Qi vaguely recalled. The staff in the hands of the scowling girl was rather more familiar.

“I wouldn’t expect scum to keep good company, no,” the boy said tightly, his twinned swords already in hands and a scowl on his handsome face.

“You will both pay for humiliating us and blinding Lei Qing,” the girl with the staff added quietly, determination on her face.

“I’m sorry. Who are all of you?” Gu Xiulan asked blithely, making the two bristle and Ling Qi shuffle nervously. This scene screamed of being staged to Ling Qi. In the open plaza, the two of them were surrounded by enough watchers to make retreating difficult.

“No, my apologies. I believe I have seen you in Instructor Zhou’s training. Fong, was it?” Gu Xiulan added in a sweet and entirely insincere voice.

The pink-haired girl scowled at them. “I see poor memory is among your flaws,” Hong Lin replied tartly.

“Trash like her never should have wasted the Instructor’s time merely due to a little good luck,” Hong Lin added, glowering at Ling Qi. “Nor should she even be in the Sect making pretensions at things she does not deserve. Now that the truce has ended, I no longer need tolerate it.”

Hong Lin seemed to have a personal grudge with Ling Qi. This was strange given that Ling Qi had hardly given the girl a thought outside of sparring.

“And you picked up a couple of failures with a grudge to distract me while you fight my friend, Ling Qi? I suppose that is what I would expect of a girl from the core provinces. Your kind have never been much good at fighting your own battles,” Gu Xiulan sniffed.

This was what Ling Qi had been afraid of. She couldn't run without leaving Gu Xiulan behind, and she couldn't be certain that some members of their audience wouldn't jump in given the chance.

Still... this was an opportunity too, wasn't it? If she fought off another member of Elder Zhou's class in public, that would warn off weaker disciples.

The other two... She had put them out of her mind after her initial check-up on their status post-Elder Zhou's test. While the girl's speech had relieved her assuming 'Lei Qing' was the girl she thought Gu Xiulan had killed, she couldn't really afford sentiment here.

“I don't know what has you so angry, but I've beaten you before in training,” Ling Qi stated flatly, doing her best to sound confident. “I don't have any quarrel with you, but I won't hold back if you start this.” That sounded suitably threatening, didn't it?

The twins were too busy glaring at Gu Xiulan to look her way, but Hong Lin bristled.

“You... *You wretched little gutter rat.* Do not pretend that we have no quarrel even ignoring that you have no place here,” Hong Lin snapped.

“I genuinely have no idea what you're talking about,” Ling Qi snapped back. “What - are you that angry that Gan Guangli put you in a crater last week?”

“No,” Hong Lin said coldly. “I am furious that an ungrateful little harlot of a commoner has been leading my fiancé along.”

Ling Qi blinked. She blinked again as the other girl's guai appeared in her hands.

Hong Lin couldn't mean... No...

Dammit, Huang Da.

## Chapter 38 - Truce End 2

Ling Qi scowled. That guy... He was just causing her one problem after another.

Bad enough that he was a creep who switched 'targets' at the drop of a hat. That people thought badly of her for his interest. And now, that someone was actually going to attack her over it.

"The creep? Do me a favor and leash him."

The other girl's eyes were just beginning to narrow in outrage when Ling Qi's right hand blurred, and a white streak shot out. She flung one of her new knives at the Zhu girl. Even as she was doing so, she darted backwards, the wind stirring around her frame and making her gown billow around her feet.

Throwing without looking at her target had cost her some accuracy, and the Zhu girl nearly escaped her attack, spinning her staff to deflect the knife. A slight tug on the projectile with a current of wind was enough to alter its trajectory, scoring a shallow cut across the back of the girl's hand. It was enough for her qi to take hold.

"Ha ha. Is there anything more pathetic than a woman who cannot even keep her man's eyes upon her?" Gu Xiulan laughed as she paced away to the right to reduce their vulnerability to a group attack.

An arc of flame burned through the air, a wide crescent with a core of flickering blue that forced the sword wielding boy to sidestep in front of his sister and disperse it with a twinned cut of his blades. Ling Qi felt her control of the wind contested in that moment the fire was blown away, but she could also see a grimace on the boy's face as qi flickered around his body where the flames had licked at him.

Ling Qi didn't have time to pay the twins attention though because a furiously scowling Hong Lin had appeared in front of her with a muffled boom. The bar of Hong Lin's guai was coated in a solid shell of grey qi as it swung upward to strike her across the ribs. Ling Qi's eyes widened as she tried to call up a heavy burst of wind to push the other girl back and out of range. She remembered this attack. It was the one which had laid her out in a single strike in her first spar against Hong Lin.

Her Gale Shield wasn't enough as Hong Lin simply bulldozed through the rushing wind currents with a snarl on her lips. The air flew from Ling Qi's lungs even as her qi drained precipitously to cushion the worst of the blow, and she knew she would be sore after this.

“You don’t know anything, you wretched little strumpet!” Hong Lin shouted as Ling Qi desperately ducked under a follow-up strike from the girl’s second guai that would have cracked her across the temple.

“Do you think I enjoy watching that boy flit about from one girl to another?” Hong Lin muttered, low enough that Ling Qi doubted anyone else had heard it.

Ling Qi couldn’t spare a glance for Gu Xiulan, but she could hear the girl laughing even as a green glow lit up in the corner of her vision and the flagstones were carved open by sharpened wind currents. With Gu Xiulan’s greater cultivation and speed and the hobbling that Ling Qi had inflicted, Gu Xiulan seemed to be doing well.

“That sounds like your problem. I don’t want the asshole,” Ling Qi snapped as she managed to open the distance. She felt so slow under the bright light of dawn, and it irked her that her Sable Crescent Step was so limited without low light. She would have to fix that.

Her flute appeared in her hand. Even as Hong Lin narrowed her eyes and tried to close the distance again, Ling Qi raised the instrument to her lips and began to play the first haunting notes of her Melody. There was a susurrus of surprised and disappointed noises from those watching as thick, cloying mist spilled forth from her flute. The battlefield was quickly consumed by a thick bank of fog.

Ling Qi suppressed a wince at the off tone of her first few notes; she was still short of breath and the aching bruise throbbing on her lower ribs didn’t make things any easier. Despite the distraction, she remembered to include Gu Xiulan in the mist’s protection. Ling Qi could feel her friend like a cheerfully blazing hearthfire off to her right.

“Of course you would use this cowardly thing,” Hong Lin said darkly as she peered through the mist, eyes darting about as she tried to locate Ling Qi. Ling Qi, who had started moving the moment the fog rolled out, was nowhere near the place where the girl’s weapons struck. She winced as she felt the furious wind of their passage.

The breathing room she had gained did afford her the opportunity to give the other battle going on a look, and she was pleased to see her earlier assessment was correct. The boy’s robes were tattered, revealing that his skin had taken on a bark-like texture that seemed to be protecting him from Gu Xiulan’s flames. The girl’s eyes were verdant green lanterns in the mist though, and she was surrounded by a circle of viridian light. The Zhu girl’s shoulders were trembling from exhaustion, but she was preparing

something. However Ling Qi had to focus back on her enemy because Hong Lin wasn't taking her inability to find Ling Qi well.

"If he will not respect me and if I cannot strike him, I can at least break his toys. I cannot be reproached for *that*."

Ling Qi didn't like the way Hong Lin had paused, fists clenched. Hong Lin's muttering was weird and nonsensical, which worried her. Ling Qi's fears were confirmed when Hong Lin's skin flushed red, qi streaming up visibly around her as her hair and gown fluttered in a phantom wind.

Instincts screaming at her to move, Ling Qi leaped backward with all of her strength, flickering through the mist as soothing dark qi rushed through her veins. She just barely avoided the other girl's paired guai slamming downward in an overhand strike at where Ling Qi had just been standing. The plaza flagstones shattered, chips of stone flying outward from the impact.

Ling Qi only grew more concerned a moment later. The circle of green around the staff girl had pulsed and expanded outward, washing over everyone. As it did, she felt her grip on the twin's qi through her Against the Wind technique disrupted. That girl had to go.

She didn't want to stop playing the Melody, but her qi was rapidly draining away through the rapid-fire use of her techniques. Her only comfort was that if she was draining her qi quickly, the others must be nearly running on fumes too. This gave her one good solution. If the twins were suffering so much fighting Gu Xiulan alone, she would just have to give them more foes.

Avoiding another thunderous strike from her own opponent. Ling Qi played first dissonant note of the new verse, the shadows grew darker and hungry eyes appeared in the mist. All three of her enemies stiffened, moving to dodge the shadowy claws and fangs now nipping at their heels. Hong Lin shrugged off her attacker with a snarl, the mist failing to do more than scratch uselessly at her flushed skin, but the other two were not so lucky.

A trio of bloody cuts slashed across Zhu Mei's forehead, causing her to stumble and cry out in pain as blood began to pour down into her eyes. Zhu Fong was similarly unlucky, except his misfortune was the jagged cut across his knee that caused him to stumble when a burning, many tongued whip blazed into existence in Gu Xiulan's gloved hand and coiled around his limbs with a flick of the laughing girl's wrist. He screamed as it burned through his clothing and slammed him bodily into his sister, sending them both



to the ground in a tumble.

Ling Qi winced as she heard the crack of breaking bone, but she had no time to worry about that. The qi aura around Hong Lin was beginning to fade, and she could see the girl breathing heavily. Whatever Hong Lin had done clearly strained her. However, it didn't stop her from raising her hands and weapons, her hands and forearms darkening to the color of steel as qi infused them.

This time, when Ling Qi flew backward, it wasn't entirely of her own will. When Hong Lin struck the ground, the earth rocked, and a rippling burst of dark, iron-colored qi erupted from around her like a shimmering wall. It struck Ling Qi like a speeding carriage, and Ling Qi could feel bruises forming all across her body even as she did her best to move with the motion of the blow as Elder Zhou had taught her. It was her movement art, Sable Crescent Step, that saved her the worst of it. Ling Qi could feel some of the force of Hong Lin's attack passing through her harmlessly in places as she melded with the mist.

The blast still disrupted her song and blew the mist away with a thunderous crash, leaving her standing exposed in the middle of the damaged plaza. Hong Lin was hardly in the best shape either; the flush was fading from her skin as she panted for breath, shoulders slumping tiredly as she stared incredulously at Ling Qi.

"How! How are you still standing after..."

Whatever else Hong Lin was going to say was cut off as she screamed in pain. The lance of white hot fire seared across her lower legs and sent her tumbling to the ground, her badly burned legs apparent among the burning tatters of her gown.

"Because she is simply better than you, you whining child," Gu Xiulan said coldly as she strode over. Gu Xiulan looked somewhat battered. A thin stream of blood flowed from the corner of her lip, and she looked furious.

Ling Qi surreptitiously popped one of her qi restoring pills while Gu Xiulan spoke, choosing not to comment on just how close the fight had been. She was all too aware that they still had an audience with nearly a dozen other disciples watching them. She absolutely could not afford to appear tired right now so she did her best to stand straight and keep her expression confident despite the pounding in her ears. Thankfully, Gu Xiulan was fully willing to take the attention for herself.

"Let that be a lesson to you," Gu Xiulan said haughtily, voice cracking through the air like the whip she had been wielding as sparks danced in the air around her. "Do you

truly think that I, a daughter of the Gu family, last descendants of the Purifying Sun, would extend my friendship to a weakling? That Elder Guan Zhou, the great Bulwark of the South, would accept an unworthy student? Check your pride and delusions. We will happily break them for you should you find yourself unable to do so.”

The murmuring around them grew briefly louder and angrier, and Ling Qi tensed as she scowled at her fellow disciples. Then, the tension broke, and the first of their audience turned away, a pair of boys who inclined their heads slightly to Gu Xiulan before leaving. The other disciples drifted away as well, some with more reluctance and unfriendliness in their expressions than others. Gu Xiulan continued to glare before hmping and reaching into her pouch for a restoration pill herself.

“Shall we take our spoils then?” Gu Xiulan asked brightly after swallowing the pill, turning to Ling Qi with an expectant look. “I believe an even split is fair in this case.”

Ling Qi nodded slowly, looking at their opponents. Hong Lin was struggling to sit up, a grimace on her face, and Zhu Mei was slumped at her brother’s side, tears crawling down her face as she frantically worked to heal her brother’s burns. As for the boy himself, he was unconscious, bleeding from a shallow cut on his head where it had struck the flagstones.

She had... won?

## Chapter 39 - Truce End 3

"Yeah, I guess we should collect our due," Ling Qi replied absently to Gu Xiulan, glaring at Hong Lin. Despite her words, she still felt ambivalent when she glanced at the other two. It wasn't precisely guilt because in the end, they had attacked her and her... friend. She couldn't really think of Gu Xiulan any other way after her words to the crowd although she was still wary of the other girl's temper and inclinations.

"Zhu Mei, right?" Ling Qi called, studiously ignoring the handful of people still lurking within ear shot. The girl's shoulders stiffened and her head shot up even as the green glow around her hands continued unabated. "You have till we're done with Hong Lin to finish up healing your brother. Then you drop the staff."

Ling Qi glanced to Gu Xiulan for approval even as she spoke. It was a little presumptuous to take the lead, but hopefully, the other girl would be fine with it. Gu Xiulan simply cocked her head to the side slightly, an amused smile on her lips.

"There is no rush. I will keep an eye on her," she said simply, turning to face down the twin cultivators with her arms crossed in that slightly irritating bust-emphasizing way she had.

Zhu Mei's face twisted with helpless frustration, but after a moment, she meekly nodded and returned to her work, dropping her gaze from Gu Xiulan's unimpressed stare. Ling Qi strode toward Hong Lin where the girl had finally managed to sit up. Hong Lin's legs were burnt badly, and Ling Qi's stomach churned at the scent of cooked flesh. All the same, she kept her glare unwavering as she flicked a knife into her hand.

"I don't want anything to do with you or that creep," Ling Qi said quietly. "But you attacked me, and I won't just forgive that. I figure you know what comes next."

Hong Lin sneered up at Ling Qi, but Ling Qi could see the weakness in Hong Lin's expression and the trembling in the hands keeping her upright. "Of course. Now you rob me, correct? It isn't as if I would expect anything else from a beggar."

"Oh, do stop that," Gu Xiulan said dryly, not turning around. "You soft central cultivators do so love your pretensions, but let us not seriously entertain the notion that you would not be taking spoils in our place."

Hong Lin sniffed, somehow managing to sound haughty despite the obvious pain she was in. "A token of victory is hardly the same as the robbery you sand-dwelling bandits

engage in. Get on with it.”

Ling Qi rolled her eyes, having no further desire to engage with the girl. Hong Lin sat stiffly as Ling Qi scooped up her weapons, only barely managing to avoid lurching under their tremendous weight. Her expression darkened when Ling Qi spotted a familiar grey ring on her right hand and reached down to take it. The last thing that caught Ling Qi’s eye was a pair of glittering silver anklets that Hong Lin wore, shimmering and unburnt despite the state of the girl’s leggings and shoes.

Ling Qi felt bad at the restrained sob of pain that the other girl let out when she removed them, but she crushed the feeling ruthlessly. Just because she had resolved to be a better ally to her friends didn’t mean she had to be kind to enemies. A quick scan showed her nothing else of value, and Ling Qi wasn’t about to escalate to strip searching the other girl.

“Don’t come near me again,” Ling Qi said flatly as she stood up. “I don’t want any further conflict with you. Deal with your own problems.”

Ling Qi could see that her words were futile from the hatred in the other girl’s eyes. Hong Lin rose unsteadily to her feet and turned away, slowly limping off in the direction of the market and the medicine pavilion. Ling Qi would just have to get strong enough that the other girl and her lunatic fiance couldn’t threaten her.

“I will show you how to attune the storage ring when we are done,” Gu Xiulan said conversationally as Ling Qi turned around to face the same way as her. Ling Qi grunted in response, arms trembling as she continued to support Hong Lin’s paired guai.

“You... don’t want it?” Ling Qi asked carefully. She had gotten the impression that storage rings were pretty valuable.

“Father will be sending me a similar one now that I have reached the second realm,” Gu Xiulan said with a shrug. “Now, allow me to take care of this since your hands are full.”

Zhu Fong had stirred to consciousness while Ling Qi had been relieving Hong Lin of her items, and he glared up at Gu Xiulan from the ground. “This won’t be the end of this,” he vowed stiffly as the glow faded from his sister’s hands.

“It should be,” Ling Qi replied tiredly. “You aren’t going to help anyone like this.”

Gu Xiulan smirked, idly brushing a few strands of hair that had come loose from her braid out of her eyes.

“Ling Qi is right. You’ll only waste your time on this nonsense. It is hardly my fault your families lack the expertise to aid her,” Gu Xiulan said dismissively, causing Zhu Mei to flush in shame and Zhu Fong’s scowl to deepen. “Now, place your talismans and pouches on the ground, or would you prefer to be crude like that Hong girl?”

“Bandit,” the boy spat, even as he kicked the sword still lying at his side toward them and began to remove his belt pouch. Ling Qi uncomfortably shifted from foot to foot as she watched the girl set her staff down with a pained look and remove a rather pretty white jade hairpin in the shape of a lotus flower from her hair. Her brother merely unwound his sash and threw it atop his sword. Gu Xiulan collected it all while humming cheerfully to herself, along with the boy’s other sword and Ling Qi’s knife that she had thrown at the start of the fight.

Gu Xiulan dismissed the Zhu twins with a wave of her hand after that, and Ling Qi fell in beside her as they walked away. They were heading back toward the lecture hall to organize and go through their winnings. Ling Qi took the time to take another of her qi recovery pills.

In the first empty room they found, Ling Qi dumped their newfound treasures on an empty desk before turning to Gu Xiulan. “How does this work?” she asked, holding up the little grey ring.

Gu Xiulan looked up from the paired sabers she had been examining. “Ah. Just apply a drop of blood, and channel your qi into the ring. It will attune easily enough.”

Ling Qi frowned dubiously, but there was no point in doubting Gu Xiulan now. She grimaced as she pricked her finger on the tip of one of her knives and let the resulting drop of blood fall onto the dull ring.

The drop was immediately absorbed, and Ling Qi hurried to push a thread of qi in after it. The moment she did, she stiffened when a ‘window’ seemed to open in her mind. It was disorienting at first, like looking out of a third eye, but the disorientation soon faded to the point where it felt more like something hovering just on the edge of her vision.

If she focused on it, she found that she could see the inside of a small hollow stone cube in which pills and spirit stones were piled. Excited, Ling Qi tried to reach for them... only for a dozen pills and a two score or more of stones to rain down on the floor in a noisy clatter and go rolling wildly away.

Gu Xiulan raised an eyebrow, and Ling Qi gave her a sheepish grin. It looked like she would need some practice in using storage rings.

Once they had recovered their spoils from under the desks and benches and piled them up, Ling Qi remained amazed. On the desk before them was more spirit stones than she had seen in her life up to that point, including a few glittering yellow ones. Yellow stones were worth ten red ones, according to Gu Xiulan, but the exchange rate for higher tier stones apparently grew steeply with each level to the point that a single green stone was worth fifty yellow ones.

The pills, which were meant to help someone cultivate metal, mountain, and wood arts, were sadly not much use directly. The two of them agreed to simply split the proceeds on the pills rather than bother dividing them up. Gu Xiulan would get the larger split since Ling Qi had taken the storage ring.

The talismans were another matter

“Do you want to go to the market before we decide what to do with them?” Ling Qi asked tentatively as they considered the small pile of gear. Ling Qi was reluctant to suggest it - and not just because the idea of spending the next several hours being dragged around by Gu Xiulan on a shopping trip was pretty unappealing. She was worried about everyone else. Bai Meizhen had been fighting Sun Liling, and who knew what was happening with Li Suyin and Su Ling or even Han Jian and the others.

Gu Xiulan contemplated her proposal. “I had considered going to see how Jian was faring,” she said thoughtfully. “Or at least find a few of our more insulting peers to put in their place...”

“What was up with that anyway?” Ling Qi asked, idly twisting the new ring on her finger. She couldn't do anything for Bai Meizhen, and her other friends were probably hiding out at this point if she knew them at all.

“I understand why they were insulting me, but what was that ‘desert rat’ stuff? And what were you talking about at the end there when you were scaring them off?” It had slipped her mind at the time, but she was curious now that they had a moment's peace.

Gu Xiulan sniffed disdainfully., drumming her fingers against the desk she was leaning on. “Childish and outdated insults about my home and nothing more. You are familiar with the tale of Lu Guanxi?”

“Yeah. He was a hero who saved the Empire...” Ling Qi wracked her brain for more details, but she hadn't exactly had time for bedtime stories after leaving Mother behind. She had recalled parts of this story when she first met Han Jian though.

“From... some huge army of walking corpses,” Ling Qi finished a little lamely, unable to remember the rest of the story. “The King of... Something?”

“The Twilight King,” Gu Xiulan corrected gently. “A pretender to the imperial throne who used forbidden arts to craft abominations of his slain foes. In any case, the Gu family is a surviving branch house of the extinct Lu family. Hence, we are descended from the Purifying Sun.”

Ling Qi was pretty sure she was missing something. Her understanding was that Gu Xiulan’s family was lower status than Han Jian’s. But if they were related to a Founding Family, shouldn’t the Gu be higher ranked?

“Alright,” she replied slowly. “So that explains the speech. What about the insults?”

Gu Xiulan scowled, and the air warmed slightly. “My esteemed ancestor’s actions were necessary, but they were hardly without ill effect. Much of Golden Fields remains an ashen wasteland to this day, and in the first millennia after the Scouring, the surviving houses of the province... struggled to stay competitive with the rest of the Empire.

“Of course, my family has worked long and hard to ensure that we are no longer poor vagrants scrabbling among ruins. Such words betray the speaker’s lack of knowledge and poor education.”

Ling Qi nodded slowly, considering that. Was that why Gu Xiulan liked flaunting her wealth so much? She doubted that was the entire reason, but she suspected this common misconception about Golden Fields might be part of it.

“That’s interesting...” Ling Qi considered how to gracefully segue back into the other subject, and upon failing to think of a way to do so, she just bluntly raised it. “So, the market?”

Gu Xiulan raised her hand to cover her mouth and laughed lightly. “Ling Qi, if you really wish for me to help you get yourself well appointed, you only had to ask,” she said cheerfully. “That gown of yours is so ill fitting. I know. Why don’t we both get ourselves fitted for new gowns? I have had about enough of these dowdy grey things.”

Ling Qi felt a creeping sense of dread as she glanced down at her wrinkled gown with its twice-wrapped sash and too short hems. “This is fine. Really,” she said hurriedly. “Besides, isn’t this the Sect uniform?”

“It really isn’t,” Gu Xiulan replied chidingly. “You aren’t presenting yourself strongly with

such things. The soft color works for you in a way that does not for me, but I think you might be better with black and shades of blue instead. You will want to stick the high cut to avoid drawing attention to your more... deficient attributes. Do you have anything against veils?"

"I don't need to hide my face. I don't look that bad," Ling Qi snapped.

"No, no." Gu Xiulan rolled her eyes. "I wasn't implying anything of the sort. That said, you could do with making a bit more use of your cosmetics. But your hair is coming along very nicely."

Ling Qi fingered one of the stray strands that always hung in her face. It's true that her hair wasn't quite as lank and stringy anymore, but that wasn't the point. Ling Qi hadn't missed that comment about her "deficiencies" either. "Then what did you mean?"

"I mean that you could very well manage the mysterious look with a bit of work, silly girl," Gu Xiulan said in exasperation. "You know the sort - the ones with veils and trailing lengths of silk that billow with their movements. It would certainly fit with that movement technique of yours."

"Besides, a proper cultivator's gown will do you better in protection than that ugly thing you are currently wearing under your garments. Did you go out of your way to select the least appealing gear at the market?"

"I got what I could afford," Ling Qi replied defensively, but her anger had simmered down. Gu Xiulan wouldn't get her something explicitly worse than what she was already using, even if she'd probably insist on a bunch of silly aesthetic stuff. And Ling Qi did have a lot of stones right now and could have more from her share of the proceeds if they sold a few of the talismans...

Besides, keeping so much money on her felt like asking for trouble. Wouldn't it be better to get useful things?



## Chapter 40 - Truce End 4

"I'm not dressing up like some dancer," Ling Qi said stubbornly as she walked beside Gu Xiulan down one of the streets in the market. "I just want something practical."

Gu Xiulan gave a put upon sigh as she led them around a corner; she apparently knew where she wanted to go for this so Ling Qi simply followed her.

"You are such a difficult girl," Gu Xiulan grumbled. "I do not think I have ever met another young lady so stubbornly opposed to improving her appearance."

"Probably because I'm not a 'lady,'" Ling Qi replied waspishly. "There's no point in trying to pretend to be something I'm not."

"Isn't there though?" Gu Xiulan shot back immediately, seeming frustrated. "No one will respect you if you choose to continue behaving and appearing the way you do."

Ling Qi frowned at the other girl. "If I get strong enough, they will. That's the point of cultivation, isn't it?"

"And mastering one's appearance and its effects on others is a form of strength," Gu Xiulan argued passionately. "When a lady can halt aggression or guide those around her with a smile and a few honeyed words, that, too, is strength. Similarly, the ability for a man such as Han Jian to inspire loyalty and awe with his words and presence is also strength."

"I suppose," Ling Qi grudgingly replied. "I don't like it though. I'll just follow your lead. I'm not wearing something that's going to take an hour to put on though."

Gu Xiulan smirked at her victory, and Ling Qi hunched her shoulders in irritation. She knew the other girl was right. Choosing to refuse the trappings of culture and wealth wasn't going to do her any favors in the long run. Was that what Mother had been trying to do? Ling Qi had thought Mother was just grooming her to follow in her footsteps at the brothel, but... If she was honest with herself, Mother had never mentioned anything of the sort.

"Gu Xiulan, the Sect said we could communicate with those outside the Sect now, right? Do you know where I would have to go to send a letter, even if I'm... not sure where the recipient is?"

Her companion blinked at the change in subject but recovered quickly. "I suppose there should be an office of the Ministry of Communication in the town at the base of the mountain. They rarely fail to deliver their messages to the intended recipient," Gu Xiulan replied slowly, eyeing Ling Qi curiously.

"And is there a way to trade a red stone or two for silver?" Ling Qi asked tentatively. It hurt to spend her scant resources on something that didn't immediately help her, but she remembered her conversation with the spider spirit in the well. She also remembered how thin and listless Mother had looked the last time she had seen her. There hadn't been that much grey in Mother's hair when Ling Qi had left home. Mother's profession wasn't exactly one kind to aging, even if, or indeed because, looking back, the... establishment Mother worked at was pretty high class as those things went.

Gu Xiulan pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I suppose you would be able to do that in the same place. The Ministry typically handles such things as part of their business dealings. Why would you wish to waste your stones so though?"

"Why do you think?" Ling Qi asked irritably, giving Gu Xiulan an unimpressed look. "You know I am a commoner. I just... I didn't part on great terms with my Mother, and I thought I could help her out a little." She had to be careful. Too much money at once would just make Mother a target... Maybe she could set up something to mail her a little every month?

Gu Xiulan paused in the street. "Ah. That is rather obvious in hindsight. How obtuse of me. Well, I don't see that being a problem. Interfering overmuch in mortal affairs is frowned upon, but no one would rebuke you for seeing to the care of family." Gu Xiulan furrowed her brows. "Why would you not know the location of your own mother?"

Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably, barely avoiding bumping into one of the passerby. "I... kind of ran away from home when I was... ten," she replied slowly. "Yeah, I had just recently turned ten. I've only seen her once or twice since so I'm not sure if she still lives in the same place."

Ling Qi saw a flicker of genuine surprise on the other girl's face. "I... see. Yes, that would be a problem," Gu Xiulan replied neutrally while giving Ling Qi an appraising look. "No wonder you act like a ruffian. You will apologize, of course. I know not your circumstances, but to abandon family in such a way is shameful."

Ling Qi scowled defensively, but then looked away, shoulders drooping. "...Yeah, I know.

That's the idea." How does one go about apologizing for that kind of thing?

'Hi Mother. It's me, Ling Qi, the daughter you probably assumed was dead in a gutter years ago! Turns out I'm an immortal now so you shouldn't worry. Here's some money because giving it to you hardly costs me a thing. Sorry for being a selfish and disobedient daughter!'

As Ling Qi held back a snort of laughter at her own musings, Gu Xiulan came to a stop. "Leaving that aside for now, we are here. I am going to make a lady of you yet," Gu Xiulan said with cheerful determination.

Ling Qi felt a spike of regret that had nothing to do with her lack of filial piety.

The next few hours were a drag of poking, prodding, needles and cloth, and more than a couple of fairly heated disagreements with Gu Xiulan over the exact specifications of what Ling Qi wanted. In the end, Ling Qi managed to avoid all the gauzy scarves Gu Xiulan wanted to dress her in and came out of the whole mess with something she could actually feel comfortable wearing.

Her new gown was high-necked and covered everything below her collarbones. It had the same long and billowy sleeves she had gotten used to. The outer layer was dark blue, nearly black silk with embroidered patterns of silver flower petals being blown in the wind across the chest. The hems were silver embroidery as well, but they were arranged in patterns of formation characters rather than flower petals. The sash and underlayer of the gown were a lighter blue.

Most importantly, the new gown fit her perfectly, which was nice from a comfort perspective even if Ling Qi felt awkward about the way the cloth tightly hugged her hips, and while it helped that the formations woven into the gown meant that right now, she was better armored than most guardsman, there were still a couple features she wasn't very happy about.

"Was it really necessary to have it slit so high?" Ling Qi said self-consciously as they strolled out of the dress shop, clutching the silky cloth closed in her hands. The slit nearly came up to her knees!

"Do stop that. You're going to wrinkle the dress," Gu Xiulan chided. Her own gown was all reds and golds and cut significantly lower than Ling Qi's to boot on top of having tighter and less open sleeves. "You said you wanted practicality, did you not? It will not hinder your movement at all."

"I feel like the second I really start moving or a breeze kicks up, I'm going to be flashing my legs like some kind of deviant," Ling Qi grumbled. "...Thank you though." For all her complaining, this thing was worth it from what the tailor had told her of its abilities. On top of the base level toughness it would enhance the effects of techniques using water qi, like her Forgotten Vale Melody.

"It's a good thing you have some command of the wind then," Gu Xiulan replied dryly. "So that you may ensure that you only flash your legs when you wish to. You're welcome. I suppose this is a good start, but one dress hardly makes a wardrobe."

Ling Qi blinked, feeling sheepish as she smoothed the wrinkles in her dress and instead took hold of the currents of air around her.

"Right. Forgot about that," Ling Qi mumbled, feeling foolish. She would have to practice to avoid doing anything embarrassing. "I'm not going to do it on purpose."

"If you say so," Gu Xiulan replied dubiously. "Now, shall we go about ridding ourselves of our remaining load?"

"Yeah, let's. I'd rather have some space in my new ring," Ling Qi agreed. "I actually want a couple of the talismans so I was thinking..."

The two of them chatted about the details as they shopped around for good prices on the talismans Ling Qi wasn't interested in keeping.

Despite being tempted by some of the more expensive pills and elixirs, Ling Qi spent only a small amount of her stones on them given that she planned to attempt breakthrough in the near future. She did, however, stock up on qi recovery pills and healing salves.

The majority of her take went to the purchase of the only dark qi-enhancing talisman she had found in the entire market. It was an innocuous thing, a ribbon of black silk meant to be worn around the neck like a choker. Merely putting it on let her feel the qi in her dark-aligned meridians flowing more smoothly.

Still, despite the shopping trip with Gu Xiulan being surprisingly enjoyable, her other concerns niggled at her mind more and more as the day wore on. Were her friends alright? Had Bai Meizhen won her battle? Ling Qi began to feel guilty for spending so much time on something like this. Gu Xiulan seemed to pick up on her growing disquiet and so with the last of the spoils they intended to sell gone and their purchases made, the two of them left the market and headed back toward the female residences.

The bad feeling in the pit of her stomach only grew as they drew close enough to see the smoke rising from the residential area.

# Chapter 41 - Truce End 5

Ling Qi and Gu Xiulan parted ways at the entrance to the female residences, and Ling Qi hurried along toward the center where her home lay.

Things had changed since this morning. There were signs of battle in the streets from scorched or cracked stonework to deep gouges and craters in the earth. Ling Qi wondered who would be repairing the damage or if they would at all. Maybe the Elders only repaired infrastructure when a new class was incoming, and the disciples would just have to deal with the damage they had inflicted on the residential area themselves. That seemed like the sort of thing the Elders might do for several reasons.

Such thoughts fled her mind as she approached the house she had been living in for the last few months. Her stomach dropped when it came into sight. Maybe it was because it had been the first real home she had had since she left Mother, but seeing it in ruins was disheartening.

Much of the front wall had collapsed, and it had taken a chunk of the roof with it. Pieces of the wall were scattered across the street, which, along with other nearby buildings, was scarred by deep pits. It almost seemed like great chunks of earth and stone had simply melted.

Amid the wreckage, Bai Meizhen sat silently in a meditative pose, pristine and pale, atop a flat slab of rock that looked to have previously been a part of the their roof. The image was somewhat ruined by the blood staining both the bottom of her silver robes and her shredded sleeves. It left much of her snow white arms bare, but Bai Meizhen seemed unbothered by the nearly indecent exposure.

The other thing that broke the image of serenity was the great, poisonous green serpent coiled around the meditating girl. From the pattern on the serpent's scales, Ling Qi could tell it was Cui, but Cui was far from the tiny, finger-thick snake she usually was. Bai Meizhen's cousin was now currently as thick as one of her thighs and several times longer than Ling Qi was tall if her estimation was correct.

Cui twitched at her approach, raising her head and letting out a threatening hiss as her eyes locked onto Ling Qi. Ling Qi stopped immediately, raising her hands in a carefully non-threatening manner. The serpent regarded her silently, tongue flicking in and out as she tasted the air.

*'Cousin Meizhen, your little mouse has returned.'*

Ling Qi blinked in surprise; Cui had avoided talking to her since that first time when Ling Qi had asked about repaying Bai Meizhen. Cui's voice was no longer garbled and sounded like the voice of an arrogant girl a few years younger than her. Ling Qi frowned almost immediately when the words processed. What was with spirit beasts and not using her name?

Bai Meizhen opened her eyes then, her expression weary and somber. "Ling Qi, I am glad you are doing well," she greeted, studying Ling Qi as she turned her head to look at her. "I see your day has been profitable."

"Yeah," Ling Qi replied, picking through the rubble field around her friend as she approached and studied the other girl in return. That was... a lot of blood on her gown. Ling Qi felt guilty at the contrast between the two of them.

"I got in a fight when I went to pick up my stone allowance. I didn't get too badly hurt so I went to the market to offload my spoils." She paused, and the awkward silence stretched between them. "Are you alright? If you're hurt, I picked up some healing salves while I was there."

"Thank you, but I am afraid it would do little good," Bai Meizhen replied, looking up from her study of Ling Qi's gown. "Wounds dealt by that wretched girl's blood do not heal easily. Common medicines will have little effect."

"... Oh," Ling Qi said, feeling even worse. She fidgeted with her gown as she came to a stop a short distance from the barrier that Cui formed around Bai Meizhen. "Did you beat her? And what do you mean by her blood? I saw she had that spear, but—" Ling Qi immediately shut her mouth, horrified that she had just let slip that she had seen the fight and done nothing. What would the other girl think of her?

Bai Meizhen furrowed her brows, and Ling Qi saw her hands clench atop her knees. The temperature around the girl dropped, and Ling Qi felt a stirring of fear in her gut.

"It was a draw," the serpentine girl said grudgingly, her normally even and controlled voice simmering with a hint of worrying anger. It didn't seem directed at Ling Qi, which stung a little if she was honest. She almost wished the other girl was angry. As it was, her friend simply had no expectation that Ling Qi could have meaningfully helped her in the fight against Sun Liling.

"The Scarlet Devil's Raiment is a foreign technique, twisting and manipulating the user's blood into superlative armaments. It works particularly well with that wretched girl's

potent lineage. Her family has truly gone native,” Bai Meizhen added with disgust.

Ling Qi honestly had no idea how to respond to that. The weapon and armor she had seen Sun Liling summon were made of her blood? How in the world had she not simply bled herself dry? Why would someone from such a wealthy family not simply have talisman armor and weapons?

“Are your legs going to be fine?” Ling Qi asked. Now that she was closer, she could see that Bai Meizhen’s legs were swathed in bloody bandages under her tattered gown.

Bai Meizhen pursed her lips, her intense yellow gaze drifting to the side awkwardly as she tugged at the tattered portion of her gown to better cover herself. “I will heal in time. We chose to stop before either of us could harm one another permanently,” she said. “I am afraid we will require a new residence though.”

“Nevermind that. We can look for another house later. Let me help you to the Medicine Hall,” Ling Qi said firmly. She felt a twinge of fear as she stepped over Cui’s emerald coils and offered Bai Meizhen her hand. Ling Qi hadn’t been there for her in the fight. Maybe she couldn’t have affected it, but she could do this.

Bai Meizhen blinked at her, nonplussed.

“That will not be necessary. My constitution is hardly so fragile. A few wounds like these are not worth bothering the healers over. Grandfather has inflicted far worse in the course of training,” she replied coolly. Ling Qi caught the tiny bit of discomfort in her voice. “Besides, I do not wish to sully your new gown. I am aware that you cannot afford many like it.”

It was Ling Qi’s turn to frown. “Are you really going to worry about something dumb like that?” she asked incredulously. She couldn’t say anything about what had just been revealed about her housemate’s family situation and couldn’t rightfully comment on it besides, but she was honestly thrown by the last comment.

“It’s just a dress. I can wash it,” she said flatly. “And I’m not going to let you sit there wounded because you want to be tough. There’s no reason not to visit the Medicine Hall. Or are you really going to tell me that you can’t afford it?”

Ling Qi was uncomfortably aware of Cui’s head hovering behind her back within easy striking distance as she finished speaking. That... might have been presumptuous and rude now that she thought about it, but it was too late to take the words back. So instead of apologizing and backing away, she simply firmed her expression and



continued to hold out her hand.

Her housemate stared at her silently, making Ling Qi begin to sweat. Finally, she reached up and took Ling Qi's hand. Her skin was oddly cool and felt very soft against the rough calluses that persisted on Ling Qi's hands despite her cultivation. Bai Meizhen let out a soft and prolonged hiss of pain as she moved to stand with Ling Qi's help and stumbled as her legs buckled beneath her.

Ling Qi managed to catch her, slipping an arm under the other girl's shoulders to help support her. The pale girl leaning against her chest straightened up almost immediately, her snow white cheeks pinked from the exertion. There was a faint look of embarrassment on the stoic girl's features though so Ling Qi kept her eyes straight ahead as she supported the other girl. Bai Meizhen was obviously not used to accepting help.

"C'mon, just take it one step at a time. Once we take care of you, we can see about picking out a nicer house," Ling Qi said brightly, trying to break the awkward silence.

*'Hmph. Cousin Meizhen will listen to the mouse over I, Cui. How insulting,'* the huge serpent sulked as she uncoiled to get out of their way and follow. Her voice still made Ling Qi twitch.

Bai Meizhen was silent as she limped along, leaning heavily against Ling Qi's side, expression wooden. Ling Qi worriedly snuck a glance at her now and then. She figured the other girl was concentrating on simply moving given the trembling she could detect in her steps. It was during one of those glances as they made their way down the street that Bai Meizhen looked up to meet her gaze.

"Thank you," she said quietly before looking back down.

"It's nothing. I can't do much more than this anyway," Ling Qi said bitterly. She still wasn't strong enough. Not to help Meizhen, not to take care of herself.

She needed to break through. That was the first step toward real strength.

The trip was difficult. Despite her obvious effort, Bai Meizhen was unable to move faster than a slow walk. Ling Qi grew more tense as they moved through the residences; out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the other girls murmuring to each other and shooting unfriendly glances their way. It looked like between her stunt in the plaza earlier and Bai Meizhen's current weakness, they were attracting even more hostility than usual.

Ling Qi simply set her shoulders and kept walking, refusing to let herself be slowed down. Besides, Cui was still slithering at their side, and she thought the serpent made for a potent deterrent.

For a time, she was right. They made it out of the residential area and were well on their way toward the market when they found themselves approaching a crowd in the middle of the road. Nearly a dozen people, boys and girls, blocked the path. Ling Qi recognized a handful of them from Elder Zhou's lessons, although not enough to remember their names. She was fairly certain they were all people she had beaten after she revealed her techniques though.

"Stop," the boy at the front of the group called to them as they came within earshot some twenty meters away. "I apologize, Miss Bai, but my associates and I require words with your maid." He sounded arrogant to Ling Qi, but she could detect nervousness in his tone.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bai Meizhen asked coldly, standing up straighter as Cui let out a threatening hiss from beside Ling Qi.

"She has insulted all of us deeply with her conduct," the boy replied stiffly. "Elevating herself above her station, being rude to her betters, and now beating and robbing Hong Lin and the Zhu siblings? If you cannot discipline your servants, it falls to us, your peers, to do it for you."

"They attacked me," Ling Qi replied flatly. "I only returned the favor. Aren't you being a little too arrogant?" She tried to project confidence, but she really was worried. There were too many people here. Eight to be exact, five girls and three boys.

"He is. You all are. What do you intend to do exactly, should I not stand aside and allow this farce?" Bai Meizhen said with a scowl.

The boy scowled back. "It is the two of you who are being too arrogant. If you will not stand aside, Bai Meizhen, then you will find yourself our enemy as well. Many of us have older siblings and relatives in the Sect. Do you think you can simply bully everyone and get away with it? You are hardly in the sort of shape to contest us all."

Ling Qi almost wanted to cry at the sheer unfairness of that statement. In contrast, Bai Meizhen's expression only grew darker. "Cowardly trash. Do you think I fear your petty retribution? That your pathetic families, scrabbling in the dirt, having existed for only a bare few millennia, concern me? Truly, things have fallen far that so many would forget

their place so. It shows only the rot that has been allowed to set in.”

“I don’t disagree,” Ling Qi replied quietly out of the corner of her mouth, looking for good escape routes. She saw several, but she wasn’t sure Bai Meizhen could make it up those cliffs as she was. This felt more and more like she and her ‘indiscretions’ were just an excuse to take a shot at a wounded Bai Meizhen. “But should we really be antagonizing them this much? We should retreat.”

“The Bai clan has always been too proud.” The boy drew the straight sword that had been sheathed on his belt. “Its history is indeed mighty, but the rot you speak of lies within your own house. While the Empire grows strong, you turn on yourselves and devour your own. The days in which your clan could do whatever it wished have passed. Or has your family forgotten the execution of Bai Meilien so quickly?”

Ling Qi could hear the tremble of fear in his voice despite his brash words.

“Real pretty words from a guy who needs eight people to face two. You all are just oh so brave,” Ling Qi snapped, preparing herself to run. She could probably pick up Bai Meizhen and dash for it if it came down to it. It would probably be better to take the upward...

Her thoughts cut off as she felt her skin crawl and a wave of paralyzing terror rippled out, nearly making her scream despite the fact that she could feel that it wasn’t directed at her. She looked down and found Bai Meizhen’s expression to be absolutely livid. The pale girl stood, no longer leaning on her.

“It seems you wish for pain.” Bai Meizhen hissed. Ling Qi had never heard the girl sound so cold. Even Cui had reared up, baring fangs coated with clear venom that melted smoking pits in the dirt where it dripped.

Ling Qi’s face fell. She wasn’t the best at reading people... but she really didn’t think Bai Meizhen was going to run now - if she ever would have in the first place. Ling Qi could probably still scoop the other girl up and dash for it - she was good at hiding, and Sable Crescent Step only made her better - but she didn’t know if the furious girl would allow herself to be carried away.

All of her instincts told her this was a terrible idea. Fighting against four times their number was suicidal, even if almost half of them were trembling and white-faced from the feeling of Bai Meizhen’s qi.

A quick glance showed that four, including the asshole doing the talking, held swords. The melee fighters moved forward in a staggered line. The remaining four were more eclectic in their weapon choices. There were a couple of archers, a girl who was unarmed save for a pair of faintly glowing blue gloves, and a boy with a heavy pike who was murmuring something under his breath.

Bai Meizhen was still badly injured and nearly immobile. Even if Bai Meizhen were stronger, could she and Cui really stand up to them all? Ling Qi felt a chill of her old fear, urging her to flee and leave this all behind.

## Chapter 42 - Truce End 6

No.

She couldn't - wouldn't - act like that anymore. It would mean abandoning one of her few friends, and it wouldn't even solve the problem. This wasn't like before where she could count on her own obscurity to make the aggressors forget about her if she escaped the initial conflict. She had made herself stand out, and now, all she could do was deal with the consequences.

... She was tired of running anyway, and these people pissed her off. Maybe becoming a cultivator had worsened her control on her temper, but she really just wanted to beat these people down. Bai Meizhen was worth ten of these hypocritical assholes. She would just have to trust that the girl's reputation was true to life.

Her flute appeared in her hand, drawn directly from her new ring, and she blew the first note of her Melody, calling on the mists once again. She would see just how brave this bunch was.

"Xu Lian, help the others pin the peasant down," the apparent leader snapped as the mist engulfed them. "Du Xi, activate your formation now!"

Ling Qi felt a bit of dread in her gut as the blue glow on the rearmost girl's hands expanded outwards in a bubble, washing over their enemies. It set their eyes ablaze, causing the fearful trembling in their hands to cease.

At the same time, the murmuring boy with the pike rapped the butt of his weapon on the ground, and a circle of golden characters flared into existence around him. In response, ephemeral chains burst from the ground around Cui, whipping around blindingly fast to coil around and slam the rearing serpent to the ground.

Even as Ling Qi quietly crept away from her original position to get a better vantage, she felt the fear in her gut intensifying again. Had she made a mistake? What was she thinking, fighting this many people at once? She was already down an ally...

"Arrogance," Bai Meizhen's voice cut through her music and the other sounds like a frozen whip. "To think such a paltry spell could hold a daughter of Bai. Is this truly your best?" There was no fear, nor even concern, in her friend's voice, just furious contempt.

Even as the terrifying pressure the other girl exuded redoubled, Ling Qi felt her own fear lessen. Bai Meizhen's eyes glowed like golden fire even in the darkness induced by her mist, and a weapon had appeared in her hand. It had a handle like a sword, but rather than a blade, there were four long shining strips of paper-thin metal hanging from it. Her shadow had grown into a dark pool at her feet, and Ling Qi could feel Bai Meizhen's qi pulling hungrily at her mist, drawing moisture from the air. A mantle of dark waters cascaded down her shoulders and rose up, casting her face in shadow as it formed a flared hood.

At the same time, Cui let out an enraged hiss, and Ling Qi felt a pulsing ripple of qi in her bones as a loud sizzling reached her ears. The shining chains holding the serpent corroded rapidly along with the dirt and grass around her until the serpent's flexing coils shattered what remained in a hail of rapidly dissolving fragments.

However, Cui's escape took time, precious seconds that gave the four armed for melee time to close the distance with Bai Meizhen and the archers to draw back their bows. Ling Qi could tell that her attempt to hide herself had failed when she saw the arrowheads train on her position.

Dark qi flooded her limbs as Ling Qi smoothly dodged the first arrow, which crackled with fiery qi, and the second, which felt oddly heavy as it passed over her shoulder when she ducked. If her mouth wasn't occupied with playing her Melody, she would have grinned savagely when she heard one of the archers curse her in the mist.

The other four had converged on Bai Meizhen. They seemed relatively confident despite the failure of their companion's spell on Cui. Had it only been meant as a momentary distraction to keep Cui occupied while they ganged up on Bai Meizhen? Worry still churned in her gut. Ling Qi hoped Bai Meizhen would be fine for a few seconds until she could start the next part of the song and distract them.

The leader let out an encouraging war cry that seemed to steady his companions' hands even as two of them split apart to flank Bai Meizhen. The flankers' bodies blurred under the effects of their movement arts. The last of them dashed forward, the spear in his hands outstretched in a thrust.

It passed by Bai Meizhen without touching her as she swayed to the side, a contemptuous expression on her face. A twitch of her weapon hand brought out a nerve-wracking scream of metal on metal as the strands of her weapon snapped out, guided unnaturally by the unseen force of her qi. The boy hurried to pull back his spear,

spinning the haft up to deflect the snapping metal strands, and though he knocked three aside, the fourth twisted through his guard with a metallic hiss. He cried out in pain as the whip-like blade slashed across his chest. Bai Meizhen's strange weapon shredded straight through his robe and the armor beneath even as the spearman's dark earthy qi flared, preventing the wound from being more than skin deep.

However, the two enemies who had moved to flank Bai Meizhen were still there, and as they brought their swords to bear, one cutting high and one cutting low, Bai Meizhen's knee buckled slightly, disrupting her graceful swaying dodge enough that one sword scoured across her shoulder. It sheared off a few more tattered shreds of her sleeve and sent up a splash of cold water as it scoured her mantle, but it failed to so much as draw a drop of blood. It was, however, enough to make the lingering feeling of fear from her friend's initial technique fade, and Ling Qi saw Bai Meizhen's expression of disdainful fury grow darker.

Ling Qi hesitated on what to do next. Should she continue her song or shackle their enemies with the wind? The mist would fade in a short time if she stopped, but something told her that this battle would be decided one way or the other before the Melody fully faded. Ling Qi flicked her wrist and threw, a streak of white flying from her sleeve toward the back of the girl that had almost struck Bai Meizhen..

The girl jerked and arched her back, gasping in pain as the knife cut a bloody line across her side. Ling Qi took hold of her qi, and the wind kicked up around the four, growing fierce and blowing back against their movements. It was almost enough to distract them from the scream that erupted ahead of her as the boy with the pike fell to the ground, frantically tearing at his burning and sizzling robe with his qi flaring wildly and quickly beginning to fade. Going by the sizzling dirt and grass around him, Ling Qi blamed Cui, who had reared up angrily and was slithering closer to the ranged foes.

... Cui was still over ten meters away from the boy with the pike. Could the serpent spit her venom that far? That was terrifying.

She did not have any more time to consider it as she wove out of the path of incoming projectiles, relishing the looks of increasing panic on the archers' faces as the arrows thudded into the dirt behind her. A shudder went up her spine as one of the arrows exploded into a violent fireball when it passed through where she had been a moment ago. That would have hurt.

A glance behind her showed that Bai Meizhen was going on the offensive. She swayed through their attacks, her liquid mantle springing to life to deflect what blows could not be fully avoided, and then struck out. Her weapon's strands snapped out with a metallic

hiss and coiled around the sword of one her attackers to rip it from her hands even as her free hand struck the girl across the cheek with a simple open-handed slap. Ling Qi didn't have time to be bemused by her friend's choice of attack as the force of the blow sent the girl tumbling to the ground. Then, she screamed and thrashed in pain. Ling Qi could see the inflamed red of the handprint on her cheek and the way tendrils of red spread further under her skin.

Ling Qi hoped Bai Meizhen remembered not to go too far. The girl who had been hit by her dagger fell next as the watery mantle over Bai Meizhen's shoulders exploded outward in a rain of icy needles. The needles peppered the area around her, making the two remaining enemies flinch. Their counterattack gained them little except another painful repudiative slash from Bai Meizhen's blades that sent one of the two boys stumbling back with much reduced qi.

Ling Qi smiled to see the archers and the girl with the gloves falling back, looking ready to run. She would have to see if she could put a stop to that; they didn't deserve to run after this stunt. Going by Cui's path, the serpent agreed with her. Still, her instincts whispered to her that this had been too easy.

Then the area around Bai Meizhen exploded in a plume of dust and grit, blasting her mist away from the girl's position. Ling Qi's eyes widened in alarm when she saw Bai Meizhen flung backward to sprawl on the ground. In the midst of the rising plume of dust, Ling Qi spied a tall figure and the gleam of metal. When the dust cleared, she saw a boy that she recognized from Elder Zhou's lessons. Kang Zihao, the only boy to be given advanced elixirs. He stood in the center of a small crater, tall and serene of expression. In one hand, he held a shining steel shield embossed with the imperial dragon crest in gold, and in the other, he held a tall, straight spear with a red tassel just below the blade.

Her dread returned at the sight of one of the top ranked cultivators in Elder Zhou's lessons. Ling Qi suddenly had a feeling she knew why these eight had the courage to insult Bai Meizhen so.

"How pitiful for one of such status to abuse their lessers." The handsome boy's calm voice echoed out over the sound of falling grit. "Have you no shame, serpent of the lakes?"

"Do not speak to me of shame," Bai Meizhen spat in response, struggling to her feet. Ling Qi felt a spark of fury when she saw how badly her friend's legs were bleeding again. "Do you think me a fool? I had wondered why these curs had elected to bare



their teeth so.”

“It is my duty to protect the people of the Empire from traitorous vermin,” Kang Zihao responded smoothly. “Much as it is father’s duty to protect Our Holy Empress. I can no more ignore their plight than he would an assassin’s knife, and is that not what your entire clan truly is, serpent?”

Bai Meizhen drew herself up, imperiously staring down at Kang Zihao despite the difference in their height. “Do not speak as if your family holds a position of pride, fool. The Empress will tire of your father in time, just as she has her other playthings. Do you truly think you are something special, Kang Zihao?”

Ling wondered why her friend was wasting time talking, but she saw then a creeping shadow in the grass behind the boy and felt a thrill of hope.

Kang Zihao narrowed his eyes and spun, deflecting Cui’s fangs with his shield and throwing the furious serpent back. “I will bandy no further words with you, serpent. Let us see how well you do without your servant blinding the opposition.”

Bai Meizhen’s eyes widened in alarm at the same time that Ling Qi’s did. Ling Qi pushed off the ground, willing the mist to darken further and hide her as she leaped back, but it wasn’t enough. She felt the pulse of qi as the spear-wielding boy appeared in front of her, weapon drawn back to strike. His spear blurred through the air, and although Ling Qi did her best to track it and dodge, she wasn’t going to be fast enough.

Her vision exploded into whiteness as a muffled boom sounded, but there was no pain. Instead, there was a familiar and very loud voice, tinged with strain.

“VILLAIN! SUFFER THE WRATH OF LADY CAI!” Ling Qi opened her eyes in time to see Gan Guangli, towering over her attacker with Kang Zihao’s spear clutched in a fist the size of a small keg. Blood trickled from between his fingers, and blazing white light shone from his skin. More importantly, she opened her eyes in time to see Gan Guangli’s other gigantic fist slam directly into Kang Zihao’s face.

Kang Zihao skidded backward a full five meters, heels digging furrows in the dirt. Blood trickled down from a split lip twisted into a furious scowl. “What is the meaning of-”

“What is the meaning indeed,” a cold and measured voice rang out, cutting him off. Ling Qi craned her neck to see the source. There she saw one of the other stars of Elder Zhou’s lessons. She found herself looking up at Cai Renxiang, standing atop the ridge on the far side of the path, arms crossed over her chest.

The Cai heiress was illuminated from behind by a blazing corona of white light, casting a long shadow across the path. The girl had discarded her disciple's robe as well in favor of a shining white gown with gold hems and embroidery. The image of a red and gold butterfly's wings splayed across the bosom of the garment, the top of its wings stretching up to her shoulders. "Is this the honor of the capital, Kang Zihao? The use of a flimsy pretense to strike at a wounded peer?" she asked in a voice filled with scorn.

Ling Qi fought down the panic she felt at being around so many who were out of her league. Her feeling looked to be one shared by the two young men who had engaged Bai Meizhen but were left standing; they looked distinctly regretful as they slowly tried to creep away. The ranged attackers had fled long ago at this point.

Bai Meizhen's venomous gaze was fixed on Kang Zihao's back, and Ling Qi felt a stab of concern at how coldly murderous her friend's expression was. She had seen looks like that before; usually, there would be a body for the guards to clean up the next day.

"It is good to see that there is at least some civility in this place," Bai Meizhen said softly, glancing up at Cai Renxiang and studying the other girl's angular features briefly before returning her gaze to Kang Zihao's back. "I had begun to think all the Empire outside of the Thousand Lakes had degenerated into barbarism."

"You cannot mean to side with this snake," Kang Zihao said, looking a bit nervous. "Lady Cai, please understand the statement you are making. I struck only for the good of the Sect, and of course, the province of Duchess Cai. The presence of one of the Bai..."

"I care not for your petty excuses, and her presence is one of imperial mandate," Cai Renxiang cut him off flatly. "I am in no mood for this. I have witnessed so much cowardice and dishonor this day that my stomach was turned, and now, upon seeking out one of the few who I expected to be worthwhile for a duel of honor, I find you engaging in a pathetic display of banditry? Attempting to strike down a citizen of my Emerald Seas without mercy? Begone from this place, and reflect on the shame of your actions."

Ling Qi blinked. Was the shining girl referring to her? Gan Guangli still stood in front of her like a gigantic shield, glowering at Kang Zihao. This situation worried her; she felt like she was intruding into something she had no business being involved in. Something was happening here, and it irked her that it was going over her head.

Kang Zihao squared his shoulders defiantly, but she could see his eyes tracking from

Bai Meizhen to Cai Renxiang and then over Guangli and herself and his own quivering 'allies'.

"I see," he said finally. "You make an error, Lady Cai. I will, however, respect your will in this. If I may collect my followers..."

"You may take those who still stand," Cai Renxiang's domineering voice cut him off again. "The others will pay the price of loss for their shameful ambush."

Kang Zihao's expression darkened, and Ling Qi saw the grip on his spear grow white-knuckled. In the end, he nodded once curtly and gestured for the two boys who still stood to follow him. Ling Qi disliked the idea of them getting away, but if Bai Meizhen wasn't going to speak up in this situation, then neither would she.

"I thank you for your assistance, Lady Cai," Bai Meizhen replied somewhat stiffly, her eyes still fixed on the rapidly retreating back of Kang Zihao.

"It is no more than my duty," the other girl said dismissively, turning her gaze to the two of them. Ling Qi dipped her head respectfully as Cai Renxiang's intense gaze passed over her.

"Guangli, help them gather the belongings of this trash and move it from the road. Bai Meizhen recover well. I will challenge you when you have healed."

"It will be my honor, Lady Cai," Bai Meizhen said politely, with more respect than Ling Qi had seen her give another person before.

"Are you well, Ling Qi?" Bai Meizhen asked in a quieter tone, scanning Ling Qi for injuries. Ling Qi fidgeted awkwardly as she found herself studied by both her friend and the steadily shrinking young man in front of her. It didn't help that Cai Renxiang's gaze was burning a hole in her back either.

"I'm fine. They weren't able to land a hit on me," Ling Qi replied with a touch of pride. "Gan Guangli... Lady Cai, thank you very much," she added, remembering Bai Meizhen's lessons and giving each an appropriate bow.

Cai Renxiang simply nodded seriously in her direction while Gan Guangli's stern expression turned cheerful. Ling Qi glanced away, flushing slightly at the sight of Gan Guangli's smile. Why did Gu Xiulan have to put such thoughts in her head?!

They turned to practical matters after that. Between her efficiency and Gan Guangli's

ability to carry everything, stripping the losers of their valuables took only a short time. Bai Meizhen sat down and caught her breath while they did so. Meanwhile, Cai Renxiang exited in a flare of light to do whatever it was intimidating glowing people did.

The ambushers didn't have anything near as interesting as her previous opponents. It seemed that because of the planned ambush, they had chosen not to carry most of their valuables so it was really only their talismans that could be looted. She would likely sell off the talismans for red stones because none of the talismans were of particular interest to her. Bai Meizhen didn't appear to have any preference on the matter.

Gan Guangli seemed to have taken his lady's command to mean to follow them to the market, carrying the goods as they went. This allowed Ling Qi to feel a little bit safer as she helped her friend limp along.

Once she and Bai Meizhen had gotten to the medicine hall, Ling Qi found herself in an awkward position. Bai Meizhen insisted on paying for Ling Qi's wounds to be healed despite the fact that the girl's own healing was going to cost over a hundred spirit stones. Apparently, Sun Liling's techniques were incredibly difficult to heal from. Ling Qi could do little but accept, even as she promised herself to pay the other girl back for the twenty odd stones spent healing her completely from her earlier duel.

By the time they were released, it was getting late. The sale of the talismans afterward did not take long though. With her newfound wealth tucked firmly into her storage ring, Ling Qi thought she had quite enough of this day and only hoped those following would be a little less stressful.

## Bonus 8: Observation

Sima Jiao tapped his foot to the beat of the music echoing through his chambers. It was all horns and drums, full of a frenetic energy. The recording tablet stood upright on the stand to the right of his plush chair. It was an older model, but he found the faint scratchy distortion to the original sound to be superior to the ones made by that upstart Master Ren. The old model changed the images and emotions that it impressed on his thoughts just enough to make something different of the piece. It really was too bad that the musician had been executed so early in his career, he would have liked to see how his style developed.

Putting aside idle musings on music, he inhaled deeply from the pipe between his lips and then breathed out, blowing out a complex symbol of sparkling smoke and squinted up at it, guiding it to join the growing array that hung in the air in front of him. The feedback issue that had been plaguing his latest attempts to improve upon Grandmaster Wu's work on steering arrays was truly vexing.

"Perhaps you should focus on your toys at a later date dear. You are on duty at the moment," Xin said from behind him.

Sima Jiao did not do anything so base and mundane as turning his head. Instead, the vast shadow cast by his chair rippled and a single additional eye opened in its depths. His presence suffused the entire back half of the room, dozens of eyes gazing upon each of the clairvoyance arrays set up throughout the viewing chamber, showing scenes of battle and petty teenage rivalry that were playing out on the mountain below. In truth, there was no need to make an additional viewpoint at all, but it paid to give his wife direct attention. Especially when she took on that sly tone, the vexatious vixen.

Xin's avatar lounged distractingly atop a couch of silvery lunar mist, bobbing her head absently to the music as she looked down on the most advanced array, which tracked the overall chances of lethal injury among the barbaric little urchins they were overseeing.

"You know perfectly well that I can do both," he replied dryly, not bothering to move the lips on his own avatar, his voice rang out instead from multiple sources in the shadow around her.

"But you are not really paying attention," she chided, giving his newly formed eye an impish smile. "Oh, no one is going to die, but you're hardly enjoying the show with me."

"It was entertaining for perhaps the first quarter hour," he scoffed. "Then it just began to remind me why strict law is such a necessity," he knew they were taking a lighter touch this year, but the little beasts were going to reduce the mountain to smoking rubble and be forced to live like barbarians in the ruins at this rate. It had almost been enough to make his old instincts stir from slumber.

"It is not so bad as that. Structure rises from anarchy. I am sure the children will manage to find an equilibrium in the coming days," his wife replied musingly. "I can feel the first ripples propagating into the future already."

"I shall take your word for it," Sima Jiao replied. For his part, he expected that the path was rather clear, given the pieces in play, but teasing the details of approaching events out had always been her talent. He began to turn the greater part of his attention back to his developing array. His wife was clearly up to something, but if she wished to draw him into her meddlesome plotting she would have to try a bit harder.

"That Ling girl is doing well so far," Xin interrupted again. "She's begun to master both of her arts and won a duel. She was out shopping with a friend using her spoils while the rest were scrabbling. It was quite adorable."

He grunted in response. That one was talented, but so were all the commoners brought in, the ministry wouldn't have bothered otherwise. Heavens knew that was one policy he had supported whole heartedly. Left to fester in squalor those sorts inevitably became trouble, shaping themselves into engines of ever greater destruction and chaos the longer they survived. Much better to nip it in the bud and bring them into the system early, before one needed an entire squad of Ministry Agents to bring the boot down on some power mad would be neo-sage emperor. With the conscription program they could get suppressed, snapped up by a clan, or made new nobility.

"Nothing particularly special about that one. If she doesn't end up a retainer to the Bai, she'll spend her life building up a village somewhere in the back end of the province," he added, knowing that his wordless reply wouldn't be sufficient.

"That is hardly fair," Xin protested. "She has the potential to be a core disciple in the future with a little good fortune."

She got like this sometimes, attaching her attention to a disciple. They always ended up a disappointment.

"I heard that," Xin replied with narrowed eyes, and Jiao cursed silently at his lack of care with his thoughts. "Really, you impossible man, just get over here and watch things with me."

Sima Jiao silently raised his eyes to the ceiling, stopping short of offering a plea to the great spirits. It would hardly do him any good, given his wife's lineage. She was obviously going somewhere with this, and wouldn't allow him his peace until he humored her. Instead the man in the chair and the chair itself dissolved into smoke and shadow, and he reformed a body atop the couch next to Xin, who sat up to make room.

He was reminded why he bothered with his body at all as she leaned against his shoulder and slipped an arm around his waist. A glance down at her slyly grinning face told him that she knew perfectly well what he was thinking, even if he had shrouded his thoughts properly. Sima Jiao simply rolled his eyes at her antics, even as he loosed his hold on his spirit and allowed it to mesh with her own spiritual self, tinging the rooms shadows with silver.

"Show me what I've missed then," Sima Jiao said, gesturing at the array.

"It is not so much what you have missed, but what you would have missed. Someone is about to drop a stone in the stream," Xin laughed, resting her cheek against his shoulder. She gestured toward the array, and Jiao eyes, all of them, widened as information began to pour through their connection. Future paths, some dying, never to be, and others blooming into new possibility. White hair and mist, radiance and blood.

Sima Jiao, esteemed Elder of the Argent Sect, Head of the Talisman department, dropped his face into his hands and let out the groan of a man who had just seen his workload double.

Xin just laughed and laughed.

# Chapter 43 - Brewing Chaos 1

Despite having to rest in the ruins of her home, searching for a new one was not Ling Qi, nor Bai Meizhen's top priority. Instead, the next day, with her energy restored, Ling Qi immediately went to look into what, if anything, had happened to her friend, Li Suyin and her roommate, Su Ling. It began rather poorly with Ling Qi's arrival at their house finding the door broken in and what little inside ransacked. The shattered inkwells and torn pages scattered on the floor painted a grim picture, one that lit worry and anger in Ling Qi's heart.

It wasn't as if it was an uncommon sight either. Now that she had time to look, the entire residential area looked worse for the wear. Walls and roofs were damaged, windows were broken, and craters pocked the streets. Fighting was still ongoing with Ling Qi passing several open duels in the streets on her way to Li Suyin's house. The only place completely free of damage was the storehouse where everyone got their food and household supplies; she supposed the storehouse counted as 'Sect Property' in a way the rest didn't.

The atmosphere was tense and the air clouded by smoke from the occasional uncontrolled fire. To Ling Qi, the sight resembled the half-remembered spirit tales she had heard of when she was very young. After all, naughty and disobedient children brought misfortune or were snatched by spirits or monsters.

Ling Qi didn't bother to hide as she exited her friend's ruined house. Perhaps she was feeling overconfident from the day before, but she just couldn't muster the desire to slink away into the shadows as she usually did. She met the stares from a pair of girls across the street who were watching her with difficult expressions and scowled, her fingers itching for her knives. If someone here wanted to start something, they were welcome to try.

To her surprise, there was no snide comment or disdainful whispers from them or the other scattered passersby. The girls she scowled at simply lowered their heads and scurried on, hurrying away from her with a flapping of soot-stained gowns.

Ling Qi huffed irritably. Thankfully, her clothing seemed to take care of its own cleanliness, and for all that she still felt awkward and out of place in the shimmering, smooth fabric, she couldn't help but be grateful to Gu Xiulan for it.

The ensuing investigation into her friend's whereabouts quickly became frustrating. She couldn't track them given her lack of expertise in that area, and for all that the open



hostility directed her way had toned down, no one was interested in talking to her or answering questions. Her search took her from the residential area out to the main plaza where she continued trying to get more than terse non-answers out of her fellow disciples. This attempt proved fruitless, and after a few hours, she was feeling frustrated and irritable on top of increasingly worried.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, she reacted poorly when she saw an all-too-familiar head of gray hair approaching her with his hand waving in greeting. She had been standing in one of the plaza's miniature gardens, trying to calm herself.

"Go away, Huang Da," Ling Qi snapped, one of her knives appearing in her hand as she turned to face the approaching boy. "I don't have time to deal with your obnoxious, unwanted advances today. I had enough trouble with the damn fiancée you apparently have yesterday." Her voice was harsh, and her more vulgar words slipped through without notice.

He came to a stop a few meters away, that irritating, creepy little half-smile still firmly in place.

"I apologize for the trouble that ogress gave you, my lovely night lily," Huang Da replied smoothly, making Ling Qi's eyebrows twitch in irritation. "Let me first assure you that I have no feelings for that brutish girl. It is merely a business arrangement. I wish I could have seen you dancing circles around her that day."

Ling Qi continued to scowl at him, fingering the blade of her knife, as he leaned against the cherry tree he had stopped next to.

"Because that's so much better," she said peevishly. "Seriously. I don't have time for you today. And stop making up weird nicknames. I'm not your anything." She deliberately turned and began to march away, hoping he wouldn't follow.

"Are you not interested in the well-being of your followers?" Huang Da asked to her back. "I had heard you were looking into Li Suyin's whereabouts."

Ling Qi stopped, her qi churning in time with her anger as she turned around.

"If you hurt her, I won't forgive it, you creep," Ling Qi said coldly. "If you think you can use her as some kind of hostage..." She didn't know what she would do exactly, but he wouldn't like it.

Huang Da frowned, looking hurt.

"Of course not," he said dismissively. "Truly, if it were not for the fact that it is what allowed me to see your beauty in the first place, I would regret my first impression if that is what you think of me. No, I simply helped them escape their pursuers as they fled. A bit of misdirection allowed me to guide the pursuers away from the cave that the beast girl led them to hide in." He cocked his head to the side slightly at Ling Qi's dubious expression. "Come now. Why would I lie about something so easily disproved? I can tell you where they hid away, and you may ask them."

"And what are you going to want for that?" she asked suspiciously, even as her heart pounded. Were they really alright?

"Well, a kiss for the heroic one wouldn't be amiss," Huang Da said hopefully with a slight widening of his smile.

"Go drown," Ling Qi responded instantly. She knew they were out in the wilderness now; she would track them down herself.

"I thought not," he said in disappointment. "But no, I require nothing of you, lovely Ling Qi. Nothing but a word of gratitude from your lips."

Ling Qi scowled at him, but she couldn't sense any duplicity. As he said, his story would be easy to confirm, and if he lied about where they were hiding... Well, she might not be able to hit him now, but she could certainly do it later.

"... Thank you, Huang Da." The words left a bad taste in her mouth, but it was too small a thing to refuse.

Huang Da closed his blind eyes, seeming pleased with himself. "Ah, how wonderful," he mused.

"You're still a creep," Ling Qi said darkly.

Huang Da's expression fell, but he didn't stop smiling.

"As you say," he said. "Now, I took the liberty of writing down the location. Wouldn't want anyone overhearing us after all, and I suspect that you would not appreciate me leading you there." He pulled a crumpled scrap of paper from the pocket of his robe and held it out to her. Ling Qi took a few short steps closer, eyeing him warily as she took the note and glanced over it. It did indeed contain directions to a location deeper in the mountains.

It could be a trap, but she was too worried about her friend to not check up on the location. Ling Qi still despised him, but she thought that the obnoxious boy was probably sincere in his creepy, flirtatious way. She knew better than to let her guard down though; she had seen enough of guys like that to know that playing nice after the violence ended was just an attempt at manipulation. She scoffed under her breath. Like she would let herself fall for the simplest trick in the book.

Ling Qi found the place about an hour later after winding her way to a particularly maze-like ravine at the top of a rock slide that ended in a narrow crack in the mountainside. She had scouted it out, climbing the cliffs to get a better look and make sure it wasn't a trap, so she was reasonably confident when she approached the crevice and called out. Hopefully, the two girls hadn't left yet.

"Li Suyin?" Ling Qi called, coming to a stop a few meters from the cave entrance. "Su Ling? It's me, Ling Qi. Can I come in?"

Her voice echoed in the ravine. There was no response save for her own words calling back to her. Should she just go in anyway?

Then, she caught a sound from inside, the scuff of a shoe on stone, and she saw a shadow in the entrance. It soon resolved itself into Su Ling, peering warily out of the cave.

Su Ling didn't look great. Her gown and her skin were filthy and bloodstained, and her right hand was badly swollen, fingers wrapped with makeshift splints and bandages. Ling Qi was fairly certain the girl's fingers were broken. The only other obvious damage was a chunk of hair missing from the right side of Su Ling's head, making the vulpine girl's profile uneven.

Su Ling regarded Ling Qi tiredly, dark circles obvious under her eyes.

"Huh. It is you. Guess jackass decided to tell you where we were," Su Ling said without energy. She narrowed her eyes, studying Ling Qi, who was suddenly all too aware of her new garments; the new dress felt more out of place than ever. "You managed to come out on top if you can afford stuff like that."

"It's a pretty powerful talisman," Ling Qi murmured, feeling guilty and awkward. "After yesterday, I figured I'd need every advantage I can get." It sounded like a rationalization to her own ears.

"Tch. You won't hear me argue that," Su Ling replied gruffly, stiffly straightening up and spitting on the ground. "I guess you want to see Suyin, right? She's further inside."

Ling Qi nodded and stepped after the girl into the narrow 'room' beyond the entrance to the cave. "What happened?" she asked quietly.

"A bunch of girls decided they could use our stuff more than we could, and that we'd been too uppity," Su Ling growled. "Not much more to it. They busted down the door barely an hour after that stupid announcement. I had told Suyin that we should just camp out that night."

Ling Qi clenched her fists and looked down. She had been so worried about getting her stones and getting out and then later, cashing in her winnings. Some friend she had been.

"You were right." Ling Qi heard Li Suyin's voice before they rounded the corner into a larger chamber. "Trusting in civility was a mistake."

Her friend's voice sounded dull and tired, and when Ling Qi saw her, she understood why. Li Suyin was seated on a flat stone platform, her shoulders sagging. The whole right side of her face was still streaked with blood, and more was crusted in her unkempt blue hair. The shoulder of her gown was torn and hanging loose, exposing a new scar on her upper arm. What really drew her eye was the makeshift patch tied over her friend's right eye and the four jagged scars emerging from beneath it to cross her cheek and neck.

"Shit, Li Suyin." The girl's name escaped from her lips unbidden as Ling Qi stepped past Su Ling and into the small chamber, which contained a scattering of things: Li Suyin's writing case, looking cracked and battered but intact; a small stack of texts wrapped in beast hide; and some of Su Ling's hunting gear. Ling Qi fell to her knees in front of the seated girl, checking her over for further wounds.

"What the hell! No one is supposed to be crippling people," Ling Qi snarled angrily.

"It was my own fault. Or I'm sure that's what that girl would tell anyone," Li Suyin said bitterly. "I should have just held still while my friend was being kicked in the dirt."

"I coulda handled it. Wouldn't have been the first time I've been stomped on a bit," Su Ling said sullenly. "But you made the witch pay for it, didn't you," Su Ling added with a bit more cheer. "I even managed to light up the other two bitches' hairs before they ran off for their friends."

“Yes, I did,” Li Suyin acknowledged absently, looking off into nothing. “I wonder how long it will take to fix that many burst veins...”

Ling Qi clenched her hands so hard that she could feel her nails biting into her palms.

“I’m sorry.” The words escaped her lips before she could think about it. “I... I should have checked in on you guys. I’ll talk to Bai Meizhen. I’ll owe her, but I can ask her to pay for you to get your eye fixed and Su Ling’s hand...” Ling Qi was babbling as sadness and fury warred for dominance in her heart.

“No,” Li Suyin said sharply. “I will fix it myself. I broke through in my understanding of my technique so it’s not impossible in the future. And it’s not your fault. I am not a child you need to care for - and neither is Su Ling.”

“Yeah, I got this covered,” Su Ling grunted, waving her wrapped hand. “Suyin fixed up the rest and did a good job on this. I can sell some cores and get the healing finished up.”

Ling Qi lowered her head, anger slowly winning out over her other emotions.

“Fine,” she ground out. “I won’t involve Bai Meizhen. But I still want to help you. You’re my friend, Li Suyin. At least let me...” She suddenly recalled the talismans she had kept from the fight with Hong Lin and the twins. She had been intending to give them to Li Suyin and Su Ling. A thought brought the hairpin and the anklet talismans into her hands.

“I was going to give you these anyway. They’re from my fights yesterday. I thought you two could use some talismans of your own. I wanted to thank you for helping me as much as you have so far.”

The gifts felt kind of lame now, but as Ling Qi began to calm herself with a well-ingrained breathing exercise, she could admit that Li Suyin was right. While she might have been able to help, she wasn’t responsible for the other girl. She still wanted to stick a knife in the gut of whoever had hurt Li Suyin so much.

For her part, Li Suyin looked conflicted as Ling Qi pressed the gift into her hands. “I - I don’t really deserve this. It... Wouldn’t it be better if you...”

“Just take it,” Su Ling said gruffly from over Ling Qi’s shoulders as she plucked the

offered anklets, looking them over with a critical eye. "I'm done playing nice, and I can use whatever advantage I can get. ...Unless we're gonna all tie ourselves together and never go out alone, shit like this is gonna happen. I don't blame ya for not bein' around." She shrugged. "Still, thanks. You need help with something, let me know."

"I'll accept it then. Thank you, Ling Qi. It's lovely," Li Suyin relented as she toyed with the hairpin in her hands, staring at it intently with her uncovered eye. "Thank you very much for being my friend," she added, her voice trembling. "I don't think I could have stayed here after this if you hadn't..."

As her voice choked off, Ling Qi spotted Su Ling retreating from the cave looking intensely uncomfortable. She understood why when she felt Li Suyin's arms close around her shoulders and the girl's tears soak into her gown. Ling Qi stiffened awkwardly as her friend hugged her and cried, not really knowing what to do beyond patting Li Suyin comfortingly on the back.

Several awkward minutes passed that way until finally, Li Suyin's shoulders stopped shaking and her tears stopped flowing. Voice muffled by her face pressing against Ling Qi's chest, Li Suyin vowed, "I - I won't be weak anymore. I'm going to destroy that girl, Xu Jia, and her friends. I won't let them get away with this."

"I'll help as much as you want me to," Ling Qi replied quietly, rubbing a circle on the girl's back. She added the name to the list of people who were going to regret crossing her, but she would let Li Suyin have this if she wanted it; in the end, this was her grudge far more than Ling Qi's.

## Chapter 44 - Brewing Chaos 2

The three of them left the cave some time later when Li Suyin had cleaned up. They stopped first at the medicine hall for the supplies they could afford, then headed up to the vent. There, Bai Meizhen was meditating. She no longer wore the customized disciple's uniform she had previously worn. Instead, she wore a conservative snowy white gown with a deep blue sash and embroidered wave patterns along its hems.

Ling Qi spent less time on her own cultivation that day than she probably should have, but Li Suyin was determined to learn more unarmed fighting from her. Ling Qi taught Li Suyin the basics that Ling Qi had learned in Elder Zhou's class, and helped her work through the problems her wound caused.

Once Li Suyin had exhausted herself physically, Ling Qi entered a deep meditation, focusing on the qi cycling exercises detailed in her Argent Soul Art. She knew she was coming close to mastery. The penultimate level of the cultivation art was within her reach. Yet, for all that, the exercises were growing more difficult and complex.

Ling Qi found the argent qi soaking into her body growing more solid and complete, and her production of the potent energy growing quicker. On top of that, she soon felt her spiritual cultivation reach the same blocking point that her physical had. By the time the sun was falling, she felt like she was ready to attempt breakthrough to the Yellow realm. But before she could do that, she and Bai Meizhen needed to secure a new residence. She wanted to get her other friends a place to stay as well, but... It seemed Su Ling and Li Suyin intended to stay where they were. Su Ling was already planning ways to make anyone who approached the cavern uninvited regret it dearly. So with some reluctance, Ling Qi went her separate ways with them.

Which lead her to where she was now, walking alongside Bai Meizhen as the sun sunk below the horizon and re-entering the residential area. Ling Qi found herself glaring at other girls, wondering if one of the 'ladies' walking around in the streets had been among those who had hurt Li Suyin. It wasn't a productive thought so she sought something to talk about with her silent friend to take her mind off of it.

"So what should I know about what happened yesterday?" Ling Qi asked, turning to more immediate matters.

Bai Meizhen pursed her lips, glancing at Ling Qi as the other disciples parted before them.

"It did not involve you, but I suppose that man has made it your business when he chose to strike at you," she responded slowly and thoughtfully. "I am going to kill him, of course," she added as if she were merely commenting on the weather.

Ling Qi almost came up short, blinking rapidly.

"Are you sure you want to commit to something like that?" she asked. Even Li Suyin didn't want to kill her target as far as Ling Qi could tell. Murder as a response seemed... excessive.

Bai Meizhen regarded her silently until Ling Qi began to feel uncomfortable under her slit-pupiled gaze.

"It is not excessive at all. But do not be mistaken. I am in no hurry. A Bai must always have patience," she said serenely. Cui slithered out of the collar of her robe to coil loosely around her neck, once more shrunk to her tiny size. "As for yesterday's situation, what do you know of the inner provinces?"

"It's where the tax carts go after they hit our capital, and it's where the Imperial Court is." Ling Qi shrugged. "You know I don't exactly have much education about this kind of thing." It felt easier to admit ignorance to Bai Meizhen now.

Bai Meizhen arched an eyebrow.

"Quite," she replied dryly, ignoring the duel going on in the street to their left. "There are three 'core' provinces, which have no foreign border. My family's province, Thousand Lakes, is one; the Imperial homeland of Heavenly Peaks is the second; and the third is the Ebon Rivers province. That Huang fellow you have grumbled about is from a prominent family there."

Ling Qi's expression soured. She would put that one last on any hypothetical list of places to visit then. "Okay. So all of those people were from the other core provinces?"

"Yes. As you are no doubt aware, my family is not well liked for a number of reasons. Suffice to say, many look upon the rich fields and lakes of my homeland with greedy eyes, in addition to..." Bai Meizhen narrowed her eyes at a girl who had been slow to move out of their way. "... other reasons best not spoken in a public street.

"My presence here is actually a concession made by my clan in order to increase unity between the provinces." The sneer on her lips told what Bai Meizhen thought of that. "Obviously, the disciples from the scavenger clans around us have taken it as a chance



to strike at us. I doubt my cousins are faring better in the sects that they have been sent to.”

“I should avoid people from the inner provinces then,” Ling Qi said simply, scratching her cheek. “Why are you so hostile to Sun Liling and she to you then? The Western Territories aren’t core.”

“Sun Shao is a large part of the reason these problems exist at all. This is not the appropriate venue for such a history lesson. Do you have a preference for what residence we seek out?” Meizhen deflected.

“One of the nicer homes, I think,” Ling Qi replied, feeling a stab of loss at the memory of their first house. “I don’t think staying humble is going to help. Not at this point with so many people after us. We should make a statement.”

Bai Meizhen’s lips quirked upward slightly, her expression almost warm as she nodded at Ling Qi’s words. “Well said. While I have little use for frivolous luxuries, it seems that I must remind these scavengers of the truth of our positions,” Bai Meizhen said. “I had intended to find something similar to our previous domicile, but perhaps this is better.”

“How about a house near Gu Xiulan’s home? She’s a friend, and it can’t hurt to have another ally close by, right?” Gu Xiulan lived in one of the houses in the second best tier, the ones with multiple rooms and full yards. The only nicer house was the mansion in the center occupied by Sun Liling.

“Gu... from the Golden Fields?” Bai Meizhen asked curiously. At Ling Qi’s nod, she made a considering sound. “That is a good family, if one that has regressed somewhat into mercantilism. Acceptable. Do you know where she resides then?”

Ling Qi nodded again and took them down the street. Once they had reached the inner street, it was simply an issue of selecting a target. The acquisition didn’t quite go down as she had imagined it would. In reality, Bai Meizhen simply had a very calm discussion with the current owners, who turned over the home in exchange for a pouch full of spirit stones for their inconvenience.

Even Ling Qi picked up on the unspoken threat of what would happen if the two girls they evicted didn’t take the payment and clear out though. That aside, for all that the two girls left white-faced and trembling with their things packed on their backs, they didn’t seem too upset. That had been a pretty large pouch. It seemed her concern that Bai Meizhen would do something excessive was unfounded.

This left the two of them to settle into the well-appointed home and allowed Ling Qi to finally retire to a proper meditation room. She had already told Li Suyin and Su Ling what she would be attempting back at the vent and had asked Bai Meizhen to convey her intentions to Gu Xiulan should she see her. With those final worries out of the way, Ling Qi had little to do but begin working on her breakthrough.

As Ling Qi meditated, turning her perception inward, her sense of time faded away. The little aches and pains leftover from yesterday's exertions slowly vanished. Even niggling things like hunger and thirst, reduced as they were, disappeared. All that existed was her spirit, embodied by the shining silver skinned orb that was her dantian, and the narrow branching channels that flowed from it. Blacks, blues, and soft, nearly translucent greens flowed through her being, mingling and separating in time with her heartbeat.

As Ling Qi cycled her qi, feeling it strain against the invisible barrier that prevented her from growing further, she contemplated her experiences as a cultivator so far. The initial wonder, what little there had been, had faded quickly. She had been thrust into a hostile environment, where she had many enemies and few friends. And yet, that number of friends was still more than she had before.

She was more free now, despite the restrictions that remained, than she had ever been on the streets. The shackles of base need had fallen away but had been replaced by new ones: the desperation for resources; and the driving need to grow stronger so that she would not be pushed around by her peers. The friends Ling Qi had made were a shackle in a way, if one she wore willingly. Her guilt about leaving Mother alone was another. Her thoughts churned on that.

She desired freedom, the ability to choose as she willed, and the ability to go where she wished, drifting on wind. Yet... there were limits to that. True, complete freedom was an impossible ideal and one that she could not truly decide whether she even wished to achieve. What would it really even mean? She couldn't really comprehend such an existence. For all that her spirit yearned for the endless open sky, the thought of abandoning the things that bound her to those around her was something she feared, but so was allowing them to truly bind her. Was this what the well spirit had referred to when it spoke of her broken wings and damaged roots?

Ling Qi breathed out as she contemplated these thoughts and began to cycle her qi and expand her dantian.

*Ten cycles.*

*Twenty cycles.*

*Fifty.*

*One hundred.*

*Five hundred.*

The strain she felt grew greater with each cycle, pain blossoming somewhere in the body she could barely feel. The contradiction in her own nature occupied her thoughts. Here in this state, she could think clearly in a way she could never manage while conscious, and she wondered if she could truly have both. Her Wings and her Roots. Freedom and Connections. Would trying to hold onto both hinder her Path?

Ling Qi did not know, but she wanted to try. Total freedom was a useless and empty thing. The sky was empty without any perch on which to land. She needed power to ensure that her wings could carry as much weight as she wished.

With the answer came a distant feeling of chains broken and spread wings. Her qi surged, and Ling Qi opened her eyes to a world that felt richer than ever before.

But thoughts in deeper meditation were as dreams to the waking mind. Only time would tell if her feet could continue to carry her on that Path.

## Chapter 45 - Second Realm

When Ling Qi emerged from her meditation, she found that three days had passed. She would never admit afterward that her first thought was the simple, overwhelming hunger that struck her. Bai Meizhen had congratulated Ling Qi on her breakthrough to Yellow Soul and then politely ignored the way Ling Qi had wolfed down every edible thing in the house. Despite the slightly vulgar start, Ling Qi could not help but feel that she had only taken her first real step on her Path of Cultivation.

Still, practically floating with excitement, Ling Qi could not help but want to visit her other friends and give them the good news. Gu Xiulan was closest, and Ling Qi was soon at her door.

“Can you believe it, Gu Xiulan? I did it! I had been worried I would be stuck for weeks trying to breakthrough, but I managed on my first try!” Ling Qi exclaimed happily. “Everything feels so much more now.”

Gu Xiulan smiled up at her, but Ling Qi thought her expression seemed a little stiff.

“How wonderful for you,” Gu Xiulan said brightly. “Do come in. You have gone and caught me by surprise, but I believe I have some sweets left from our last celebration.”

Ling Qi couldn't help the feeling of elation that had her practically bouncing on her feet as she stepped past Gu Xiulan. When was the last time she had really felt so accomplished?

“Sorry about that,” Ling Qi said, turning back to face her friend as the shorter girl eased the door shut. “Did Bai Meizhen get a chance to let you know what I was up to?”

Gu Xiulan's expression screwed up oddly.

“... She did. I admit, that was somewhat surprising. Bai Meizhen informed me that the two of you had taken the house three doors down?” Gu Xiulan asked.

“Our old one got wrecked in her duel with Sun Liling.” Ling Qi frowned, peering around the open sitting room. “I guess I should have asked. Is your roommate around? I don't want to bother her.”

“It is no bother,” Gu Xiulan replied, seeming to recover her poise. “That girl spends little time here. Don't concern yourself over it.”

"If you say so." Ling Qi thought it a little odd, but ultimately, it was Gu Xiulan's business. Ling Qi followed Gu Xiulan into the dining room. "How have you been holding up? Things have been a mess since the truce ended. I hope it dies down soon. If things keep going like they are now, the whole residential area is going to be wrecked."

"That is a concern," Gu Xiulan agreed as she led Ling Qi to the table. "I suspect the Cai heiress' call for a meeting between the more important parties may have something to do with that." As Ling Qi sat down, she continued on her way toward the pantry. "As for myself, I have had a few scuffles, but nothing worth speaking of."

Ling Qi let out a relieved sigh. Although she had partially broken through to the second realm in spirit, she really didn't want to have to jump into any major conflicts yet. At the same time, she wouldn't just let one of her friends be hurt.

That turned her thoughts to her other reason for coming here. She wasn't exactly sure how to bring it up though. Once Gu Xiulan returned with a few plates with rice cakes and sweets, Ling Qi allowed the topics to drift to lighter and simpler things, like ways Ling Qi could style her hair as it grew out and other such frivolities.

Eventually, conversation turned to Han Jian and the others, who were doing well. Han Jian and his cousin, Han Fang, had broken through to Silver Physique. In addition, Fan Yu had finally reached the peak in physical cultivation for Gold Physique.

From there, conversation turned to their own current cultivation goals.

"I will be ready to begin my breakthrough to Silver in two weeks at most, I think," Gu Xiulan mused, daintily nibbling at the edge of a rice cake. "Elder Zhou's lessons were helpful in that regard. After that, I think I shall seek out a spirit to bind."

"Your family isn't going to send you one?" Ling Qi asked, fiddling with her cup of well-watered plum wine. Perhaps it was her dearth of examples, but she had assumed most noble families kept to a theme.

"No, I'm afraid not. I shall have to find something to suit me. I should ask my Elder Sister where she found her own spirit. My storage ring and a few other gifts from Father should arrive by the end of the week though," Gu Xiulan said, sounding pleased. "He had only praise for my progress."

"I'm happy for you," Ling Qi said sincerely. "How will that work by the way?" Her question drew a questioning look from Gu Xiulan as she finished her cake. "Talking to your older sister, I mean," Ling Qi clarified. "I know you can use sect points to get

lessons, but is there some restriction on travel? There are older disciples on the mountain but I don't think those are inner disciples?"

"Outer Disciples like the two of us require a pass to go to the Inner Peaks," Gu Xiulan explained easily, taking a sip of her own drink. "Inner Disciples are not allowed onto the Outer Peak except in special circumstances to avoid... undue suppression. If I meet with my sister Yanmei, it will have to be in town."

Ling Qi frowned briefly, staring into the rippling liquid in her cup. If she read between the lines correctly, that meant that once she left the Outer Sect mountain, she wouldn't necessarily be safe from meddling via Inner Disciple. It was something to remember.

"Well, that makes sense." Ling Qi sipped her drink and cast a considering eye over the array of sweets before selecting a pastry she didn't know the name of; it had some kind of delicious fruit paste filling though. "Do you have any advice on breaking through to Silver Physique?" Ling Qi asked absently.

A flicker of surprise crossed Gu Xiulan's expression.

"Oh? Are you approaching that point yourself?" she asked. "My, you *are* quick about things."

Ling Qi gave her a confused look.

"I reached the peak of Gold before the end of the truce. Didn't Han Jian or one of the others tell you?"

Her friend paused in the middle of raising her cup to her lips.

"No, I'm afraid it never came up," Gu Xiulan said faintly, something unidentifiable in her tone. Ling Qi shifted uncomfortably as Gu Xiulan studied her; the other girl's gaze was sharp and calculating, the way it had been when Ling Qi first met her. "You would be quite offended if I attempted to introduce you to one of my male cousins, wouldn't you?" she asked grumpily.

Ling Qi stared at her, thrown by the apparent non-sequitur.

"I don't see why I..." Ling Qi blinked and then frowned as understanding of what Gu Xiulan was implying reached her. "Oh. You mean... No, I don't want to get involved in anything like that." She shot the other girl a dirty look. "Why would you even ask?"

"Hmph," Gu Xiulan replied glumly. "I am quite cross that you do not even understand the

extent of your good fortune. Rising rapidly through the first stage of cultivation is one thing. Even breaking through in one aspect after such a short time might be dismissed as luck. But both? That is rare talent. I suppose you did not notice the sudden number of girls chatting excitedly over that Ji Rong fellow after his dual breakthrough last week," she continued tartly. "Even at a slightly slower pace, you will likely need to fend off suitors with a stick once mention of your ability slips out in correspondence." Gu Xiulan seemed to grow more irritated as she spoke.

"I haven't actually broken through yet," Ling Qi pointed out, alarmed at the scenario Gu Xiulan painted. "I mean, it might take me a few more weeks or even a month or two."

Gu Xiulan laughed humorlessly, shaking her head.

"You really do not understand, do you?" she asked, the jealous anger fading from her tone. "Even if it took you another month, such breakthrough speed would be attention catching, if less so. To think I would be outshone by you so..."

Ling Qi felt more than a bit of worry at the way the other girl's hand tightened around her cup.

"Gu Xiulan," she began awkwardly. "It's not like I did it all on my own. Bai Meizhen has helped me, you and Han Jian have helped me, and so have Li Suyin and Su Ling. Do you think I would have made it into Elder Zhou's class without your help? I barely knew how to dodge an attack until you taught me."

"You *were* quite hopeless for all your fire," Gu Xiulan muttered, peering up at her with narrow eyes. "... My apologies. That was unsightly." Her dark expression seemed to clear as fast as the clouds of a summer rain shower. "I suppose I shall simply have to increase my efforts."

"Right. It never happened," Ling Qi agreed quickly. She knew Gu Xiulan's temper flared easily, and the last thing she wanted was to alienate one of her friends. "That actually leads in pretty well to the other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

"About breaking through?" Gu Xiulan asked. "It is different for every person. I would strongly suggest having several buckets of soapy water on hand before you begin though."

"Got it," Ling Qi said, recalling when she had reached mid gold and found herself covered head to toe in oily grime. "I actually wanted to talk to you about Li Suyin."

Gu Xiulan wrinkled her nose.

“That meek little creature? I do not understand what you see in her. She is a weight dragging you down,” Gu Xiulan said hotly before the heat faded. “Or perhaps not, given your progress.”

Ling Qi grimaced. She had suspected that Gu Xiulan’s hostility was something like that, which made it harder to be angry at her. The other girl thought she was doing Ling Qi a favor by driving off ‘hangers-on’. Well, Ling Qi also suspected a large part of it was simply possessive jealousy. “Can you give her another chance? I really think Li Suyin’s going to do better; she had a... wake-up call at the end of the truce.”

Gu Xiulan huffed, looking unconvinced. “Very well. I will trust your judgement in this.” Ling Qi thought she was telling the truth. “In exchange, may I ask that you at least be polite in letting down any members of my family that Father sets to court you?” Gu Xiulan’s voice turned back to teasing; the other girl’s moods really were mercurial.

Ling Qi spluttered. “You aren’t actually serious about that. I refuse to believe it. Anyway, let’s stop messing around. I was hoping I could keep training with you and the others. Are you doing that today?”

“In the afternoons,” Gu Xiulan answered, giving Ling Qi an amused look. “I doubt anyone will object. Even my Fan Yu is not foolish enough to deny that you deserve a place if you wish it.”

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Ling Qi spent much of the next few days in the company of Han Jian and the others, training and practicing combat skills in spars, as well as refining her use of Forgotten Vale Melody. She would then spend each evening with Gu Xiulan soaking in the bubbling qi of the mineral spring and chatting with the other girl. She spent some time playing her flute as well. She found it awkward to do so while bathing with Gu Xiulan, but it was relaxing and even serene. A good way to round out a day of hard training.

She idly wondered if Gu Xiulan would mind if she invited Bai Meizhen. The pale girl had been looking somewhat harried lately. A good soak would probably be good for her.

Ling Qi was sad about the growing distance between her and Han Jian. Han Jian was throwing himself into training more and more, and she suspected it was partially her fault. More and more, he seemed frustrated and angry with himself and his progress in



cultivation. Han Jian still put in a show of good cheer, but Ling Qi couldn't miss the strain in his smile and the occasional looks of envy she caught him giving her. Despite that, her training with her other friend was still far more stressful.

"Li Suyin, we really should take a breather," Ling Qi sighed, having just swept Li Suyin's feet out from under her and knocking her to the ground.

"I can keep going," the blue-haired girl panted out, her face red from exertion as she struggled to rise back to her feet. Li Suyin had changed, having shorn her hair short so that it ended just below her ears and having acquired a proper, if plain, eye patch that covered much of the right side of her face with dark grey silk.

"But you shouldn't," Ling Qi said, crossing her arms. She cast a glance at Su Ling, who sat in quiet meditation with twin fires behind her head with a third struggling to form between them, and Bai Meizhen, whose surging qi sent a thrill of fear up her spine as the girl stood stock still, her shadow churning in a dark pool at her feet. "You have to cool down and meditate on your actions or your qi won't be able to imprint the experiences on your body properly. And that's ignoring that you'll just hurt yourself if you push too far all at once. You should know that."

Li Suyin looked down while trying to catch her breath. They had been sparring hard with pure unarmed combat for the last hour and a half, and although Ling Qi felt fine, she could tell that Li Suyin was on the edge of collapsing. Elder Zhou had always made sure disciples who reached that state sat down to meditate and dispersed their qi properly into their bones and muscles. He had said that doing so was how they were able to learn and master weapons so much more quickly than mortals.

"I'm sorry," Li Suyin said, shoulders slumping. "I've asked you to teach me, and here I am, acting as if I know better. How ungrateful of me."

Ling Qi grimaced, looking down herself. The other girl had been like this all week, swinging from determination to depression like a pendulum. Ling Qi wasn't sure what to do about it. Li Suyin was advancing quickly enough - she knew how to throw a punch, the basic tells necessary to dodge simple attacks, and even a few throws and counters - but Ling Qi was concerned about the girl's mental state.

"It's not a big deal," Ling Qi assured her friend. "Just remember that if you don't take care of yourself, all the training in the world won't help, alright?"

Li Suyin nodded, and to Ling Qi's relief, she sat down to rest and meditate.

"I think I might be able to decrease my recovery time with the next layer of my art mastered," Li Suyin murmured to herself as Ling Qi sat down across from her.

"That would be good," Ling Qi said, even if she wasn't certain whether something like that would be healthy in the long term. "How is your cultivation going anyway?"

"I think I should reach late gold within a few more weeks," Li Suyin replied as she calmed her breathing and closed her eyes. "I need to open a spine meridian though before I begin working toward the peaks. It's difficult to decipher, but I think grandfather's art contains more combative techniques... It's just so difficult to piece everything together."

Not for the first time, Ling Qi wondered at just what kind of art Li Suyin was using. It sounded more like several arts all mashed together to her. Maybe it was; who knew. It would make sense for a clan to have a whole tree of related arts, she supposed. Maybe what Li Suyin had inherited were all the fragments that were left?

"I'm sure you'll get it," Ling Qi replied confidently, which made Li Suyin smile just a little as she meditated.

Ling Qi needed to get her own cultivation in so she closed her eyes and focused on absorbing the qi-infused mist of the vent to strengthen her argent foundation. If she kept working at it, she would master the technique within the month and finally be able to learn just what the Eight Phase Ceremony cultivation art in the jade slip she received from Xin did.

# Chapter 46 - Restoring Order 1

The meeting Cai called took place near noon on the fourth day of the week and was the last thing Ling Qi intended to do before secluding herself for her breakthrough attempt to Silver Physique. As she and Bai Meizhen walked the path to the pavilion Cai Renxiang's message had indicated, she continued to pepper Bai Meizhen with questions, which the pale girl took in stride.

"Do you know what the test is for becoming an Inner Disciple?" Ling Qi asked. Elder Su had mentioned that there was a test, but she didn't really know what the test consisted of. Presumably the older disciples on this mountain were the ones who failed.

"A tournament," Bai Meizhen said evenly. "As is traditional. The top eight performers are accepted into the Inner Sect with their tournament placing determining their initial Inner Sect rank. There is also a production contest with similar rules."

"So sixteen people total," Ling Qi mused. It would almost certainly have to be the combat tournament for her. Even if she did find formations interesting, she doubted she would get good enough at them to become a top talisman crafter by the end of the year. "Is it just our year or...?"

"The older Outer Disciples may join either test, although typically those more than a year or two older than us have reached the plateau of their potential in the Sect," Bai Meizhen answered as they reached the top of the path. Ling Qi peered ahead, seeing perhaps a half-dozen people already present, but they were too far away for her to make out any features.

Ling Qi frowned; the entry of older Outer Sect disciples would make the competition stiffer.

"What would it mean?" Ling Qi asked, drawing a glance and a raised eyebrow from her companion. "For me, I mean," she clarified. "Since I have to serve in the army for eight years."

"A higher placing in the tournament may mean a higher and better starting position within the Sect's military branch," Bai Meizhen replied thoughtfully. "I would not assume too much however. While it is true that you must serve, it need not necessarily be with the Sect."

Ling Qi glanced curiously at Bai Meizhen, but there was no time for further questions

because they had arrived at the perimeter of the pavilion. The building itself featured a wide stone platform with several steps carved into the sides. Thick wooden columns painted silver had been slotted into the corners to hold up a tiered and tiled roof overhead. The platform was well furnished, but it now centered on a set of four tables pushed together and surrounded by chairs.

At the head of the table sat Cai Renxiang, serious and severe as ever. Gan Guangli stood to her right, carefully pouring his lady a cup of tea.

Seated further down on the left was the crimson-haired Sun Liling, slouched with her elbow on the tabletop and her cheek in her hand. Lu Feng sat beside her in a still casual but less rude slouch wearing a bright red robe embroidered with gold thread. His sharp gaze swept over Ling Qi and Bai Meizhen, evaluating them before returning to the others.

Unfortunately, Kang Zihao was also present, sitting stiffly across from Sun Liling and regarding everyone else present with an aloof expression, his arms crossed over his chest. Two boys she didn't recognize flanked him.

Ling Qi was surprised to see Han Jian sitting at the far end of the table flanked by Han Fang and Gu Xiulan with Heijin asleep in his lap. He raised a hand in greeting as he caught her eye, and Gu Xiulan gave her a sharp-edged smile.

Other surprises were less pleasant. Huang Da was seated a short way down from Kang Zihao. For once, he wasn't paying her any mind. His usual grin was twisted into a glower at Ji Rong, who sat across from him. The scarred boy was idly polishing the thick iron plate of the cestus on his right hand with the sleeve of his left while staring down Huang Da.

She didn't recognize the last person present. He sat between Kang Zihao and Cai Renxiang, and at first glance, he seemed to be asleep. His arms were crossed over his broad chest and his face concealed under a wide brimmed conical hat painted with a tortoise shell pattern.

"Tch. Just like a Bai. Makin' everyone wait without a care in the world," Sun Liling drawled as the two of them approached the remaining empty seats.

"Our method is certainly superior to one which leads to rushing heedless into the jaws of ruin," Bai Meizhen said coolly. Bai Meizhen drew a few surprised looks when she pulled out a chair for herself. Ling Qi wondered if they were expecting her to do it.

"Is that so," the redhead said glibly. "Not seein' it, personally. Which one of us is a princess?"

Bai Meizhen gave her a look of condescending pity as she sat down, turning up her nose slightly as if to say that this conversation was beneath her. "A matter of debate. I suppose even barbarians enjoy pretensions of class in their huts of mud."

"And snakes like playin' at strength while hiding in their burrows," Sun Liling responded heatedly before glancing at Cai Renxiang, who had turned her attention to the two of them. "But this ain't the time for this grudge. S'pose I can give Miss Cai some face and leave it till later."

Ling Qi sat down carefully and quietly, doing her best not to draw any further attention to herself.

"Thank you, Princess Sun," Cai Renxiang said calmly as Gan Guangli took up a position looming behind her with his arms crossed over his muscular chest. "As worthwhile as it might be to witness such a battle, I do not wish for this meeting to devolve into a brawl."

"Lady Cai, might I interject before we begin?" Kang Zihao asked, dipping his head respectfully in her direction.

Cai Renxiang turned her severe gaze to him, staring him down for a full three count before inclining her head slightly. "You may. What is your objection, Kang Zihao?"

"Thank you, Lady Cai," he replied. Ling Qi might have even thought him sincere if she didn't know better. "While I can understand an exemption for that one as we all have our seconds" - he glanced pointedly at Ling Qi before directing his gaze to Ji Rong - "but what is *that* doing here?"

Ji Rong fixed Kang Zihao with an unimpressed look; he seemed much more confident than the last time Ling Qi had seen him. "You wanna have a go, pretty boy? If you're talking to me like that, then you know damn well that I killed a Mid Red Realm when I was a mortal. You really want to try your luck?"

Huang Da's expression grew more sour. "Do not brag as if it were some achievement, scum. Only luck saved your miserable hide."

"That so," Ji Rong said, cracking the knuckles on his uncovered hand. "The way I hear it, luck is just another kinda strength. The creepy fuck shoulda been more alert while he was going around playin' vampire."

"You..." Huang Da looked ready to lunge over the table at Ji Rong when Cai Renxiang rapped her knuckles once on the surface of the table.

"He has been invited because this is a matter of strength, as all things are." Her voice cut through the echoes of her thunderous knock. "I will not comment on whatever personal disputes you might have, but the criteria for an invitation was simple. If one reached the second realm, they were to be invited, provided they were not vassal to another," she announced evenly. "I am glad, in this instance, that you came regardless, Miss Ling. I had not been informed of your breakthrough."

Ling Qi froze as the girl's eyes turned to her, along with everyone else's. She fought down the urge to squirm under the attention, doing her best to imitate Gu Xiulan and Bai Meizhen by sitting as straight as she could and keeping her expression serene.

"It is no trouble," Ling Qi said distantly as her heart pounded in her ears.

"The Bai have sharp eyes at least," Sun Liling grumbled. "Can we get on with this then, Miss Cai? I gotta feed my spirit soon. She's getting testy."

Ling Qi eyed Sun Liling curiously. She didn't see any kind of spirit beast in the girl's presence. It must be hidden away.

"Of course, Princess Sun," Cai Renxiang said. "I have brought you together in order to discuss matters of the chaos unfolding around us. Property is being destroyed en masse, and banditry is becoming common. It is frankly unacceptable."

Ling Qi felt a stab of vindictive pleasure as she caught a scowl on Kang Zihao's normally serene face. "Is such not the will of the Elders?" he asked. "It is, after all, meant to winnow the chaff away."

"I agree. It does make things rather more exciting," Huang Da added, having apparently gotten a hold on his temper. To Ling Qi's eyes though, there was still an edge to his normal expression.

"Yeah, not gonna say I haven't enjoyed the time since the gloves have come off," Sun Liling added with a shrug. "Guessing you're not exactly complaining about that though."

No one else seemed inclined to speak up. Han Jian looked a bit uncomfortable just

being at the table with the rest, Bai Meizhen seemed content to keep her peace, and the 'sleeping' boy had barely stirred.

"You are correct," Cai Renxiang replied. "I have no objection to tests of martial valor. However, some limit need be applied to the venue lest we find ourselves crouching amidst rubble by the year's end. Personally, I believe that this is yet another test to see if we disciples will allow ourselves to descend into barbarity if left unchecked."

"That does seem pretty accurate, I think," Han Jian spoke up lowly, glancing around the table. "Everything I've seen says the Sect takes a pretty hands-off approach, but they're paying attention to what we do with our freedom."

"The moon has eyes, and the clouds stand vigil. Even the mountain lives and breathes," an unfamiliar voice said slowly as if choosing his words carefully. Ling Qi followed the sound of the voice to see that the boy who had been 'asleep' had raised his head. She could see his somewhat blocky features now, but most disconcerting were his eyes. The whites were dark grey, almost black, and his irises were an odd grey-green shade. She could also see a few patches of dark green, nearly black, scales peeking out from under the neck of his robe. "We are judged."

"Exactly so, Sir Han, Sir Xuan," Cai Renxiang replied, setting her cup down soundlessly. "I propose that we impose a penalty on those who begin battles within the residential areas. It would be a fine of some significant sum of spirit stones or if need be, confinement for repeat offenders."

"Well, I'm not gonna apologize for my own actions." Sun Liling smirked challengingly at Cai Renxiang. "And I don't really think it's an issue. What d'you have to fear about camping? Not like the grass and the trees are gonna eat you here."

"It is hardly anyone else's fault that you reside in a demon haunted jungle and have no standards," Bai Meizhen cut in. "I second this proposal. There has been far too much noise as of late."

Kang Zihao scowled before nodding. "That seems reasonable. Any who attempt to use such a ruling to hide from the winnowing will find their cultivation stunted regardless."

Ling Qi scowled as she caught Huang Da 'looking' in her direction. "Agreed. We all deserve to sleep peacefully," Huang Da said smugly.

Ugh. Was he watching her sleep at night? No, boys were still barred from the female residences and vice versa, but the idea was still unsettling.

“Who’d a thunk that I’d find myself agreeing with a Huang?” Ji Rong drawled. “Sure. I guess you want us to smack around anyone who breaks the rules?”

“It would be best to give them a warning to cease first,” Cai Renxiang said. “But yes. If need be, perpetrators are to be subdued.” Her expression then grew cold. “However, should I find any of you abusing such privilege, I will see it as an assault upon my person.”

Ling Qi relaxed a little as the conversation continued. It seemed that things were actually going to stay civilized. Cai Renxiang was focused on curbing the most obvious chaos first and foremost. Ling Qi thought that was to her credit, even if she was obviously angling to expand her authority and control from there. It was refreshingly honest, all things considered.

There was a lot of dickering over what exactly the punishments would entail and how they would be enforced. It was eventually decided that the initial fine would be thirty five spirit stones, doubling on each subsequent offense until the fourth when the perpetrator would find themselves confined for two weeks.

Confinement would be handled by the Xuan since formation barriers were apparently his focus. It was agreed that the actual fines would be in Cai Renxiang’s care to avoid the temptation to abuse the authority being granted. The only other thing agreed to was that there would be another meeting in a month’s time.

Until then, everyone at the meeting would have the authority to levy fines. It was a strange feeling, having potential authority over others.

However, Ling Qi didn’t test whether that authority actually granted any respect. Instead, in the wake of the council meeting, she rushed home for one purpose. She needed to breakthrough to Silver Physique now more than ever with others’ attentions on her as a cultivator herself, rather than an extension of her roommate.

Ling Qi sealed the door to the meditation room and began to cultivate.



## Chapter 47 - Restoring Order 2

Ling Qi found that unlike her previous breakthrough to Yellow Soul, this one was an intensely material experience. There were no fuzzy dreams or vague thoughts, only an awareness of every inch of her own body. It had suffered much in her time in the streets, from poor nutrition to ill-healed wounds from old beatings. She could feel the effects of all these things as her qi circulated through her flesh and bones. Layer upon layer of qi, carefully soaked into her tissues through months of physical cultivation, pulsed in time with her heartbeat. The muscles were at the limit of what they could accept, mortal flesh unable to hold a single drop more of enhancing qi.

Ling Qi didn't often think about it, but she knew that she was far beyond what she was three months ago. She could now dash as fast as a horse, lift her own weight or more with a single hand, and suffer blows that would crack stone and merely be wounded. She could, she thought, as she felt her awareness soaking into her every vein and tendon, probably shatter a grown man's sternum with a simple palm strike.

And Ling Qi had just begun to walk her Path of Cultivation.

She could almost understand why cultivators looked down on mortals so for all their talk of protecting them. Mortals were so easily broken and withered so quickly. The spans of years Bai Meizhen had mentioned in her lessons came to her. It hadn't sunk in properly until now, but she knew if she avoided a violent death, she would live more than a hundred years. That lifespan would only increase if she continued cultivating.

How old was Elder Su? Two hundred? Three? The woman had a matronly air, but she was still young and beautiful. All but her eyes and demeanor were largely untouched by time. What did it even mean to live for so long? Ling Qi could hardly even wrap her mind around the idea.

*Crack.*

She felt something change within her. A poorly healed fracture in the bone of her upper arm shifted, sending a knife of pain through her body as it realigned, and the bone grew smooth and straight once more. Another needle of pain followed, then a thousand more, as the effects of years of malnutrition began to reverse. The qi in her body began to surge riotously, sending painful shudders through her frame.

Ling Qi almost screamed as the barrage of sensation crowded out all conscious thought. The qi she had built up was draining away precipitously, no longer simply

layered within her bones and muscles, but instead fusing and becoming part of them, forcing out mortal impurities as it did. She felt like she was baking beneath a high summer sun, drowning in her own sweat.

When she came to herself, the first thing that struck her was the smell. It nearly made her gag; it reminded her of a middenheap in summer, and it was coming from her. She struggled to open her eyes, gummed as they were. When she managed to do so, she found herself covered from head to toe in something sticky and black like smelly tar. It was so much worse than her previous realm breakthrough.

Gu Xiulan had warned her of something like this, she remembered. She had even prepared washing water for it. That preparation seemed woefully inadequate now. Her eyes watering from the smell, Ling Qi hurried to clean herself as best she could.

Thankfully, the gunk covering her came away easily despite its stickiness. It was almost as if the stuff was repelled from her skin. As she cleaned herself up and the smell began to fade, she began to wonder at how light she felt and how easily she breathed, the absence of a thousand little aches and pains that had been with her so long that she didn't even notice them save by their current absence.

Of course, she still found herself disappointed. Her skin was clear and smooth, but it was still dark. Her limbs were not slender and graceful as Gu Xiulan and Bai Meizhen's were but instead showed well-defined and sleek muscle. Her ankles were still too thick, and her feet too large, and if anything, she was even taller now. She didn't often think of her appearance but some part of her had hoped that she might at least become a little prettier like the immortal ladies in stories. The lack of anyone truly unattractive among her fellow disciples had buoyed that hope.

It wasn't to be though. She was still the same plain and boyish girl she had been before her breakthrough. Ling Qi scowled at her reflection in the mirror as she brushed her fingers through her long hair. It had grown out greatly during her breakthrough, hanging almost to the middle of her back in a wavy, curly curtain. At least the breakthrough had finished the job Gu Xiulan's efforts had started.

Her fingernails were a few centimeters long now too, and her toenails weren't much better, which was more annoying. She would have to cut them along with her hair.

Ling Qi paused, looking into her own bright blue eyes in the mirror. Did she *need* to cut her hair? She had kept it short before out of practicality. She had no time on the streets to care for longer hair or put it up with pretty ribbons and ornaments like Mother had

enjoyed doing to it. She idly fingered a few of the lengthened strands ... Maybe she could do something with it. Arrange it in one of the ways Mother had shown her when she was young.

She turned away from the mirror. Something to consider later. She still had to dispose of the buckets of filthy water and at least trim her toenails so that she didn't trip.

Ling Qi didn't like the attention she drew when she finally went out to dispose of the buckets and her old clothes. She had been shut in for days again. The fighting had died down, but that just meant that there were more people in the streets. More girls whispering behind their hands as she passed, even if most of them lowered their eyes when she glared at them.

It was unsettling. She had grown used to spiteful looks and disdain. The lack of it made her nervous.

In the wake of her breakthrough came less exciting things. Organizing her time and resources came first. The storage ring she had acquired had swiftly grown full, carrying everything. She did not forget Elder Zhou's words. She was progressing quickly, but she still had so much ground to make up. Going through her things brought Ling Qi a surprise however. While she was sifting through the jumbled contents of her storage ring and deciding which of her meager possessions she wanted to leave at their new home, she came across the tokens from Elder Zhou's test.

She had forgotten about them, those three symbol inscribed discs. She found herself idly turning them over in her hands as she recalled the test.

The light caught on a scratch in the smooth metal of the sun token as she did, and she paused. That wasn't a single scratch.

Squinting at it, she found that the token was covered in dozens of tiny characters, some of which she recognized from Elder Su's lessons. Bemused, she recalled the only real practical part of formations the Elder had covered, that being the activation of dormant symbols. She fed a bit of qi into the token and watched as the character lit up faintly.

Nothing else happened though, and after a moment, the character faded. A second attempt showed that she could light up as many as five characters at a time to seemingly no effect. She spent a bit of time trying different combinations but eventually stopped. She only recognized perhaps half of the characters. This seemed like a good use for her archive pass, she supposed.

With that in mind, she left the residential area, shifting uncomfortably as she found people getting out of her way. It wasn't like Bai Meizhen where the street ahead would clear entirely, but Ling Qi didn't have to weave through the people in the streets as much. Many of her fellow disciples would simply take a step to the side or turn to give her more room.

It was weird.

Ling Qi pondered her different reception by her fellow disciples as she made the trip up the winding path that lead to the archive. It had to be her participation in that meeting. Nothing else really made sense. Remembering Gu Xiulan's words, it could also be a result of her breakthrough. She supposed it would be difficult to miss her suddenly lengthened hair or even more unwieldy height.

Halfway up the path to the archives, she heard a massive crash and a rumble as a plume of dust rose from the path ahead. Ling Qi stopped, craning her neck to see further up the switchback, but all she was able to catch sight of were several flashes of dark green light and a sudden burst of silver.

Was someone having a duel on the path to the archive? She had been desensitized to such things since the end of the truce, but the next rumble and the rain of stones and dirt falling from the higher path seemed a little more intense than the usual violence. Ling Qi mostly felt only curiosity as it was unlikely to have anything to do with her. She continued up the path at a slightly faster pace, hoping the duelists wouldn't put the path out. Having to climb the cliffs to reach the archive would be annoying.

Ling Qi was almost blinded by the brightest flash yet as she reached the same level, and when her vision cleared, it was to a disquieting sight. In the middle of the now badly pockmarked path were two figures, both male. One, Ji Rong, stood frozen in absolute stillness, one foot off the ground and his fist extended for a punch. Burning stakes of viridian light seemed to puncture straight through his limbs and torso, but she saw no blood or wounds.

The other figure slowly straightening up was the Xuan boy she had first seen at Cai's meeting. He was dressed much the same as then in a thick, dark green robe patterned with geometric shapes. His shell-patterned conical hat still concealed much of his face. He held a weapon now, a tall xizhang capped with a silver hoop cut in half by the continuation of the staff's haft. A half dozen rings of varying metals jangled musically as Xuan removed the hoop from Ji Rong's forehead.

Ling Qi eyed the scene cautiously as the odd boy turned to look at her in an unhurried

way. She could tell that he was at least somewhat winded from the way his shoulders rose and fell. Meanwhile, Ji Rong was eerily still, the glow of the stakes thrust through him casting his frozen face in sickly relief.

“Sister Ling,” the Xuan boy greeted her. What little she could see of his expression was even as he nodded in her direction once before looking back to Ji Rong. Xuan reached into the collar of Ji Rong’s robe and plucked out what she recognized as the archive pass granted to Ji Rong.

Ling Qi eyed Xuan warily. At this distance, she was confident she could have her mist up before Xuan could reach her if it came down to a fight.

“Brother Xuan.” Ling Qi mirrored his polite greeting. Xuan’s choice of address was odd as few others used the formal terms. It also occurred to her how strange it was to be holding a normally pitched conversation with someone over thirty meters away. It was times like this that made her wonder at the enhancement of her senses.

“Might I ask what happened?” Ling Qi asked cautiously. She would like to know if the other boy was in Kang Zihao’s camp or if this was something unrelated. Ji Rong had been pretty antagonistic to both Kang Zihao and Huang Da after all.

The pass vanished from Xuan’s hand, presumably into a storage ring.

“The untamed wolf bites all hands, knowing no loyalty nor gratitude. The cur’s insult to Lady Cai could not be brooked.” Xuan replied, turning away from the frozen boy to begin walking toward Ling Qi at an unhurried pace. “A lesson was administered.”

Ling Qi stepped to the side of the path, ready to draw her flute or her knives at a moment’s notice. “How long is he going to be stuck like that?”

Xuan cocked his head to the side slightly, pausing in front of her.

“A season perhaps?” he answered, sending a chill down her spine at his casual coldness. His strange eyes flicked back in the frozen boy’s direction. “Nay. Without intervention, a full cycle of the moon more like. Does Sister Ling object?”

His way of speaking was a little grating. “Isn’t a month a bit much? He’s helpless like that, isn’t he?” Ling Qi hated to think what would happen to her if she were to be frozen in place for a month.

Xuan’s wide shoulders rose and fell in a dismissive shrug. “No touch can reach but

mine. A lesson - not an execution.” Xuan resumed his walk, the top of the xizhang jangling as he moved past her. “Good fortune, Sister Ling. Convey my greeting to Sister Bai.”

Ling Qi watched his back as he walked away, perturbed by the encounter, before testing Xuan’s claim. Sure enough, when she cautiously poked at Ji Rong, her finger was stopped a half meter away. It felt as if she were prodding smooth stone rather than air. Ling Qi could see faint viridian characters glowing in the dirt in a circle around Ji Rong, and a single black character meaning punishment on the frozen boy’s forehead.

She grimaced and withdrew her hand. She supposed she would find out more at the next meeting... if there was one. There was little she could do either way. Casting one more cautious look around to search for any hidden characters on the ground, she hurried on to the archive.

Thus began her routine for the first part of the week. In the mornings, she would go to the archive, studying formations and attempting to decipher the symbols on the tokens. In the afternoons, she would head to the vent to cultivate and train with Li Suyin and Su Ling. They were both doing relatively well as far as she could tell although Su Ling was absent more and more often, citing a need to gather materials for some kind of arrangement she had with a crafting disciple.

Ling Qi’s training with Han Jian would then continue in the afternoons. The boy seemed to have shaken off his gloom, and he apologized for how short he had been with her the previous week. But... Ling Qi felt that he was still growing more distant to her. It wasn’t out of any malice, she thought, but he had an ever increasing focus on the others in his group. Han Jian spent more time drilling and encouraging Fan Yu than he had ever done before.

She caught Gu Xiulan giving Han Jian the occasional worried look, and the other girl’s interactions with her had become... awkward. When she had shown up at the first training session, Gu Xiulan’s expression had been greatly conflicted. Fan Yu avoided even looking at her.

It seemed that even her successes could have negatives.

## Chapter 48 - Restoring Order 3

Ling Qi forged on, determined to keep improving as the days passed. Soon enough, her efforts began to bear fruit. Her study in the archive had allowed her to recognize more of the symbols and allowed her to puzzle out the combination for the star token. The token itself had pulsed with soft light and then disintegrated, leaving behind three wax stoppered bottles. A hurried check of the bottles' properties revealed the liquid inside to be a potent elixir for the enhancement of physical cultivation.

So too did her training advance in other areas. Ling Qi was growing closer to a complete Argent Foundation, and every day, the air she breathed and the qi she circulated seemed to become a little clearer and a little fresher. Another week, or perhaps two, of effort and she would have it.

Her skill with the mystical melody of her arts grew as well. The mist spread further and lasted longer, the weave of qi holding it together growing more potent. She had also found the trick to weaving the the first two melodies together in order to activate both techniques at once. As her understanding grew, a new tune was revealed to her. Starlight Elegy was a slow, sad piece of music that left those lost in the mist exhausted and lethargic, sapping their vitality and qi.

All her training and study could not keep her mind off the past though. Ever since the issue had been shoved in her face during Elder Zhou's test, she found her thoughts occasionally turning back to her mother. Ling Qi's feelings toward the woman were mixed. Mother had been strict and often highly critical, only rarely having a word of praise. Yet despite her profession, Mother had done everything she could for Ling Qi. In hindsight, it was easy to see that her mother had obviously spent most of what she had on Ling Qi's education, such as it was, despite Ling Qi's failure to absorb most of it.

Ling Qi had had good reasons for staying on the mountain these past few weeks. Her breakthroughs were critical to her continued safety, and there was just so much to do... but could she honestly say that her mother didn't at least deserve to know that her daughter was alive? Perhaps it was insight granted by long hours of cultivation, but her past assumption that her mother's continued fretting over Ling Qi's manners and appearance were due to wanting Ling Qi to follow in her footsteps seemed foolish.

After all, an escort didn't have much use for literacy. It made her wonder where Mother herself had learned.

That night, she resolved to write a letter and go into town the next day. It was no easy

thing to complete. What *did* one say to a family member that she had abandoned years ago? The candle she was using for light burned down twice as she wrote a few lines only to hastily scribble them out again and again. Finally, she was able to compose something passable.

*Mother,*

*I hope you are still well.*

*This is from Ling Qi, your daughter. It seems a little silly to write that, but I would not blame you for forgetting me. You will be surprised to see this letter, I am sure.*

*I am sorry. You did not deserve to be left alone without a word. I know it cannot make up for leaving you to believe me dead for years on end, but I hope you can accept this small gift as an apology.*

*That seems rude. It likely isn't a small gift to you, but I might already be forgetting the worth of silver. I've joined the Argent Peak Sect. I have become a cultivator.*

*I will not ask that you write me back. I do not deserve that, but know that I will continue sending similar gifts when I can.*

*Thank you for taking care of me.*

It seemed stiff and formal to her, but Ling Qi didn't know what else to write. What could she do but apologize? Ling Qi stared at the letter for a long time before she finally went to sleep. She just hoped it was possible to send it; she would feel awfully stupid if she couldn't have it delivered after spending so much time on it.

The next day, she left bright and early, departing through the front entrance of the sect. Ling Qi chose to head down the path at a jog, her command of the air currents keeping her gown from flapping unnecessarily. It was a good, light workout.

Just another strange thing since becoming a cultivator. A jog of several kilometers on a steep path barely left her breathing hard. There were a handful of other disciples going back and forth, but none paid her much mind. The town at the base of the mountain soon came into sight, an island of stone and cleared land in the midst of a sea of trees. The air was cool and crisp from the early spring, and a light mist hung over the sprawling farmland that surrounded the shining stone walls that encircled the hub of the town. The walls bristled with towers and their accompanying war machines, net casters and other more deadly things for fending off barbarian and beast incursions, and the



sun gleamed off the helms of the guardsmen atop them.

Ling Qi slowed down to an energetic walk as she approached and passed the gate without issue, her head held high. It was a lesson from her old life that still held true. The appearance of confidence and self-assurance quelled many suspicions. She had to pause to give her name at the gate and get directions to the local Ministry of Communications building, but there was no further hold up.

Her walk through the tidy streets was enlightening. It was strange to walk among mortals again. The projections in the test had not been real people, and besides, she had barely begun to cultivate at that point. Had... everyone she knew really been so slow and graceless? It wasn't as if the mortals were moving in slow motion precisely, but to her perception, their every motion was obvious and telegraphed. That man would stumble on his way through the door. That woman would shift the basket in her hands to adjust for the weight in three more steps.

The obvious respect in the eyes of the townsfolk as they parted to make way for her was unsettling. She hid her unease and soon made it to the office of the Ministry of Communications. The easy part was changing a spirit stone for silver, ninety five coins for a single stone with the remaining five being the office's fee.

It had taken longer to set up the delivery because even though she only had to wait in line behind other cultivators, the Ministry was busy. It had been awkward to explain to the Ministry worker that she needed her letter and package delivered to a Ling Qingge in Tonghou city and that no, she didn't have an address.

Somewhat alarmingly, once she made it clear the recipient was her mother, the whole process was smoothed over. Apparently, the Sect had records on such things. Ling Qi wasn't sure how she felt about that. In the end, she sent the letter and a pouch of thirty silver off. Now that she knew what to do, it wouldn't take nearly as long to accomplish in the future.

Ling Qi wasn't sure whether she wanted her mother to respond to her letter or not.

With the lingering weight of worry over her mother's condition lifted for the moment, Ling Qi recalled the other obligation still waiting for her to fulfill, namely, her promise to Bai Meizhen. The taciturn girl had helped her a lot since she had begun here, and now, she should be strong enough to actually help Bai Meizhen in return.

Ling Qi didn't get a chance to speak with Bai Meizhen until later in the week though as

her housemate had secluded herself to cultivate. When Bai Meizhen finally emerged from the house's meditation room, it was late at night on the fifth day. Ling Qi had fixed herself a small dinner of rice and fish and had been eating in the dining room when Bai Meizhen entered, swaying tiredly on her feet. She looked wearier than Ling Qi had ever seen her before.

"Welcome back to the world of the living," Ling Qi greeted the other girl wryly as she paused in eating her meal. "How did your cultivation go?" She knew the proud girl wouldn't appreciate an offer of help when Bai Meizhen was merely tired.

"Well enough. I will be ready to begin the breakthrough to the Green Soul Realm within the month," Bai Meizhen replied as she sat down at the table across from Ling Qi, expression drawn and tired. "Has anything of interest occurred while I was secluded?"

Ling Qi considered the last few days, thoughtfully chewing on a bite of well-roasted fish.

"Well... Ji Rong apparently got in a fight with that Xuan guy. He ended up frozen in place up by the archives. He's still up there." Ling Qi actually felt a little bad passing him every day. Was he aware when he was like that? "Xuan asked me to say hello actually," she added. That request was kind of strange in hindsight.

Bai Meizhen's expression grew puzzled. "Odd. Xuan Shi has never been particularly aggressive."

"Do you know him?" Ling Qi asked curiously.

Bai Meizhen made a dismissive gesture. "Not as such. I met him a few times as a child. There were some talks of a betrothal, but it never bore fruit. Neither the Bai nor the Xuan could agree on the details," she explained matter-of-factly.

Ling Qi's eye twitched, and her threat estimation of Xuan Shi rose a notch given that the Xuan family could apparently bargain at least somewhat equally with her housemate's family. Sometimes, she wished she had better knowledge of her peers, but she didn't have time for that sort of comprehensive education right now.

"Right. Why don't I get you some tea? You look like you need it." Bai Meizhen's eyelids were drooping, but Ling Qi still wanted to talk to her.

Bai Meizhen blinked in surprise. "Would you? That would be most appreciated." Her cool voice was touched with gratitude. "Thank you, Ling Qi."

Ling Qi nodded, pushing the scraps of her meal aside to head to the kitchen. She would make enough for both of them. Even if the tea didn't benefit her anymore, she had come to enjoy the taste of it. It had a certain spice that just perked her right back up even when she was tired. Several minutes later, she returned with a pair of steaming cups in hand and set one in front of Bai Meizhen, who offered her a tiny smile before taking a sip.

Bai Meizhen didn't quite sigh in relief, but Ling Qi nonetheless saw the way her stiff, tired posture eased slightly. Ling Qi took a tiny sip herself, enjoying the warmth of the tea.

"Do you think I'm strong enough to help you yet?" Ling Qi asked. "I'd like to think that I kept my promise on not taking too long," Ling Qi added with her best try at a teasing smile. It probably wasn't very good; she wasn't Gu Xiulan after all.

Bai Meizhen looked up from her cup as Cui peeked out of the collar of her gown to steal a sip of her tea. The pale girl shot her cousin a reproving look and shifted the cup out of reach in response.

"I think so, yes," Bai Meizhen responded slowly, the fatigue she had shown fading. "You held up well enough against those ruffians, and that was before your breakthroughs. You have become quite strong."

Ling Qi looked away, feeling awkward at the praise, and fidgeted with a strand of her lengthened hair. "I still have a long way to go."

"As we all do," Bai Meizhen said with a hint of amusement. "Very well. In my initial survey of the mountain, I discovered a curious chamber deep in a hidden cavern. It was sealed by a pair of bronze doors engraved with fortifying formations. Sadly, even the surrounding walls proved to be fortified as well."

*'Rocks should not resist my venom,'* Cui interjected sulkily while staring at Bai Meizhen's cup.

"So it's probably another thing like the vent. A miniature test set up by the Elders?" Ling Qi asked thoughtfully. "What do you need my help with then?"

"The formations upon the door require the cooperation of two second realm cultivators to open," Bai Meizhen explained. She met Cui's longing gaze with her own and lowered the cup with a soft sigh, letting the tiny snake drink. "I expect whatever trials beyond the

door to reflect that.”

Ling Qi nodded in agreement. She had been curious what Bai Meizhen had wanted her help with. She was glad it wasn’t something more violent. “When do you want to go then?”

Bai Meizhen pursed her lips. “Nearer to dawn, I think, to preserve secrecy and give me some time to rest.”

“Oh, I had meant...” Ling Qi floundered. “You wanted to do it *tonight*?”

“Yes, if you are ready.” Bai Meizhen peered at her with slight curiosity. “Do you already have plans for the evening?”

“No, I was just surprised,” Ling Qi replied quickly. She had made the offer. She wasn’t going to back down now.

## Bonus 9: On Cultivation

The core of all cultivation is the transference and refinement of the fundamental energies of the world. To advance, a cultivator must take in external qi and through various methods purify or otherwise transform the energies to be compatible with their own bodies and spirits. Once this initial infusion of external qi has activated the cultivators own spiritual organs, it becomes possible to generate internal qi in small amounts. However, internal generation is useful only for replenishing and expanding the internal reservoir. In order to refine the body and spirit, or practice arts and techniques requires additional infusions of external qi.

Early cultivation methods, and indeed the ways practiced by the barbaric peoples outside of the empire, achieved this in various unpleasant fashions. The Cloud Tribes of the southern mountains for example, perform a barbaric rite in which young men and women have their souls fully merged with a partner beast, trading away some portion of their humanity identity to catalyze their internal energies with the strength of beasts. This self mutilation is among the more tame non-imperial methods.

The barbarians of the western jungle are much more foul. Ritually excising their own blood and flesh, these veritable beasts would invite evil spirits to inhabit the gaps left behind, and merge these entities with themselves, cultivating through further blood sacrifice and rites most vile. Distant tales of barbarians across the northern seas speak of men who devour one another for power, becoming soulless abominations of mutable flesh. There are more terrible ways such as these than even this scholar can count.

Pre-Imperial methods, the methods of our ancestors, were not typically so unpleasant, however they remain inferior. Most require entering into pacts with spirits and beasts through any number of methods, both exotic and mundane, but almost universally do so from a position of weakness rather than strength, placing them always under the thumb of non human entities. Even those who bargained from strength were forced into an unseemly reliance upon capricious forces.

These ways are inevitably deadly and unstable. They offer a route to power, this is true, and our most esteemed ancestors cannot be blamed for using them in the face of our deadly world when no better methods existed, but they cannot be condoned in the modern day. Though the occasional throwback might arise, swiftly accumulating power in these primitive methods on the back of great luck, one must not forget that for every success there will be a thousand dead or crippled in the attempt, and that is this scholar being somewhat generous with the numbers.

It is a hallmark of civilization that the imperial method, if practiced properly will never cripple or kill the user. The untalented may find themselves progressing slowly or not at all, but they will never find themselves choking on their own blood as their own qi turns against them and poisons their organs.

The core of the imperial method lies in the use of spirit stones. First discovered and put into use by the peoples of Celestial Peaks, the exact nature of spirit stones remain somewhat mysterious to this day. Unlike other minerals, there seems to be no logic to where veins of spirit stones appear. They are most prevalent in Celestial Peaks, but smaller veins occur throughout the empire and indeed expeditions into barbarian lands have turned up signs of their presence even there. Also, unlike other minerals, if not over harvested, spirit stone veins will replenish themselves over the course of decades.

There are many competing theories as to their origin; that they are the remains of the fallen Dragon Gods, that they are the milk of the Nameless Mother, rising from the earth to nourish her children, that they are the last vestiges of ascended beasts so ancient that they have become one with the land, etc. Speculating on the origins is not the purpose of this document however.

Spirit Stones contain a qi that was unique in all of nature at the time of their discovery. 'Pure' or 'Blank' qi which contains no trace of elemental or spiritual nature. Perfectly mutable, this qi may be used by any person, no matter their temperament or descent, no matter which elements they favor. Pure qi is able to transform into any other type, making it perfect for cultivation whether one is at the very beginning of their way, or nearing its peak. The use of pure qi to cultivate outstrips all other methods in both reliability and efficiency.

That is not to say that the cultivation of other types of qi is useless. Clans the empire over practice cultivation arts which refine environmental qi as a supplement. The more impressive arts even allow for the refinement of various types of qi back down into pure qi for use in cultivation, bypassing the need for spirit stones somewhat. However, it was only the use of spirit stones and generation upon generation of imperial study that allowed such arts to come into existence. In addition such arts are universally difficult to cultivate.

A certain degree of spiritual potency must be achieved before such refinement even becomes possible, let alone efficient. For the vast majority of the empire's cultivators, spirit stones remain the source of self improvement.

It should be warned however that attempting to cultivate pure qi itself is a mistake. It is largely impossible for those of lesser cultivation and attempting to maintain the purity of the qi after absorption will only slow and hinder if one is capable. However, over the

millenia some have performed trials in forcing the cultivation of pure qi. The results of these efforts have never been positive. For those who are already well advanced on the path of cultivation, the results are a damaged foundation and domain, or even losses in cultivation. For those in the lower realms, the results are more dire, typically involving mental degradation or even permanent catatonia.

This resulted in these efforts being banned by imperial decree under the reign of Emperor Wu of the Second dynasty...

-Excerpt from *On Cultivation*

# Chapter 49-Serpent's Treasure 1

A little more preparation for the potential trial might not go awry however.

Once Ling Qi finished her meal and her tea, she slipped out to pick up an extra dosage of healing salve and stored it away in her ring. The spatial ring remained her favorite talisman. The ability to simply store things away without care was incredibly useful. Ling Qi was careful to keep from the main roads and to keep an eye out for any potential watchers. She didn't much care for the idea of being followed by Huang Da again. She didn't see so much as a hair of him though. Eventually, she snuck off the beaten path, cutting through the scrubby woods on the lower mountain slope to reach the crossroads Bai Meizhen had asked her to meet at.

"Did anyone follow you?" Ling Qi asked as she stepped out from beneath the darkened eaves of the trees on the right side of the path. Bai Meizhen stood near the lone marker placed at the path's splitting point, her arms folded over her chest.

"Not that I am aware of." Bai Meizhen seemed to have no more trouble seeing in the dark than Ling Qi did going by the way her golden eyes tracked Ling Qi's movement. "There are few who would dare, and of those, fewer still who would opt for such tactics."

Ling Qi cast a wary gaze around. "Where are we going then?"

"The chamber lies near the base on the south side of the mountain," Bai Meizhen answered, turning to set off on the path leading in that direction.

"Opposite the entrance, huh," Ling Qi mused. She hadn't had any reason to look at that part of the mountain before. All the facilities were higher up; even the vent was closer to the peak. She followed Meizhen in companionable silence. She thought they made a visually interesting pair. Bai Meizhen's snowy white hair and skin along with her bone-colored robes made her stand out in the dark whereas Ling Qi was very much the opposite, a dark figure blending into the night's shadow.

Given that they were still on the path, it seemed like Bai Meizhen had no intention of actively sneaking anywhere. "Bai Meizhen, do you mind giving me some advice?"

Her friend glanced over at her without slowing her pace. "I suppose not. What troubles you?"

"It's just... Now that I've broken through to the second realm, I'm unsure as to how I should proceed with my cultivation going into the third," Ling Qi admitted. "Do you have



any tips? Anything in particular I should do?"

Bai Meizhen hummed thoughtfully, hands clasped loosely behind her back as they began to descend the increasingly steep and rough path. "Each person's Path is different, of course, but I suppose there are a handful of commonalities. Your qi pool is impressive given your current level, but I would suggest expanding it significantly before entering the third. Half again as large as what you have now - at the very least."

"How do you know how much qi I have?" Ling Qi asked, filing away the information. "Is it something to do with how Cai Renxiang could tell I had broken through?"

Bai Meizhen gave her an unhappy look, and Ling Qi abruptly realized that she had interrupted the other girl. She still felt a thread of fear at the powerful girl's disapproval, but it didn't reach her face. She dipped her head in apology.

"My perception art grants me such sight. You have seven meridians in use, two of which are devoted to wind, one to water, and the rest to darkness. You should be careful not to unbalance yourself toward a single element so much," Bai Meizhen answered Ling Qi's query. "I assume Cai Renxiang has a similar art. Such things are hardly unknown."

"Guess I won't be able to do the same then," Ling Qi responded, feeling put out. She would have liked to be able to get such detail about her enemies.

"Returning to the original query," Bai Meizhen continued with a disapproving huff. "I can only suggest that you diversify your arts further. I have mastered four arts to the limit of my cultivation and four others to a lesser extent in the interest of utility and a well rounded skill set."

Ling Qi had been thinking much the same. Her current techniques were good, but she could do to have more options than simply playing her flute or throwing knives.

"What do you mean about unbalancing? Gu Xiulan uses nothing but fire, and she seems fine."

"Does she now?" Bai Meizhen asked tartly, a hint of arrogant condescension returning to her tone. "Tell me, does she lose her temper easily? Pursue her passions with far more than appropriate intensity?"

Ling Qi fiddled with a strand of her hair. "Sometimes," she admitted. "But she is not as bad as you make it sound." Ling Qi felt the need to defend her other friend.

"I did not say that she was. Some clans choose to accept the... quirks that come with

such specialization. For the Bai, we focus our arts around water, darkness, and the more yin-aligned aspects of wood. It is best to use at least three elements in abundance in order to keep a degree of personal balance.”

“I see,” Ling Qi murmured. “Is that...?”

Bai Meizhen raised her hand for silence as they reached the end of the path proper. There was only a narrow, crumbling cliffside ahead and dark trees below.

“We may continue this discussion later,” Bai Meizhen said. “For now, let us concentrate on the path. The way ahead is treacherous.”

Ling Qi straightened up and nodded. Time to focus on the task at hand; she could consider the advice Bai Meizhen had given later. The two of them descended the cliff carefully via a narrow ledge barely wide enough to walk one at a time. Ling Qi was certain that were she still a mortal, she would have slipped several times or fallen when a bit of stone crumbled under her feet, but as she was, descending was easy enough. What came after was far more difficult. Despite the fact that the darkness was no hindrance to her, the paths through the thick trees and undergrowth seemed to shift slightly each time she blinked, and the hairs on the back of her neck rose with the feeling of being watched. Bai Meizhen lead on confidently, unaffected by the twisting of perceptions. Several times, Ling Qi almost lost sight of her companion only to be guided back by Meizhen taking her hand in her own, seeming to simply melt out of the twisted landscape from nowhere.

She needed to work on her ability to resist such illusions, Ling Qi thought. She wouldn't always have Bai Meizhen with her. Perhaps she could ask later what a good method for training her perception would be.

In any case, that was what lead her to walk hand in hand with the pale girl by the time they reached the wide mouth of the cave her companion had mentioned. Unlike the crevices that she had seen up to now, this opening was a yawning hole in the side of the mountain twice her height and nearly eight meters across. Ling Qi took one last glance over her shoulder at the twisted forest but now, it only showed a normal nighttime scene.

Wordlessly, the two of them descended into the cave, following the shallow, sloping tunnel down into the lightless underground. She could hear the distant dripping of water, and her breath came out in wisps of steam as the air grew cool and moist.

Her grip on Meizhen's hand tightened as they reached another chamber, the simple beauty of it stealing her breath away. Her night vision was colorless, but the elegant natural artistry of growing stone was a sight to see. The ceiling was a honeycomb of

free hanging and joined stone growths, and many twisting and smooth pillars of rock rose from the damp floor. This place was alive, and the qi in the air was thick and cloying.

Meizhen didn't pause save to cast a brief look Ling Qi's way before tugging on her hand. She thought she saw the other girl's lips quirk upward in amusement though. Ling Qi flushed; she must have been gaping like a fool. She hurried to follow her companion across the rounded stones that formed a path across the small, still lake in the center of the cavern.

They left the beautiful cavern behind, taking another exit down a narrower and steeper tunnel, which soon opened into a much more unassuming round chamber. A pair of great bronze gates were set in the far wall, coiling dragons carved along the edges. There were four indents, two on each door in the shape of spread human hands, each pair surrounded by a complex circle of characters.

She supposed that explained why Cui couldn't do this for Meizhen.

"I do not know what lies beyond," Bai Meizhen said, finally breaking the silence between them as she released Ling Qi's hand and stepped toward the door. She saw Cui slither down to the floor from under the hem of Meizhen's gown, growing larger with each passing second. "The door requires that we activate each pair at the same moment. It is simple enough, but be prepared for the unexpected."

Ling Qi nodded cautiously, stepping up to the door alongside Bai Meizhen. "Alright, let's do this." This would be easier with arm meridians, but presumably Meizhen would have mentioned if that was needed. She could still direct qi into the structure in front of her. She hoped she was ready for this.

"So, on a three count?" Ling Qi asked, placing her hands in the cold metal indentations.

Bai Meizhen nodded, Cui now at full size and coiled around her feet. "That would be appropriate, I think." Ling Qi could see the eagerness in the girl's golden eyes, their glow making them the sole spots of color in her vision. "Three..."

"Two," Ling Qi murmured in time with her, steeling her nerves.

"One," they said together, and as one, they pushed their qi outward, the vast, cold pressure of Meizhen's energy erupting beside her as her own less obtrusive qi awoke. As Ling Qi exhaled, a thin stream of blue-black misty energy enveloped her hands.

The doors lit up, a dozen characters then a hundred and then two hundred making themselves known on the mirror sheen of the doors. Ling Qi shuddered as she felt her qi connect to something vast and aware. She felt the crushing, impossible weight of its attention, a mountain pressing down on her shoulders, bowing her knees from the weight.

She had an instant to see Bai Meizhen's shoulders shaking from the pressure, expression drawn into one of defiant determination, before darkness consumed Ling Qi's vision.

## Chapter 50 - Serpent's Treasure 2

There was a brief, strange floating sensation, and then, Ling Qi found herself swaying on her feet and standing on uneven stone. She blinked blearily, catching her balance on the nearby wall. She felt a surge of panic as she realized that Meizhen was no longer beside her and a further one when she peered down at the floor below from the ledge she stood on.

The floor writhed.

Ling Qi was on a narrow ledge halfway up the wall of a narrow cavern, although the cavern was more like a small chasm given its length and width. Below her, there was a veritable swarm of squirming life. Centipedes and other vermin crawled over one another, a susurrus of creeping legs. Some were as small as the ones she had seen as a mortal while others were as wide as her wrist and as long as her arm with wickedly sharp mandibles. The creeping things swarmed over the remains of some massive beast that lay at the bottom. She could see four limbs and a long body, including a sinuous tail, but little else under the carpet of insects. At the far end of the chasm, beyond what she thought to be the creature's head, was a wide cave mouth leading out and down.

Her eyes were drawn upward then to the loud sizzling that had caught her ear over the sound of the vermin below. There was another opening on the ceiling, rough and circular but wide enough for her to climb through. It dripped wetly with some kind of viscous substance.

Ling Qi fought to keep her breathing and nerves under control and consider what she should do. This... The elders were aware of most things on the mountain. Even if this were real, it was likely another test. She should try to find Meizhen obviously, but she had no leads on how to do that. What now?

Meizhen had a real sensory art after all. If she stayed in one place, the other girl would probably find her. But Ling Qi wasn't sure she was comfortable passively waiting for Meizhen to discover her. She had come to help, not to be rescued.

There were two exits, one going up and the other going down. On the one hand, despite her revulsion at the sheer number of insects below, the corpse they were swarming over was very large. A spirit beast that huge... Wouldn't its core be incredibly valuable if it still existed? On the other hand, wading through tens of thousands of hungry biting

insects didn't appeal. Ling Qi might not be afraid of such things precisely, but well, who wanted to do that?

Ling Qi took a deep breath and stepped to the side, making sure she was well out of the way of anything dripping from above. It would be foolish to ignore good fortune like this. Even if the core was gone, other parts of a spirit beast were valuable too, and with her storage ring, she didn't have to worry about the weight as much as she otherwise might. To that end, she did a little rearranging of her storage ring to free up space. She tucked her qi cards under her sash and put a handful of spirit stones into her pockets.

Finally, she drew her flute and prepared to play. Hopefully, she only had to handle the vermin she could see down there and not anything larger. Ling Qi began to play, and the mist rolled out, spilling down over the edge of the ledge in a cloudy waterfall, expanding to fill the chasm around her. At first, the insects did not even react as they were engulfed, paying little mind to the noise and increase in moisture, so focused were they on their feast. That was fine. Ling Qi was glad that she could get right on to the second part.

She played the first high haunting notes of Dissonance, and her lungs burned with qi as the mist below became a veritable sea of black. The sheer number of targets left her feeling strained, but it didn't stop her. Taking the shape of a plague of insubstantial rats, the teeth and claws of her mist constructs tore into the swarm. Thousands of the insects died instantly, and the sound of crunching chitin almost overwhelmed the high-pitched shrieks of the larger insects, the biggest of which lashed out mindlessly, biting and clawing at the mist even as her qi-fueled attacks sparked uselessly off of their thick chitin.

That, however, wasn't a problem. There were only a handful that could withstand her mist constructs like that. The other larger insects thrashed around with cracked shells and chittering hisses. Time would take care of most of them. Ling Qi felt no real worry as she bounded down from the ledge. The corpses of insects crunched under her feet, she would have grimaced if her flute wasn't in the way. She was confident she could stay hidden in the mist and away from the attention of the still-living creatures.

Sure enough, her footsteps grew silent, even as she rushed over the carpet of dead bugs. More died every moment as she brought them within range of her mist. With many of the vermin covering the reptilian corpse dying, she was finally able to get a better look at the creature the vermin had been devouring.

It wasn't a pretty sight. The scent of rot nearly made her gag up close, and she could see great piles of sloughed off gray scales. The corpse was perhaps twenty meters

long, not including the tail curled up well outside of her mist, with stretches of rotting muscle and exposed bone. It had four clawed limbs and a thick, squat body. Ahead of her in the mist, she could see its almost skinless skull, an unsettling reptilian thing with a boxy snout and fangs half as long as her forearm.

Most unsettling though was the way the creature's corpse pulsed with scabrous life. Even as she watched, more of the biting, snapping insects emerged from its rotting flesh, only to turn and begin devouring that same muscle and sinew in the moments before her mist constructs tore them apart. After the initial surprise, even the bigger ones had returned to feasting, ignoring the shadows nipping at their shells.

Ling Qi needed to figure out where its core would be. A core was essentially a spirit beast's dantian, so it should be... somewhere in the abdomen? She was going to have to stop playing to grab the core so she really hoped rotting spirit gunk was washable too. There was little to do but store her flute away, find a patch of exposed rib, and start digging. It was difficult to hold down her dinner as she drew a knife and began cutting her way in, releasing some kind of smelly gas as she punctured something or another. It was made worse by the way the carcass continued to birth more vermin. She tried very hard not to look too closely at what she was digging through. The flesh seemed to writhe under her hands, fighting back at her efforts to dig through it, almost as if the rotting meat was regenerating somehow.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, whatever had killed the beast had torn its belly open, thus making her job easier. Otherwise, she would never have been able to finish her search before the mist fully faded. Unfortunately, this also meant that her aspirations of a full beast core were unfulfilled. Whatever had slain the spirit had broken the crystalline sphere in its gut into pieces; she had to settle for fragments of warm, dull gray tissue. It felt like soft clay, but she could still feel fairly strong qi even from the fragments.

Hastily stowing away the bloody and viscera-coated chunks of material in her ring, Ling Qi rushed toward the exit and away from the much reduced swarm of vermin. She slowed briefly when she passed the creature's skull, reaching down to scoop a handful of fallen fangs and scales into her ring as she ran out of the dissipating mist.

It seemed her caution was unnecessary. The screeching swarm did not follow her or even seem to notice her passing as it turned back to its feast. She had an unsettling feeling that the corpse had been there for a very long time given the way the rot-slick guts and muscle had seemed to slowly recover in the wake of her digging.

Ling Qi slowed from a dash to a quick walk, sticking close to the wall in the downsloping tunnel. Slowly, the pounding of her heart returned to more normal levels. That had gone

as well as she had any right to expect.

She passed several minutes steadily walking down the round tunnel; it seemed strangely symmetrical to her eye, more like a tube than a tunnel. The rock on all sides was smooth and rippled as if it had melted and then been left to harden again. At least it wasn't cramped. She kept alert as she walked, wishing that there was some form of cover for her to sneak behind.

Eventually, the tunnel flattened out and opened up into a much larger space. Here, the ceiling was dozens of meters above her head, and the walls extended a good fifty or sixty meters across. Ahead of her lay a great pit as wide as the tunnel she was in now. She couldn't see the bottom from where she stood.

Gingerly working her way around the lip of the pit, she peered further into the room. It was shaped vaguely like a huge bowl with a pool of what looked like liquid silver in the center. Its perfectly still surface gleamed in her vision. The walls of the pit were riddled with small tunnels, some a few meters across and others barely wide enough for Ling Qi to fit an arm into, and thick veins of what she thought were some kind of metallic ore. The floor was uneven, seemingly carved through by a thousand channels like irrigation ditches in the stone.

Most importantly though, Ling Qi saw Bai Meizhen sitting beside the odd pool.



## Chapter 51 - Serpent's Treasure 3

Bai Meizhen looked somewhat scuffed, her snow white gown dirtied at the hem, but otherwise, none the worse for the wear. She looked up as Ling Qi began to pick her way across the room.

"Ling Qi," she greeted, rising to her feet in a single graceful movement. "I am glad to see you well. I did not expect to be separated."

Ling Qi felt relief as she approached her friend. She had been hoping that they hadn't been sent to entirely separate places. She glanced at her hands, which were still covered in filth, and grimaced.

"Yeah, I didn't end up in the best situation." She came to a stop a short distance away from her friend and the shore. "Where is Cui? Is she alright?"

Meizhen paused before responding. "She was wounded in my initial encounter; I am letting her rest in my dantian. It is of no concern," she replied dismissively, turning her eyes away to peer around the cavern. "There is a door on the other side, but I believe this pool holds something of use. I suggest we investigate it first." Meizhen gestured for Ling Qi to come examine it.

Ling Qi took a few steps forward then stopped. "Do you need some healing salve for her?" she asked, eyeing Bai Meizhen in confusion. "I would have thought you had some, but..."

"Perhaps later," the pale girl replied. "For now, it is more important that we puzzle this pool out so that we may leave this place. I fear the creatures that dug these tunnels may return."

The idea made sense, but something wasn't right. If it were anyone else, even Ling Qi or herself, she could imagine Bai Meizhen dismissing a bit of hurt in favor of pursuing a goal... but not for Cui and not so easily. Bai Meizhen was not very expressive, but she couldn't imagine the girl would truly look so unconcerned about her cousin being hurt.

A knife slipped surreptitiously into her hand. "I think it's more important that we help Cui first. Why don't you bring her out?"

Bai Meizhen scowled at her, studying her face as if deliberating on something. Then she lunged.

Ling Qi's eyes widened and she backpedaled. Her face paled as Bai Meizhen's face tore in half like it was made of wet paper with a terrible ripping sound. It exposed a maw filled with sharp twitching mandibles, overshadowed by the much larger ones that erupted from where Meizhen's cheeks had been. Ling Qi ducked under the snapping sword-length mandibles and leapt back, gaining distance from the Meizhen thing.

The lake rippled as thrashing, chitinous coils emerged carried on dozens of clattering legs. The thing's mask - and she hoped to every great spirit she could name that a mask was all it was - now hung in two limp halves from either side of its wide upper body. The 'hood' of chitin formed something that looked like a half-melted human face above its chittering mouth, and dark eye sockets burned with emerald fire.

*'The little ape just had to have its questions,'* the thing's voice hissed in her mind, making her feel as if bugs were crawling over her skin. *"Can't it see how hungry we are? Hold still, little ape, and it will be over quickly as it was for the other."* The thing's statement was punctuated by half of 'Meizhen' falling to the shore with a meaty thud and slowly dissolving into black sludge.

"Like I'd buy that," Ling Qi snapped. "Meizhen would destroy you." Ling Qi was confident in her assessment despite the thing's horrifying appearance. The thing's body was thicker than her torso and several times longer, and she had a feeling it was very fast for its size. Even as she backed up, a wicked spike of a stinger at the end of its body was emerging from the pool.

"How about this? You leave me alone and I won't kill you like I did the rest of the bugs down here!" Ling Qi bluffed.

The thing hissed, and Ling Qi shuddered at the fury in its mental voice. *'So that is the scent...'* It raised its body higher, towering over her. *"You will replace them soon enough. We will offer your bones and skin to the Father-Mother!"* Some kind of disgusting, sticky black fluid dripped from its maw to sizzle on the stone.

Well, she didn't really think that would work. Ling Qi needed to figure out what her plan was though. She had fifteen meters of starting distance from the thing, which left her a good twenty five meters from any of the walls.

Ling Qi's flute appeared in her hand, and she began to play as she kicked off the ground, jumping backwards and away from the monster as the mists began to roll forth. Ling Qi mingled the melodies and strengthened the outflow of her qi, thickening the mist around the grotesque spirit to confuse its senses.

*'We will not let the little ape run!'* The thing's chittering voice scratched at her mind as it surged forward, dozens of legs clattering on the stone, her qi sliding off it like water from a duck's feathers. Rather than charge into melee though, it reared its head back, that awful maw gaping wide and spraying a gush of inky black gunk that stunk of rot at her.

Time seemed to slow as she traced the arc of the spray and determined that she wouldn't be able to move in time, even with her darkness-enhanced speed. Her qi surged, cool sable energy flooding her limbs, and she flickered, the gunk passing through where she had been standing, then dodged to the right to avoid the slick. It was still close. Her foot caught the edge of the gooey liquid, and she nearly tripped as she felt the thong of her sandal tear under the pressure of her continued movement, leaving her footwear behind, glued to the floor.

She turned the stumble into a graceful spin away from the spirit as she continued to play, making another attempt at entrapping the thing in her mist. This time, she felt her qi take hold, and the worm let out a chittering screech of frustration as the mist thickened around it, muffling its senses and causing the music to seem to echo from seemingly everywhere at once.

*'Wretched, darting creature,'* it hissed, coiling in place and peering into the mist. Emerald eyes flared with fell light. *'No escape from us!'*

The entire, monstrous thing crouched and then leapt toward her, mandibles extended. Ling Qi wove out of the way as the creature crashed down against the floor with stone-cracking force, her melody never faltering. Despite being close enough for the wind of its passage to send her dress and hair fluttering, she remained calm thanks to the weekly combat practice with Han Jian's group. She knew that interrupting her song would likely spell the end for her. She could not afford that so she ran, darting away to hide in the mist.

The skittering horror righted itself as she vanished into the mist, its mandibles snapping together in frustration. It raised its head, scenting the air as it scuttled in a circle, searching for her while its chittering took on a higher pitch. Ling Qi was hidden for the moment though, which meant she was free to change her song, adding the threatening notes of Dissonance to the melody.

The creature shrieked in surprise and fury as shapes formed in the mist around it and struck, phantom claws scoring lines across its chitin. The worm's retaliation struck only air and mist, dispersing the construct, but it was useless as other phantoms continued to form and attack. Ling Qi felt a savage satisfaction as she watched the thing thrash

and suffer. It curled in on itself as she circled it at a distance, protecting its more vulnerable parts from attack, but it seemed that the creature wasn't out of tricks yet.

'We can feel you, ape,' the thing hissed. *'Its steps on stone, the beats of its heart, the rush of its blood. No more HIDING!'* Ling Qi winced as the voice in her head rose to an ear-splitting screech. The worm's eyes burned, giving off a haze of qi as it swung its upper body around and fixated on her, charging headlong toward her.

Still, she had given herself space, enough for one more melody to add to her song. Her fingers danced over the holes in her flute, and she began to play its elegy. Ling Qi had been hoping to conserve qi, but she would rather ensure that this thing bled out with as little chance of harming her as was possible. Ling Qi avoided the shower of disgusting fluid that sprayed from its maw with near contemptuous ease even as Crescent's Grace faded entirely. She circled away, still playing as her constructs continued their assault, cracking and scoring chitin where they struck.

The fight entered a death spiral from there, the increasingly incoherent worm spasming under the constant assaults as she continued to play keep away with it. Its limbs began to grow sluggish in their movements, and its attacks slowed while greenish-yellow ichor began to leak from cracks in its joints and shell. It cursed and railed against her, but even when she began to hear fear in its mental voice, she didn't let up and she didn't let it escape. This thing had worn her friend's face and threatened to eat her; she had no mercy for it.

As it finally collapsed to the ground with a crash, she kept playing, allowing her constructs to continue striking it as it twitched and spasmed on the ground, letting out gurgling cries as its ichor pooled beneath it. Even when it stopped moving entirely, she didn't stop for nearly a minute. Eventually, she lowered her flute, allowing the melody to fade as she flicked a knife into her hand and cautiously approached.

She wasn't a fool. The knife flew before she closed within ten meters, burying itself in one of the creature's now dull eye sockets. It didn't so much as twitch. Ling Qi finally allowed herself to relax, approaching and ripping her knife free. She studied the thing's corpse, and soon saw what she was looking for, a wide crack on its lower body, torn wide by a dozen attacks, glittered with light.

She grimaced as she used her knife to pry its exoskeleton open further and rolled up her sleeve before plunging her hand into its foul innards. Her hand came back clutching a core the size of a child's fist but also covered in truly foul-smelling goo.

Disgusted, she slipped the core into storage, keeping her flute in her hand for the

moment. She glanced at the still, silver pool in the dissipating mist. Ling Qi wanted to wash her hand clean, but she was leery of touching the silver liquid. She was also miffed to find that her sandal was irrecoverable, leaving her with one foot bare.

On the one hand, the pool might have something useful within it or was useful in and of itself. On the other hand, the worm had been trying to get her to examine it so it could be a trap. On further investigation, the face-stealing creature's claim of a door did turn out to be true. It was a blocky, ominous-looking thing of black stone with sharp, seemingly dangerous characters carved on it that she didn't recognize.

Ling Qi let out a weary breath. She'd have to choose which one to investigate first.

## Chapter 52 - Serpent's Treasure 4

Ling Qi glanced at the door set in the far wall and then to the silvery pool. While the pool might be a trap, she thought it more likely that the worm had simply been trying to get her close enough to strike by surprise. Leaving behind the increasingly smelly corpse of her foe, she walked back toward the pool to examine it, trying to ignore the warm, sticky chunks of bug viscera stuck to her right hand.

The pool was perfectly still again like the surface of a mirror. Her reflection stared back at her from the pool, expression wary and hair frizzy and wild. The faintly ridiculous thought that she really needed to figure out what she was going to do with it crossed her mind. She slowly paced around the pool, examining the shore because whatever liquid filled it was opaque, preventing her from seeing the bottom. As she studied it, she idly popped a qi restoring pill into her mouth, enjoying the feeling of relief as she bit down and her reduced qi pool began to refill.

Reaching down, she scooped up a pebble from the ground and tossed it in, watching as the liquid rippled once before stilling again. There was no other reaction. Ling Qi was still wary of touching the liquid herself though. She had a feeling that there was something more to this pool so she continued circling, looking for anything of interest.

After a few more rotations of the pool, something caught her eye. What she had first taken to be simply indentations in the stone where the edge of the pool lapped seemed a little too uniform. She crouched down, keeping a wary eye on the water, to examine the indentations more closely. Sure enough, she found that the marks were actually characters scratched shallowly into the rock. This one meant something like...

"Obscure," or perhaps "Blind," depending on how it was interpreted in context. There were characters ninety degrees to the left and right, as well as one directly across from the first character and linking characters in between the cardinal characters. The others were "Sleep," "Human," and "Stillness" from what she could tell.

Well, she definitely didn't want to touch the pool now - at least not until she figured out how to disable the formation. Ling Qi wracked her memory for Elder Su's lessons. There had been something in there about removing formations without activating them.

If she recalled correctly, there were certain parts of the connecting characters she could safely break. She bit her lip and hesitantly scratched out one of the characters with her knife. There was a spark of qi and the water rippled, but no other sign appeared. Feeling a little more confident, she moved on to the next character that should be safe to remove and then the next. The air gradually filled with an odd static that put her hair

on end.

She had to finish at this point, the energy in the broken array was started to go wild. However, it seemed she still had more to learn about disabling formation traps. When she moved to the section between the third and fourth characters and began to hurriedly scratch out another linking character, the whole section lit up fiercely. A painful buzzing filled her ears and it flashed blindingly bright.

Ling Qi fell back with a pained yelp, shielding her face with her hands as she was shoved along the stone nearly a meter by the force of the qi shockwave. Luckily, she had enough presence of mind to let her own qi absorb the explosive pummeling. There was something else to the blast though; she felt oddly lethargic, as if she had weights strapped to her limbs, dragging her down. It only lasted for a moment however.

Ling Qi grimaced and sat back up, rubbing the back of her head and giving the pool a wary look. The knife she had been using was little more than a hilt with a jagged bit of metal sticking out of it now. Explosion aside, it looked like she had accomplished her goal. The pool was now no more than an unusually uniform pool of water rippling naturally with the aftereffects of the wave that had struck her. She could see something shining at the bottom.

Grumbling, Ling Qi peered around the room to see if the concussive sound had drawn anything to her, but the cavern was quiet. She returned to the edge of the pool and peered in once she was confident that she was still alone. At the bottom was a small silver box, the size of a lady's jewelry case, its sides and lid plain and unadorned. She glanced at the formation circle, but the characters were gone, vanished with the outburst of energy.

A tentative finger poke revealed cool water and nothing more. After a moment of indecision, Ling Qi waded into the hip-deep water to get her prize, pausing only to clean her hands. The attempt at breaking the formation hadn't been ideal, but hopefully, this prize would be worth it. Examining the box revealed no further formations so she carefully picked it up and returned to the shore, scowling a bit as the fabric of her dress clung wetly to her legs. Her eyes lit up when she opened the case, revealing a single jade slip lying in the somehow perfectly dry velvet lining of the box. She hastily plucked it out and pushed a spark of qi into the jade to read the contents.

Ling Qi blinked as information regarding an Argent Mirror art flowed into her mind. A Sect technique. She supposed that confirmed her thoughts that this was a deliberate trial. The jade slip had definitely been worth braving the trap, even if it had been a little

rough at the end.

As the sound of stone grinding against stone and draining water reached her ears and vibrations rumbled through her feet, she tensed and looked up from the jade slip. The pool was draining down a steadily opening gap in the bottom and rushing down a slowly revealed stone stairwell. Another glance showed the stone on either side of the basalt door pushing outward to cover it.

She cursed under her breath and rushed toward the door, but by the time she reached it, there was only a smooth expanse of stone. It seemed that she could only take one path. She hadn't even considered that the pool would be a path of its own. It was too late to regret things now. Best to keep moving forward.

She put the jade slip into her storage ring, drawing out her remaining restorative pills to put in a pocket for easier use. Ling Qi shook her head. Just a few weeks ago, she had been so excited by the idea of a storage ring and what could be done with it, and already, she was wishing for one with more space.

She could be a pretty greedy girl, Ling Qi thought ruefully as she turned back to the newly opened stairwell. As she reached the edge of the damp bowl where the pool had been, she glanced down at her feet and with an irritated sigh, kicked her remaining sandal off. She would just have to get some actual shoes when she got out of here, but for now, her partial footwear would mess with her balance. Besides, it wasn't like a pair of flimsy mundane sandals protected her feet from anything at this point.

The stairwell was damp and unpleasant, water dripping on her head from above and cold air making her breath come out in puffs of frost, but Ling Qi continued on, keeping a hand on the wall for balance as she traversed the water-slicked stairs. She wasn't sure how long she spent traveling downward, but eventually, the narrow path opened up into another huge chamber.

Ling Qi winced as the light from the new cavern stung her eyes. The ceiling was lower here, a mere twenty meters overhead, and the chamber was filled with pillars of stone, making it difficult to see how large the place was. It was, however, well-lit with glowing veins that pulsed like the beating of a heart. The veins wound through the pillars and ceiling, coming together in nodes of crystalline growth where three or more of them intersected.

The cavern was also inhabited. Overhead, she saw scores of grey-winged moths fluttering about, each one with wings as wide as a pair of spread hands. Glitter floated in



the air in the wake of their wings. They had odd, faintly luminescent dark blue markings on their wings, as well as prominent feathery antennae and seemed to be congregating on the crystal growth.

They weren't the only creatures here. Even as she examined her surroundings, she caught sight of a dark shape the size of a large dog swooping out of the darkness to snatch a moth that had strayed too far out of the light. It was a rather massive bat with jet black fur and prominent bony ridges growing along its spine and ribs.

Ling Qi considered her best path while keeping an eye out warily and eventually decided to head toward the sound of falling water she heard from further ahead. The denizens of this cavern didn't seem hostile; the moths paid her no mind, and although she caught the sounds of bats fluttering overhead, they didn't seem interested in her either. She continued to walk under the faint light of the glowing veins, and the sound of running water grew louder and louder until she finally emerged from the forest of pillars. She found herself looking up at a ten meter high cliff from which a wide waterfall poured into a churning pool below, which, in turn, flowed into a narrow stream that curved off into the distance to her right.

There was a figure in white crouched in front of the waterfall, partially concealed by the rising mist. She appeared to be in the process of washing some rather familiar-looking black gunk from her hair. Ling Qi came up short, stopping at the side of a pillar to examine the scene critically. She hadn't forgotten the mimic worm and its abilities. Her eyes caught on the gleam of emerald scales though as Cui slithered out of the water to coil up at the figure's side.

That made it more likely it was the real Meizhen, but Ling Qi still hesitated. It didn't do her much good though as Meizhen turned around, white hair clinging to her neck and shoulders. Ling Qi shivered at the girl's cold and expressionless face, feeling the telltale wave of unease that her friend's attention brought.

They stared at each other from across the expanse of the cavern, and Ling Qi shifted from foot to foot nervously. Bai Meizhen, if it really was her, did not look friendly.

"I'm guessing you ran into a mimic worm too? Mine was pretty bad at pretending to be you," Ling Qi said, breaking the silence. Her voice trailed off weakly by the end.

Looking more closely, Bai Meizhen's eyes seemed slightly red. Had her mimic worm have some kind of blinding attack? Ling Qi felt uneasy at the continued silence.

"How am I to know if you are truly Ling Qi?" Bai Meizhen's cold voice asked, her tone

clipped and unfriendly. "I have no time for further petty deceptions."

Ling Qi paused. She was almost certain this was the real Meizhen, but how to prove her own identity? Remembering that the worm had lacked Meizhen's particular aura gave her an idea of how to prove her identity.

"I could play for you," Ling Qi proposed carefully. "If I call my mist, will that set you at ease?" Apparently, the worm's mimicry was able to fool even her friend's superior senses. If the worm's abilities were so focused on deception, that might explain why it was relatively weak in direct combat.

Bai Meizhen considered this even as Cui slithered into a loose coil around her feet, head raised to stare down Ling Qi.

"Very well. Do so," Meizhen commanded, staring at her with hard eyes.

Ling Qi nodded and let out a quiet breath she hadn't noticed she was holding. She raised her flute to her lips, keeping her eyes on Meizhen as she began to play the melody of the vale. As her qi flowed into the music and the mist billowed outward, she tentatively included Meizhen in it as well. Despite the additional cost to include someone in the mist as an ally, Ling Qi didn't want to alarm Meizhen into thinking it was an attack given how on edge the pale girl was.

As the mist engulfed them, dulling the sound of the outside world, she thought she saw Meizhen relax fractionally, some tension leaving her expression although the girl remained mostly closed off.

"... I see," Meizhen said quietly, finally shifting her gaze from Ling Qi to glance at the mist around them. "It seems that you are real this time. That is a relief. Putting down more vermin would have been tiresome."

Ling Qi lowered her flute, letting the mist began to dissipate. "I wouldn't want to expend the qi to kill another one," Ling Qi agreed. "Are you alright? It didn't hurt you, did it?"

Meizhen's lips twitched, but her expression remained unreadable.

"No, I suffered no significant wounds," Meizhen answered evenly, crossing her arms as she examined Ling Qi before looking away toward the waterfall. "I see you did not either. We should proceed. The passage above leads to the lair of an Elder Mountainroot Bat and its brood. It is the only way forward, assuming you came from the tunnel that I imagine you did."

Ling Qi frowned. Bai Meizhen was still not acting quite right. She didn't suspect Meizhen to be a mimic, especially since she could hear Cui's mumbled hissing about flying rats in her head, but she strongly suspected the other girl was agitated about something even with Meizhen's usually muted emotional cues. Normally, she wouldn't consider prying, but something in her friend's studied non-expression and the redness in the girl's eyes worried her. Her first thought was that her friend had gotten an irritant in her eyes, but... as bizarre as it was to contemplate, had the other girl been crying?

Ling Qi was uncomfortable at trying to push the other girl into talking about it. She didn't exactly enjoy social confrontation, even if she had found herself slowly growing more perceptive about such things as she cultivated, picking up cues she would not have noticed a few months prior.

"Are you certain you are well?" Meizhen asked impatiently, turning back to her. Ling Qi realized she had been staring for some time.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ling Qi said slowly, mind racing as she tried to think of a feasible-sounding excuse to spin out. "It's just - I was thinking that maybe we should talk about what we encountered before in case we get separated and it comes up again."

Bai Meizhen's expression soured, and Ling Qi caught Cui sneaking a glance up at Meizhen.

"I doubt it will be an issue," Meizhen said tightly. "It seems unlikely that these trials will use the same trick twice."

"Maybe, but it can't hurt, right?" Ling Qi pointed out, nervously forging on despite Meizhen's unhappy expression. "The worm mimicking you tried to get me to approach by asking me to examine a pool it was standing beside and hiding in. It didn't have Cui with it though, and it dismissed my questions about her by saying she was hurt. I knew it wasn't you because you wouldn't be so dismissive about your cousin being wounded."

Meizhen's lips were pressed together in a thin line, and her arms were crossed in front of her, concealing her hands in her sleeves.

"I see. The worm had, like yours, elected to set its trap near a body of water." Meizhen spoke in a clipped and clinical tone. "It chose to appear as your corpse and attacked when I approached to examine the scene."

Ling Qi winced. It seemed like Bai Meizhen's mimic had been smarter in its deception.

"I... don't suppose it talked about having killed me?" Ling Qi asked, piecing together the events in her head. "Mine said it had killed you, but that was too ridiculous to believe," she added wryly. It would be much more believable that someone weak like her had fallen.

*"Stupid bug had too many words,"* Cui grumbled, *"until Sister Meizhen made it scream."* The snake exuded smugness.

Bai Meizhen turned a frown to Cui, but Ling Qi thought there had been a flicker of something else in her expression before she had looked away from Ling Qi.

"The creature was quite talkative, yes," Meizhen agreed sourly. "And eager to gloat. Shall we move on?"

Ling Qi nodded absently, stalling for time as she tried to work out how to approach the next part carefully.

"Is that why you are so upset? Because you thought I was dead?" The words tumbled out before she could think too hard on them. Bai Meizhen usually appreciated her relative forthrightness so it seemed like the best path to getting her to talk.

Her friend stiffened in the process of turning away.

"No. A Bai does not lose composure over something as minor as the death of an ally. Do not inflate your own importance so," Meizhen said coldly without turning back around. "Now, are you coming or need I complete this challenge on my own?"

The air felt heavier, stained by the girl's abyssal qi. Ling Qi felt uncertain at how to proceed. It hurt to hear someone she regarded as her closest friend say something so cold. At the same time... the words felt false to her.

"I don't buy that. Don't just push me away and avoid the question," Ling Qi said bluntly to the girl's back. "I don't really get what the problem is. There's nothing wrong with being a little distraught when-

She flinched as Bai Meizhen whirled back to glare at her.

"I am not so weak as that! Do not imply such a thing again."

Ling Qi very nearly took a step back, but at the last moment, she set her shoulders and refused to back away from her friend despite the weight of qi pressing down on her and the thrill of fear that went down her spine. Instead, she glared right back, pushing back

the oppressive feeling of the other girl's qi with her own lighter energy, sending the hem of her gown fluttering in a phantom breeze.

"And I'd appreciate it if you didn't imply I was blind," Ling Qi snapped. "Do you really have so little respect for me, Bai Meizhen? I am your friend, not your servant. You've said that yourself. I'm not just going to stand here meekly and ignore it when I can tell that you're upset!"

The pale girl's golden eyes flashed, anger entering her blank expression. Before Meizhen could respond further though, the emerald coils at her feet shifted, and Cui let out a low, irritated hiss.

*"Sister Meizhen is being ridiculous. This is not the time for the mouse to bare her fangs either. Do they both forget where we are?"*

Ling Qi saw Meizhen flinch slightly at Cui's words, a flicker of something like self-loathing passing through her eyes so fast Ling Qi couldn't be sure she hadn't imagined it.

"Cui is right. This is not the time for this," Meizhen said stiffly, the oppressive feeling of her qi fading.

Ling Qi let out the breath she had been holding and nodded unhappily.

"...Yeah. I was being too pushy," Ling Qi replied quietly. "But I won't apologize for worrying about you."

Bai Meizhen was silent, expression unreadable, before turning back around, damp hair fluttering with the motion. "Let us move on," was her only reply, a clear shutdown of the topic.

## Chapter 53 - Serpent's Treasure 5

After their argument, Ling Qi followed Bai Meizhen silently up the steep path that lead to the top of the ridge, stewing on her thoughts. She had a feeling that she had poked something raw with her words, something that had been dredged up by the ambush the other girl had suffered and whatever words her mimic had spoken.

“Mountainroot Bats are known for their resilience and their habit of nesting in large broods.” Bai Meizhen’s calm and even voice reached her as they climbed the ridge. “They lack many of the more esoteric abilities that many species of bat spirits possess, but instead, they have very high physical power and durability for grade one beasts in addition to the agility and perceptive capability. The more powerful second grade specimens are capable of shattering stone with directed bursts of thunder qi.”

Ling Qi allowed her worries over the other girl’s state of mind to fade for now to focus on the upcoming fight.

“That sounds dangerous,” Ling Qi said. “Do you know how many are ahead?”

“At least a dozen lesser beasts,” Bai Meizhen replied as they reached the top of the waterfall. A wide gallery lay ahead, stretching hundreds of meters into the distance. “I am uncertain, however, if we are meant to simply bypass the creatures and find an exit or slay them all. I do not know the minds of the elders in this, but I imagine some hidden prize lies in the cavern ahead given the previous tests.”

Ling Qi eyed the cavern thoughtfully. There were many pillars and stalactites in the gallery ahead, and she could see a few fluttering shapes among them. There was also an eye-watering scent arising from the thick layer of whitish gray gunk splattered in patches on the floor. She could not see the far wall or any exits from where they stood.

“Let’s just head in then. It shouldn’t be any trouble for the two of us, right?” Ling Qi said with confidence she didn’t fully feel. Her flute was still in her hand, and she found herself toying with it as she observed the fluttering shapes in the distance. “Do we even know if they’ll attack us?”

“It is likely. Look at the droppings on the ground,” Meizhen replied with some distaste. “This is their lair, and they are territorial beasts.” She flicked her wrist and her weapon,

that odd collection of metal ribbons attached to a hilt, appeared in her hand. She still sounded stiff to Ling Qi, but the other girl was focused on the task ahead now.

*'Disgusting things,'* Cui grumbled. *'Leaving stinking messes everywhere. Sister Meizhen had better repay Cui for this.'* Despite the serpent's irritable words, Cui didn't hesitate to follow Bai Meizhen into the cave alongside Ling Qi.

"I'll catch you a rabbit or something myself if we get through this alright," Ling Qi muttered, drawing an approving hiss from the serpent. "Should I start playing? No reason to make it easy for them to target us."

Bai Meizhen paused then nodded sharply. "You can include me in the effect if I recall so please do so - unless your mist dissipates with time?"

"Not unless I stop playing," Ling Qi replied before raising her flute to her lips. "Do we have a plan?"

"We comb the chamber for exits and potential points of interest," Bai Meizhen said simply. "I will counter attacks upon us while you conceal our exact location. Grade one beasts are not particularly intelligent. Be wary if you spy the approach of a larger bat with lighter markings."

Bai Meizhen wasn't one for complicated plans, it seemed. It was interesting that for all of her friend's apparently high rank... Meizhen was a pretty blunt girl. Ling Qi began to play as they walked, the haunting melody rolling out along with the mist and echoing from the distant walls.

Beside her, streamers of moisture began to condense out of her mist, shaping the beginnings of Meizhen's mantle of dark water. Above and ahead, Ling Qi heard high, angry screeches that made her ears ring uncomfortably. She tensed, readying her qi to activate her defensive shadow technique at a moment's notice.

They began with a simple crisscross search of the cavern, and at first, they found themselves unmolested as they investigated. The peace was broken when a shadow dived toward them from the ceiling, encased in a faint glow of gray qi.

Ling Qi quickly stepped aside, dancing away from Meizhen's side. The other girl did the same, seemingly flowing to the side on a carpet of shadow. The bat completely missed her, and Meizhen's coiling weapon rose, carving through the creature's shell of qi and drawing a spray of blood. The diving bat let out a pained shriek as it beat its wings,

trying to regain altitude, but the sound was cut off near instantly as Cui struck, fangs digging deeply into its side.

The flying beast spasmed violently and dropped to the ground with a meaty thump, no longer able to stay airborne with the serpent's venom pumped into its veins. Ling Qi shared a brief look with her companion before turning her eyes skyward where dark shapes were gathering. There were more than the dozen Meizhen had predicted, although how many more, Ling Qi could not say.

Ling Qi switched tunes as more bats began to dive, drawing on the darker song of Dissonance to cause the mist to roil with dark constructs. She was loath to hide and allow Meizhen to suffer all of the attacks so she would focus on evading and continuing to play her song.

The next few seconds were chaotic. High-pitched squeaks that made her ears ring blasted away any other sound, and her mist was full of black furred bodies and flapping wings. She twisted her body, spinning out of the way of one clawing, biting creature after another, the wind of their passage ruffling her gown. She barely managed to avoid all the attacks and even felt several strands of her hair violently yanked out when her trailing locks were caught by the claws of one of the beasts.

Ling Qi didn't falter though, keeping up her tune as her constructs manifested as misty twins to her attackers, clawing and biting at the bats as they worked their wings to ascend back up for another dive. Some ten meters away, Bai Meizhen made her dodges look clumsy, seeming to barely move to avoid the enraged spirit beasts' attacks and punishing their failure to hit her with counterattacks from the coiling metal ribbons of her weapon. Another bat fell, screaming as Cui's caustic venom burned through the webbing of its wing.

Ling Qi felt the vibrations in the air and immediately leapt backward, trailing streamers of mist and shadow as she felt her body vanish between one place and the next. The stone she had been standing on exploded, shards of stone blasting outward as the stone spiderwebbed under the force of the attack; she felt pebbles pelt her and a few sharper ones ripped the sleeves of her gown, but she had escaped unharmed.

"There is a second elder enhancing the other beasts!" Meizhen's words cut through the noise and music like the crack of a whip, and Ling Qi found that there were indeed two, much larger shadows circling the ceiling, well above her mist. She looked back down in time to see Meizhen's mantle of water drop away, and for a moment, she wondered if the girl had been hit, disrupting her technique.



That proved wrong, of course, as the water seemed to merge with Meizhen's shadow and flow up her legs and gown, turning her lower body inky black. She saw her friend's legs flex, bending as if preparing for a leap... and then the gathered inky liquid exploded, launching Meizhen upward and trailing the suddenly ascending girl like the tail of a serpent.

Lesser bats scattered in her wake. Bai Meizhen's glittering silver weapon snapped out, glowing with sickly green qi to rake across the face of one of the Elder Bats. Ling Qi had no time to further focus on that fight because an agitated swarm of bats were still flying through her mist, their tough hides ignoring the claws of her shadowy constructs. Still, the mist seemed to be making them slower, and she managed to avoid their claws and teeth for the most part, suffering only a single bloody scratch along her arm that she felt loath to expend the qi to deflect.

Honestly, Ling Qi was reluctant to expend any further qi at all. She caught the second of the elder bats chasing Meizhen down into her mist as the girl fell back to earth though so she used the opportunity to strike, binding its senses with confusion to prevent it from flying out of range again.

One bat after another was falling to Cui, whether from suffering a fatal bite or from their flesh running like wax from her caustic spit. Ling Qi began to lose track of individual actions after that, acting on instinct to continue her song and dodge attacks. She could recall flashes of the battle - Meizhen's hair flying out in a fan behind her as an elder bat's screech erupted point blank in her face and the way blood had erupted from the beast's mouth moments later as Cui's jaw clamped on its throat. She remembered suffering a half-dozen close calls from snapping teeth and grasping claws and crushing the skull of a wounded bat under her heel when the bat had snapped at her foot in passing.

Eventually, the scrum ended; the bats which still lived scattered to the far reaches of the cavern. Around Ling Qi, over a dozen dead spirit bats lay on the ground, bleeding sluggishly from many wounds. They had won, and it hadn't even been that hard.

Bai Meizhen looked regal and untouched, save for the blood staining her sleeves, as she peered into the air for further targets.

*'They flee us. Sister, shall we feast in victory?'* Cui crowed, wound into a tight coil to the Meizhen's left, her mental voice smug and arrogant.

Meizhen glanced at Ling Qi, relaxing from her combat stance, and then back to Cui. "You may snack later, Cui. We are not done yet," she said evenly, even as she gestured with her free hand. A handful of the corpses vanished, dissolving into mist and draining into a narrow platinum band that adorned the pale girl's finger. "Ling Qi, are you prepared to continue?"

Ling Qi looked around. Reasonably satisfied that the bats would not return, she allowed her melody to cease and lowered her flute.

"I'm fine. Nothing more than a scratch," she answered. Ling Qi grimaced at the feeling of something warm and sticky coating her bare foot and the sweat matting her hair to her neck. "Well, I'll need a bath, but that can come later. Do you have room to store all of these? My ring is full, and I don't think we want to stand here and harvest cores." Particularly since she wasn't much good at it. She was lucky the worm's core had been obvious.

*"The mouse presumes too much, thinking to steal the best bites of Cui's feast,"* the serpent grumbled at her, giving her a reproachful flick of the tongue. Meizhen, on the other hand, regarded her with pursed lips but nodded.

"Do not be greedy, cousin. If I let you eat all of this, you would grow fat and sluggish for months," she teased. The serpent whipped around to stare at her relative with affronted outrage. Meizhen extended her hand, and soon, the ground was clear of all but streaks of blood and cracked stone. "Come. We may count our spoils later. I tire of this place."

Ling Qi sighed and hurried to follow her. Meizhen seemed less tense now, but her tone was still cold and distant. She kept her thoughts to herself, ignoring the slight stinging of the cut on her arm as they resumed searching the cavern. Frustratingly, they found nothing but bat droppings and other refuse despite scouring the cavern from end to end. No formations, no doors, not even a stray red stone.

They had only one portion of the cave remaining to explore. At the far end, it narrowed considerably, the ceiling rapidly sloping down until it was barely fifteen meters above the ground. The path ahead split around a massive outcropping of black stone, blocking sight of whatever lay beyond. Ling Qi glanced from one path to the other, but neither appeared to have any prize. It looked like both paths lead to the same place, but...

“Stop,” Bai Meizhen said from beside her, halting as she narrowed her eyes at the path ahead. “It seems I was in error. The bats were merely a distraction. Show yourself.”

Ling Qi spared a look at the serious expression on her friend’s face before she turned her full attention to the path ahead, clutching her flute tightly. What did Meizhen mean? Ling Qi squinted, trying to see what had alerted Meizhen... and then, she saw. The great mass of rock in the middle of the path was not completely still, and its edges not perfectly lined up with the floor. The movement was almost imperceptible, but it rose and fell slightly as she watched.

*‘The meals will not deliver themselves this year.’* Ling Qi startled as a deep rumbling voice that reminded her of fires churning deep under the earth sounded in her thoughts. The entire rock formation, some fifteen meters across, shifted, rising upward to scrape the low ceiling. A blunt, reptilian head emerged from the darkness, pushing out of a recess in the stone. Veins of dull red pulsed between black scales, and eyes that were little more than balls of white hot fire peered out from deeply recessed sockets. On each of its four trunk-like legs, Ling Qi could see gleaming shackles of red hot steel, rooted into the stone below by metal spikes covered from end to end in fiercely glowing formation characters.

It was a massive tortoise with a shell of volcanic stone. Steam puffed steadily from its beaked mouth with each breath. Ling Qi only grew more worried when saw a flicker of hesitation on Meizhen’s features.

As the silence stretched on, the massive beast let out a rumbling snort that sent their gowns and hair fluttering out behind them. *‘This damned binding...’* it growled. *‘You have a choice, children. One may pass, and the other may return to the entrance. Choose.’*

Bai Meizhen’s expression tightened, but it was Ling Qi who spoke up first. “How do we know this isn’t just another test? Or a trick to split us up?”

The massive tortoise exhaled, and Ling Qi’s hair billowed backward, her eyes watering as she was engulfed in a cloud of steam. *‘If I could kill you, you would be dead, child. The child of deep waters understands.’*

“That is a fifth grade beast,” Meizhen said quietly. “A Volcanic Tyrant Tortoise. I am surprised that such a thing would be left in this place. Yet its Qi feels far too weak.” Meizhen directed her next words at the tortoise, “You are the source of energy for the mountain’s formations, are you not?”

*'If you think me weak, you may both try to pass.'* The tortoise's veins of fire flared brightly. *'I have no patience to prattle. Make your choice.'*

Ling Qi eyed the monstrous beast warily. This didn't seem right. "I don't trust it. Why would the elders set up a test that requires two people working together just to turn them against each other at the end?"

*'I know not why you apes do what you do. Know that I will eat you both should you both attempt to pass or attack. I am bound to return the remaining disciple safely otherwise.'*

"...I do not believe he is lying," Meizhen said slowly. "You see, those arrays? They bind against treachery?"

Ling Qi squinted at the white hot characters her friend was pointing too... she couldn't decipher them. Though she didn't trust it, if Meizhen believed its words, then the decision was easy. She had come to this place for Meizhen after all.

"If you think this isn't a trap, I'll go back then, Bai Meizhen," Ling Qi said easily, turning slightly to face her friend while keeping a wary eye on the shackled spirit.

Bai Meizhen blinked, shaken from her thoughts. "As quickly and simply as that?" Meizhen asked, a little bemused. "You give up advantage far too easily, Ling Qi." The pale girl gave Ling Qi a look tinged with frustration.

Ling Qi rolled her eyes. "Don't start with that. I came here for you. You're the only reason I'm here, and you've helped me out since day one. What sort of worthless friend would I be if I didn't help you now that I can?" The kind of 'friend' she was when she lived in the gutter, scrabbling for scraps. She didn't want to be that kind of person anymore. There was no real freedom in that, just mindless survival.

"I am sorry for upsetting you earlier," Ling Qi added in a quieter voice. "But I don't want that to change anything between us."

Meizhen stared silently at her before pulling her eyes away. "...Your gratitude is noted," she said with a hint of awkwardness. "I should not have reacted in such a vulgar fashion either. Thank you, Ling Qi."

*'How wonderful,'* the massive tortoise rumbled dryly. *"How touching. Get on with it, will you? I have no desire to watch you apes act out a drama before my eyes.'*

Ling Qi shot the beast a dirty look but huffed in agreement. "He's got a point. We can talk over tea later if you would like. I picked up an art earlier in the cave that I can show you." The jade slip hadn't had the fragile, temporary feel that the archive ones had.

Meizhen made a quiet sound that might have been mistaken for a laugh if she hadn't covered her mouth with her sleeve. "Of course. I retrieved some rather potent medicines. We can work out the details of exchange after the task is finished." She turned to face the tortoise. "I will proceed then, Spirit, with your permission. What need I do?"

The glowing reptile let out another burst of steam from its maw and made a gesture remarkably like a shrug with its limited mobility. *"Walk past me, child. I will send the other one back when you have passed the formation line at the back of the cave."*

Bai Meizhen nodded sharply and stepped forward, Cui slithering along in her wake. Ling Qi only now noticed the silent awe the serpent was regarding the larger beast with. Ling Qi tensed as she watched her friend walk closer to the spirit, ready to fling a knife and at least distract the thing if she needed to, but her worry was for naught. Meizhen disappeared around the thing's shell, pausing only to give her one final look.

Some time later, Ling Qi was shifting awkwardly from foot to foot, waiting for the tortoise to stop staring at her. She was beginning to feel unnerved under its unblinking, fiery gaze. "So... when do I go back?" she finally asked, screwing up her courage to speak.

*'When I feel like it,'* the tortoise grumbled. *'Ape, what reason did you really have for coming here? I have been chained in this pit for a hundred years, since you lot trapped us. I've seen plenty of you Empire apes pass me by. You're not that serpent child's lackey.'*

Ling Qi blinked, surprised at the thing's questioning. She crossed her arms, frowning at it. "You heard me. She's my friend; I'm repaying her earlier kindness." She hunched her shoulders at the pressure of the thing's attention, its clear dissatisfaction with her response forcing her next words past her lips. "... I'm not lying. I came here for her. I'm glad I benefited as well, but I want to be a little less selfish. What's wrong with that?"

*'Naive,'* the tortoise scoffed. *'The Empire will crush that out of you if it doesn't crush you. You'll die forgotten with that kind of attitude.'*

"Everyone dies, and I'm not sure if I care about being forgotten," Ling Qi responded quietly. "I'd rather not die for a long time... but I won't let fear chain me down anymore

either.” She knew what it was like to be on the edge of death; she had spent half of her admittedly short life making decisions solely based on survival. She didn’t want to do that anymore.

‘Fool,’ the tortoise repeated. ‘Ape, show me the fragments of Kohatu’s core.’

“Who?” Ling Qi asked carefully. She didn’t recognize the word it had impressed on her mind, but it had the feel of a name. She didn’t want to admit to anything, although she could guess what the beast was referring to. “Please send me back now.”

The tortoise blasted her with uncomfortably hot steam. ‘Do not try my patience. You know what I speak of. Show them to me!’

Ling Qi shuddered under the weight of its ire. Hastily, she pulled the core fragments from her ring even as the shackles around the tortoise’s legs flared with icy light, sending frost crawling over its scales. It hurt to think of losing some of her gains, but her life was more valuable.

“H-here!” Ling Qi held out the faintly pulsing lumps of organic crystal, still wet with the fluids of the corpse she had wrenched it from.

The crushing weight on her shoulders lessened, and the tortoise eyed her with irritation. ‘Impudent child,’ it grumbled. “This is as much for your benefit as mine.”

The tortoise’s fiery gaze turned to the fragments in her hand. Its eyes dimmed, the light from between its scales almost fading entirely. The creature pushed its head further out of its shell, closing the distance even as Ling Qi found herself unable to move, legs locked in place. She distantly heard a sound like stone shattering and saw ice begin to crawl up over the tortoise’s shell and cracks appear in its frozen legs, seeping sluggish black blood. Unfathomable heat from its breath bathed her face before the point of its beak touched the fragments in her hands. A bright flash burned away her sight.

When her vision returned, watery and full of spots, she saw the tortoise settling back into its pit, the frost on its body slowly retreating. In her hands lay a stretched oval shape, pitch black like a lump of obsidian shot through with veins of dark green. Its surface felt like tough old leather, and its size equal to both of her fists held together. She looked back up from the egg to the now wounded spirit beast, still blinking the spots from her vision.

‘Something of us will leave this damned place,’ the tortoise rumbled tiredly. ‘Begone, child.’

Ling Qi had no time to respond before characters flared brightly into existence around her, and the cave vanished.

When her senses returned, Ling Qi found herself standing before the great bronze doors in the cavern, holding an uncomfortably hot egg in her hands. She stared blankly down at it. Why had it...? She didn't really understand everything that had just transpired, but she thought that this was probably a good thing. She *had* been thinking about binding a spirit for some time now.

Well. Assuming that whatever came out of this egg was within her ability to bind anyway or that the egg hatched in any kind of reasonable time frame. For all she knew, it would stay an egg for the next decade.

Given that the doors were still firmly shut though and there was no sign of Meizhen, it seemed that she was going to be waiting here for awhile. Ling Qi carefully held the egg against her chest. She didn't want to risk dropping it after all. Cradling the egg, Ling Qi found a dry place to sit down and meditate while she waited.

She spent the better part of an hour in quiet contemplation of her experiences down in the bowels of the mountain until the sound of the doors behind her slowly opening roused her from her reverie. She turned her head to see Meizhen walking out, a thoughtful expression on her face. Cui was back in her smaller form, coiled around the girl's neck like an emerald choker.

"How did it go?" Ling Qi asked, drawing her friend's attention. "No trouble I hope?"

"It was... thought provoking," Bai Meizhen responded quietly, sounding a little drained and looking it too with the way her gaze rested on the floor. "It would seem that I have acquired one month of personal lessons from Elder Ying."

Ling Qi furrowed her brows. "Who?"

Bai Meizhen's expression grew faintly exasperated as she continued to contemplate the floor. "... Of course. How foolish of me." Meizhen sighed, shaking her head, but she didn't seem particularly put out. "There are other elders beyond the three who have interacted with us this year, Ling Qi. Elder Ying is charged with overseeing the defenses of the Outer Sect and the mortal region below. She is an... interesting woman," Meizhen explained, sounding a little unsure at the end.

Ling Qi hummed thoughtfully. Lessons with an Elder were a real prize. She supposed it also made sense that there were more than three elders in a sect. "Well, remind me to ask about the rest of them later. Ready to go home then?" she asked cheerfully, standing up carefully with the egg cradled under one arm.

"Yes, I think-" Bai Meizhen finally turned to actually look at her. "... Ling Qi, is that what I think it is?" she asked, her eyebrows rising, a note of bewilderment in her voice.

Ling Qi rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "Look. I don't understand why the turtle got chatty and gave me an egg," she said defensively.

"The..." Bai Meizhen rubbed her forehead, a pained expression crossing her face. "I am glad you did not call it that to its face," she said faintly. "But still, only you, Ling Qi. Your fortune is inexplicable."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Ling Qi murmured uncomfortably.

"Let us... simply go home." Meizhen sighed, shaking her head again. Ling Qi was glad to see the coldness the girl had been showing earlier had faded - at least for the moment. She followed her friend out of the cave, ready to face a new day.



# Chapter 54 - Cooperation 1

"Let's take a break, Li Suyin," Ling Qi said, releasing her friend from the hold she had pulled her into when Suyin overextended. The two of them had been training for a couple hours at this point, and even Ling Qi had begun to sweat a bit.

Li Suyin panted for breath, red-faced from exertion as she rubbed her throat, likely sore from Ling Qi's grab. "I'm sorry. I should be better by now," she said as she tried to catch her breath.

"You're doing fine." Ling Qi sighed. It was just the two of them at the vent. Bai Meizhen was at her new lessons with Elder Ying, and Su Ling was off gathering materials for some project of hers. "You surprised me with that wood art. When did you get that?"

"I-I did a few missions for the sect last week." Li Suyin stumbled over her words as she caught her breath, dropping to the ground to begin meditating and recovering her qi. "I thought if I could take an attack, I could counter afterward."

Ling Qi rubbed the knuckles on her right hand; she had scraped them pretty raw against the ridges of bark that the wood art's technique had formed over her friend's forearm. That had been the only time that Suyin had any success in jabbing her with those steel needles she had begun playing with too.

"That's not a bad idea. Are you planning to use poison with those little things? I don't really see them being much use otherwise." Ling Qi left unsaid that in a real fight, Suyin only needed to land a touch to do some real damage with her family's art.

The blue-haired girl cast a frustrated look at the gleaming needles in the new pouch at her belt. "No, not poison." She narrowed her single eye at the implements. "I just... need to improve my precision."

Ling Qi furrowed her brow as she sat down in the grass across from the other girl. She had to be careful not to have her dress ride up, but she was getting good at that. She still needed new shoes though.

"Like acupuncture or something?" Ling Qi asked, suddenly remembering why the needles had looked familiar. She had stolen a set to fence when she was ten.

"In a way," Li Suyin said uncomfortably. "If I use my qi correctly and hit the right place, I can disrupt your qi flow. It would have caused minor muscle spasms in your arm for half

a minute or so if it had worked.” She let out a tired breath. “I’m still not good enough though.”

“You’re doing fine,” Ling Qi replied firmly. “Don’t give yourself unreasonable expectations.” She winced as Li Suyin’s shoulders slumped. Ling Qi supposed that was a pretty rude thing for her to say.

“Anyway,” Ling Qi bulled forward, coughing into her hand. “Do you know anything about formations? Beyond what Elder Su taught us in class, I mean.”

Li Suyin’s expression grew briefly bewildered at the sudden change in subject. “Um, a little. I have not really had the time to study them beyond a few basic alarm and spirit wards for home.”

“I might have to ask you about those,” Ling Qi mused, briefly diverted at the idea. “I was hoping you could help me study some formations I have on hand. I thought working on them together would be a good use of our downtime. You’re better at this kind of thing than I am.”

“Oh! Of course. I will be happy to help you with anything you need, Ling Qi,” Li Suyin said brightly. Ling Qi silently congratulated herself; Suyin hadn’t looked so happy in weeks. “I mean - I hope I can help you... I have not had time to study much of late.” And just like that, her friend had started to beat herself up again.

“No time like the present,” Ling Qi hurried to add, drawing the tokens out of her storage ring where she had placed them in preparation. “So. The tokens are kind of like puzzles so I need your help in figuring out the solution.”

The two of them ended up heading back to Su Ling and Li Suyin’s hidey hole to study the tokens; Li Suyin apparently had a couple of basic primers on formations among her now somewhat tattered library. Ling Qi wondered how much the primers had cost her mortal family or if Suyin had purchased them herself since coming to the Sect.

Ling Qi probably could have gotten better primers by going to the archive, but that wasn’t the point. It was nice to just sit down at Su Ling and Li Suyin’s makeshift table in their cave home and study with Li Suyin again, working out the surprisingly complex puzzle on the formation tokens and trading questions with the academic. The fact that between the two of them, they managed to open both remaining tokens and receive the medicinal prizes within was just a bonus really.

Ling Qi was glad to see Li Suyin smiling again by the time they were done. “Thanks for

the help, Li Suyin,” she said, feeling pretty pleased with herself. “I was worried that was going to take another few weeks to crack open.”

“It was no trouble,” the blue-haired girl replied happily, sliding the pill bottle she had unlocked over to Ling Qi. “I am glad to have been able to help you with something.”

“I’m glad I asked,” Ling Qi said, glancing around the little cave. It was still pretty rough, but it looked like the two were beginning to make it comfortable. “How long are you two going to stay out here anyway?” Ling Qi asked. “This place is starting to look nicer, but wouldn’t a real house be better?”

Li Suyin’s smile faded, and she reached up to toy nervously with her eyepatch. “I... do not know. I think Su Ling might actually prefer staying out here, and I am not certain I disagree,” she admitted. “At the very least, I want to challenge that girl before I even consider moving back. Just a few more weeks and I will break through to Yellow Soul. I know it.”

“I’ll look forward to celebrating your success,” Ling Qi said confidently, gathering up her new resources. She might just take the time to ensure Li Suyin got herself a fair fight too. It couldn’t hurt to keep an eye on the girl’s challenge to make sure no one pulled anything untoward.

With the tokens taken care of, Ling Qi began to focus on cultivation and training; she had broken through to the second realm, but it wasn’t enough. If she slowed down, she knew it would make her a target and drag Meizhen down too.

Ling Qi spent much of her mornings with the pale girl, sharing the slip for the Argent Mirror art and practicing the art herself. She enjoyed cultivating it, if only because her stresses and worries seemed less urgent while she was cultivating the tranquil qi of lake and mountain. It put things a little more in perspective. As the days passed and she continued to practice, she felt more sure of herself, more confident in her growing abilities. Constant self-reflection was not entirely positive though as she found herself thinking more and more about her goals... or lack thereof.

Strength and freedom were something to strive toward, but the more she thought about it, the more they seemed empty to her when considered alone. What did she want to achieve with the strength she was gaining? Protecting the handful of people she had become close to, of course, as well as surviving, but these goals were short-term and reactionary. What did she want to do with her life?

Ling Qi couldn’t answer that question yet, but somehow, she thought that was fine. She

had time now to think and decide for herself. She would train hard at the Sect, fulfill her service to the Empire, and figure things out along the way. She wasn't a mortal anymore, doomed to die after a mere few decades. She had time.

The thought and qi exercises that made up the first level of the art she had found, Argent Mirror, were simple and intuitive. The techniques bolstered spiritual defenses and defended against illusions. Yet when she felt the serene qi of mountain and lake flow through the channels she had opened in her head and spine, Ling Qi was amazed. Her senses were clearer, and the world around her more vibrant than ever. It was as if she had worn a dirty veil over her eyes for all her life, only to finally remove it. With her new senses came a sense for qi and the capability to see the cultivation stage of living things within her range.

Even with spending time on the cultivation of other arts, she soon felt her Argent Foundation settle fully into place as well. Mastery of the last exercise in the Argent Soul scroll opened her further to cultivation, qi seeping into her flesh and bones like a strengthening elixir and thickening the layer of pure energy around her dantian. She had taken the art as far as she could given the information she had.

This, of course, simply meant that it was time to begin working on Eight Phase Ceremony, which proved difficult. The initial exercises required that she practice at night and find a high, isolated place to meditate. Even with the clarity granted by Argent Soul, she found herself unable to even sense the qi of the stars and moon, let alone draw it in and absorb it. She was going to need more time to figure it out.

Luckily, Ling Qi had grown better at managing her time; she now knew just how much time she actually needed to sleep over the course of a week and how much she should cultivate before doing so grew inefficient. She spent a significant amount of her freed-up time to browse the archives for information on Spirit Beasts and how to take care of the young ones.

She had a bit of frustration at first due to her failure to figure out the archive's organization system. Ling Qi ended up poking through all sorts of only tangentially related texts before noticing the helpful - if tiny - signs indicating sections plated to the shelves. Thankfully, the archive was not busy in the dead of night so the only ones who witnessed her awkward wanderings were the bored older disciple reshelving and cleaning and Xuan Shi.

Ling Qi wasn't sure Xuan Shi even noticed. The boy had a table in the corner stacked with dozens of books and scrolls and barely looked up from his manuscripts even when she passed through the nearby shelves. It was weird; the pile wasn't even comprised of formation texts or technique scrolls. She saw a couple of history texts and scholarly treatises, but some of the titles looked like fiction.

She supposed Xuan Shi could do whatever he wanted with Ji Rong's pass so she didn't pay the odd boy any further attention, finding her own table to sit at with a stack of bestiaries and other such texts she had pulled down from the shelves. It was a daunting task, particularly since she wasn't a speed reader, but she wanted to make sure she knew what she was doing before she attempted to hatch the egg.

She spent a few nights like that, studying up on animal care and tortoise species in particular. The Volcanic Tyrant Tortoise was apparently native to the fiery islands of the northern ocean. It only rarely appeared on the mainland so the Sect's information was limited. They were classified as spirits of fire and mountain under the imperial system and were noted as a temperamental and destructive species, prone to a great deal of collateral damage when angered. There was even less information on the care for their young as the creatures rarely bred outside of their home islands, but she did find out that they usually made their nests in lava fields and calderas.

Ling Qi had never imagined that the earth could bleed fire, but apparently, that was possible in those distant lands. She didn't think she could acquire a volcanic vent anywhere though. Thankfully, one particularly musty tome suggested that its writer had found some success with placing an egg in a firing kiln for incubation. A large bonfire was also a possible solution, although this method was slower.

Ling Qi considered using the kilns in the production halls, but she had a feeling that would cost far too many sect points in the long run. Plus, it might not be safe to broadcast her fortune in public yet. A quick run to a different part of the archive revealed some simple methods for constructing crude kilns and forges in the treatises on historical engineering. It might take a few tries, but she thought she could rig together something that would work.

On actual care, there wasn't much of anything specific to tortoises so she would have to wing it there. In general, the cores of other beasts and heavily qi-infused materials seemed to be the best food for young spirit beasts. She would probably have to hunt more once the egg hatched.

For now, although she had a few ideas for hatching the egg, it would take time to set up,

and she still had many things to do this week. She settled for leaving it in the hearth of their home for now. The first was to try to patch things up with Han Jian. Hopefully, revealing the tokens' prizes would be a good way to get herself involved with them on a level past the superficial. Ling Qi waited until the day's session was winding down before approaching Han Jian, who had sat down to clean and sharpen his blade in the wake of the sparring.

"Han Jian, do you mind if I ask you something?" she asked, stopping at a respectful distance away. The others were all doing their own various cool down activities.

Han Jian looked up from his blade, his usual friendly expression in place. "Sure. Did you want to ask about a different weapon? You seem to be getting the hang of a bow pretty quickly," he said, tactfully not pointing out the number of times she had overbalanced and fell over while learning to swing around the heavy guandao she had taken to practicing with.

She wouldn't have been able to lift such a thing as a mortal, but as a cultivator, the weight wasn't an issue. It was just hard to keep her balance when swinging the weapon around. She wasn't really sure why she had chosen it beyond a whim and a brief imagining of standing atop the shell of her tortoise companion, laughing and crushing all comers like a warrior queen of old. ... Well, okay, she did know the reason. It was a little childish, but it wasn't like she was doing any harm.

"No, it's not that," she answered. "Thank you for the instruction though."

"It's no trouble," Han Jian said, laying his sword across his knees. "It's good to have a varied base of weapon skills. I'm pretty good with a spear and saber too, even if I prefer the sword. I'd suggest taking the time to learn at least a little bit of the sword or spear at some point. It's expected that a noble have some grounding with the four noble weapons."

"Bai Meizhen has said some stuff like that too, but what do you mean? I'm not a noble. I know not all cultivators can be a noble else every city guard would be one too."

Han Jian gave a strained smile, but it was Fan Yu who answered from where he had sat down to meditate. "Don't play the fool," he said sourly, giving her an unfriendly look. "At your rate of growth, you will end up with an imperial writ."

Ling Qi stared at him blankly before turning back to Han Jian with a questioning look. He, in turn, scrubbed a hand through his hair and explained, "If you do not already have

a clan affiliation, achieving Green Soul or Bronze Physique before the age of seventeen will earn you a writ granting the right to own a manor and start a clan once your service is over. It's essentially the lowest title. You'll have to negotiate with the province governor of wherever you settle to finalize the status. I don't think you're going to have any trouble with the requirements."

"Oh," Ling Qi said awkwardly. She hadn't even considered that there were already rules for determining how a common cultivator became a noble.

"Really, Ling Qi. You may want to sit down and study such things for a time," Gu Xiulan chipped in from her own seated position across the field. "Especially if you are going to be so stubborn about staying unwed," she added teasingly.

Ling Qi flushed and shot the girl a glare. "Anyway, I was just wondering if you guys still had your tokens from Elder Zhou's test."

It was Han Jian's turn to look bewildered. "... suppose?" he replied questioningly. "I saw no reason to throw them away."

Ling Qi grinned. It was probably a little bad to be glad that they hadn't gained the benefits of the tokens already, but it did mean that she could help. "Well, you should all bring them along next time. Li Suyin and I managed to unlock the formation puzzles on them. They have some pretty good elixirs and pills hidden inside."

Han Fang looked up at that, and Han Jian blinked once, then twice, before slapping his forehead. "... Of course they would do something like that. I've been so busy I didn't even think of that."

"Oh, do not trouble yourself, Jian," Gu Xiulan piped up. "None of us have exactly been studious in regards to that kind of thing."

"I can unlock them for you," Ling Qi cut back in. "I owe you all that much. I know I've been absent lately, but I was hoping to make sure you know how grateful I am for your help."

Han Jian shook his head, a slightly bitter chuckle escaping his lips. "I'll thankfully accept your assistance then," he said, looking back up with renewed confidence. "Sorry if I've been a little short myself. Things have been stressful since the end of the truce."

She didn't miss the way Fan Yu's shoulders hunched at those words or the slight

tightness in Han Fang's expression. "It's no trouble," she assured them. She might not know the exact reasons for their stress, but she had an inkling. She was just glad her offer had been well received.

"I suppose not," Han Jian mused. "In any case, thank you."

Ling Qi unlocked their tokens at the next day's training, feeling quite pleased at the gratitude from Han Jian and the others. Even Fan Yu simply remained silent and sullen rather than snappish. She felt like the atmosphere in the training field had somewhat normalized, despite the remaining undercurrent of tension. She didn't really make any progress in regards to trying to insinuate herself into the group outside of training, but Han Jian did mention inviting her along if they went hunting in the forest. Apparently, he wanted to give everyone more actual combat experience.

For now, she would have to be satisfied with that and Gu Xiulan's slightly nervous agreement to accompany her and Meizhen to the market at the end of the week.



## Chapter 55 - Cooperation 2

"Thank you for agreeing to come along," Ling Qi said to Meizhen as they left the house, heading for Xiulan's home.

"It is no trouble," Bai Meizhen replied, briefly glancing up and down the street before turning to follow Ling Qi, her hands hidden by the voluminous sleeves of the white and blue gown she was wearing today. "I require a number of items from the market myself. I do not mind advising you on appropriate footwear along the way."

Ling Qi grimaced. Even if she could stamp her foot on a sharp stone and not feel much more than a bit of pressure, she could admit that she looked a little silly walking around barefoot. "I'm more worried about all this hair," she grumbled, blowing a few stray strands of her curly hair out of her eyes. "It's always a pain to deal with, but I'm not sure I want to cut it short again."

"You should not," Meizhen agreed, sending a few girls scurrying out of their way as they continued up the street. "It is inappropriate for a lady. I am afraid I cannot offer much advice however. I have never cut or altered my hairstyle. It is against tradition to do so before marriage or achieving the Green Soul realm."

Ling Qi gave Meizhen a surprised look, eyeing Meizhen's snowy white locks. Meizhen's hair was long, almost to the middle of her back, but that still didn't make sense. "You have to have had it cut at some point. Your hair would be down at your feet otherwise."

She tried to ignore that Meizhen wasn't the only one receiving looks of wary respect, concern, and other not entirely negative expressions as they walked down the street. It still made her feel awkward.

Bai Meizhen offered a tiny shrug. "Our hair grows very slowly. That's why it is traditional to refrain from making hasty changes before one can be considered an adult."

Ling Qi hummed thoughtfully as they approached Gu Xiulan's door. She supposed that made sense; she'd be kind of reluctant to do anything to her hair either if it would take years to grow back.

Ling Qi knocked twice on the door and then stepped back to wait beside Meizhen. Gu Xiulan answered the door quickly, opening the door to reveal herself dressed in the gown she had picked out when she had last gone shopping with Ling Qi.

“Ling Qi, good morning,” Gu Xiulan said brightly. Ling Qi thought there was a hint of something nervous in Xiulan’s tone and expression though. The other girl turned to Bai Meizhen and clasped her hands together, bowing her head. Ling Qi vaguely recognized the posture as one of deference to a social superior, although the precise degree of deference eluded her. It looked weird coming from Gu Xiulan. “Miss Bai, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

Bai Meizhen dipped her head in acknowledgement. “Gu Xiulan, I am pleased to make your acquaintance as well,” Bai Meizhen replied formally before glancing at Ling Qi. “But please, refer to me by name. This is an informal gathering for the benefit of our mutual friend.”

Gu Xiulan looked pleased, a slight smile curving her painted lips as she straightened up. “Of course. Thank you for the courtesy, Bai Meizhen,” she said just as formally, but some tension had drained out of her. “Ling Qi can be somewhat of a handful, can she not?” Gu Xiulan asked, a bit of her normal teasing entering her tone. Despite that, Ling Qi thought she still sounded wary. “She can be so stubborn about such basic things at times. I cannot believe it has taken her this long to stop wearing those ratty sandals.”

Bai Meizhen pursed her lips. “Quite. I suppose I have you to thank for her no longer dressing like a vagrant,” she said, allowing her tone to grow less stiff as well.

“I’m standing right here,” Ling Qi grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest and frowning at the two of them. “And there was nothing wrong with my needlework. Those disciple uniforms needed more pockets.”

The two of them paused and looked at her, Gu Xiulan’s smile regaining its sharp edge while Bai Meizhen simply regarded Ling Qi with her usual coolness.

“She is rather stubborn, isn’t she?” Gu Xiulan said conversationally, seeming to ignore Ling Qi’s interjection. “I cannot tell you how much of a fight it was to get her to clean up a little in the first place.”

“Willfulness is hardly a negative trait,” Bai Meizhen conceded. “But in this case, I find it misplaced. I believe her capable of learning.”

“Oh, I’m going to regret introducing you two, aren’t I?” Ling Qi sighed. “Can we just get going?”

Despite the teasing, this was going better than she had feared given the last time she had attempted to introduce her friends. She suspected Bai Meizhen was making an

earnest attempt to be friendly by her measure, and Gu Xiulan was afraid of offending Meizhen. The three of them set off toward the market, quietly chatting as they went. Ling Qi mostly listened to the two of them as the two made polite inquiries about the wellbeing of each other's family.

Most of it went over her head beyond a vague understanding that Gu Xiulan's father was overseeing a major expansion into 'lost lands'. Bai Meizhen only spoke a little of her own home. There was something about pearl exports and new island outposts and a need for good steel...

By the time they had left the residential area, their chatter had turned to more immediate things, both of them seemingly coming to an unspoken agreement to let more serious matters lie. Ling Qi was glad. She had been feeling lost so even if the new topic wasn't her preferred subject, debating about needlework and embroidery with Xiulan or cuts of clothing with Meizhen was still better than the odd back and forth they had begun with.

Their shopping trip took up a fair portion of the afternoon, but Ling Qi didn't mind the time spent. She was able to pick up a few comfortable pairs of shoes, mostly the soft-soled slippers that both of her friends insisted were proper wear for a young lady. She could admit that she liked them, particularly the pair with the silver flower embroidery, but she still insisted on picking up a nice pair of hardier boots too.

Her hair was more difficult, as it always was, frustrating the hair stylist with its unmanageable nature. In the end, she settled for simply having it gathered and pulled back, pinned with a few understated ornaments, including a silver crescent moon that she had taken a liking to, with the main length into a neat braid that hung down to the middle of her back. It would be somewhat of a pain to redo it herself later on, but she was growing used to the idea that presenting herself well was important.

Ling Qi idly toyed with the loose hair at the end of her new braid, which was currently hanging over her shoulder and down across her chest. "Does it really look alright?" she asked for what was probably the fifth time, still feeling self-conscious. For all that she knew it was important, it still felt frivolous and a little silly. It had taken nearly an hour for the braiding to be finished, mostly because her hair kept trying to escape it, so the stylist had to use some kind of straightening oil on her hair to stop the incessant flyaway strands from springing free.

"It is significantly more elegant. Be at ease, Ling Qi," Bai Meizhen said with just a touch of exasperation.

“Indeed. Do you doubt my judgement so?” Gu Xiulan sniffed dramatically, a small bag of purchases swinging from one hand. “Really, if I did not know you better, I would be offended. I am sure with a bit of effort, you will begin catching eyes everywhere.”

“Who says I want to?” Ling Qi replied with a playful snap. She knew the other girl wasn’t being serious so it was easier to keep down her offense at the implication.

“There is obviously no need to consider courting at this age,” Bai Meizhen added coolly. “Your prospects will only grow with your cultivation.” Gu Xiulan’s smile faltered at that.

Ling Qi rolled her eyes, choosing not to comment on Xiulan’s reaction. “Yeah, I think I can stand to wait for a good, long...”

“Miss Ling?” A male voice, sounding slightly out of breath, called from her right. She blinked in surprise, looking over to where a rather plain-faced boy of middling height was approaching nervously. He ended up standing in front of them, a letter clasped in his hand. No. There was no way.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bai Meizhen asked, disdain on her features. The boy was only a red soul so it was unsurprising that he shuddered, paling under her regard.

“I am sorry to interrupt your conversation,” he said quickly, bowing low, far lower than Xiulan had to Meizhen. “I am only a lowly messenger with a letter of invitation for Miss Ling from Lady Cai.”

Meizhen’s expression darkened while Xiulan looked thoughtful, but they both ceded the next response to Ling Qi. She felt awkward under her friends’ stares, even if she also felt relieved that it wasn’t a courting letter. Straightening her shoulders, she stepped forward and held out her hand.

“Give me the letter and be on your way,” Ling Qi said, doing her best to sound dignified.

The boy nodded hastily, looking more than a little relieved himself as he pressed the clean, white paper into her hand and backed away, bowing several more times. He did not quite run away once he had gained some distance.

“Well, what does it say?” Gu Xiulan said impatiently, peering over her shoulder. Bai Meizhen stood with arms crossed, waiting with apparent patience.

Ling Qi flipped open the letter and scanned the contents, feeling nonplussed. “Cai’s inviting me to join her for tea at the pavilion on the west side of the mountain in two

days. It doesn't say for what though, and the invitation is just for me," she answered. She would suspect a trap, but Cai Renxiang really didn't seem the type.

Gu Xiulan's eyebrows climbed high on her forehead. "Well, I wouldn't refuse such an invitation unless..." She trailed off, glancing at Bai Meizhen.

"Ling Qi has no obligation to me. Who she chooses to associate with is her own choice," Meizhen said precisely.

Ling Qi frowned. Meizhen sounded unhappy. She felt like she might be missing something, but she didn't want to sound foolish by asking. "... I'll think about it," she decided. "Let's go home for now. I want to put away my things." She raised the bag full of shoes hanging off her arm.

The walk back was quieter but pleasant enough. Even with the surprise at the end, the afternoon had gone well. Maybe she could make a habit of bringing the two girls together? They could invite Meizhen along the next time they used the springs?

## Chapter 56 - Cooperation 3

Ling Qi's next week began with a paper crane fluttering through her window to deposit a letter on the desk in the corner of the room, startling her from her early morning meditation. She stared blankly after the paper construct as it darted back out of the window. It hit her a moment later, and she immediately felt terrible for forgetting.

She had sent a letter to Mother, hadn't she? Between the egg, the upcoming meeting with Cai Renxiang, and all of her training, she hadn't even really given it any thought since then. She eyed the neatly folded paper resting on her desk with trepidation. She wasn't even sure how to feel about the fact that her mother had responded.

She assumed that was what the letter was anyway. Who else would be sending her a letter? Ling Qi padded over, scanning the characters neatly written on the coarse paper of the envelope, but it was just her name and location. She supposed it was possible this was something else entirely.

She hesitated again before plucking the letter from her desk and breaking the plain wax seal. She wouldn't get anywhere from staring at it all day. Ling Qi felt a twinge of melancholy as she carefully unfolded the cheap paper, revealing meticulously neat handwriting.

*Ling Qi,*

*I too am somewhat at a loss. What does one say to a daughter I thought long dead or worse? What does one say to a daughter who found me so poor a parent that she preferred the gutter to my hearth? How many months did I search and seek, hoping to find you again, hoping you had not met some awful fate?*

*Yet you remained like the wind, ever beyond my reach, and in the end, I had no choice but to give up... as I always have. In a way, it is perhaps fitting that you ran away. It seems you have achieved a far better opportunity than I could have ever hoped to give you. I am glad you are alive. I know little of the doings of Immortals, but I can only hope that you are healthy and happy.*

*I do not know what else can be said. I thank you for your gift and will accept it. I do not deserve it - poor parent that I am - yet given circumstances as they are, I cannot in good conscience allow myself to refuse it either. I can offer you nothing in return save my well wishes.*

*You owe me nothing, my daughter. Please do not feel any obligation toward me. Stay safe and live well.*

*Ling Qingge*

Ling Qi stared down at the paper with warring feelings. She felt guilt and sadness at the melancholy that seemed to have infected her mother in the intervening years, but at the same time, she felt happiness at the simple fact that her mother was still alive and able to write back to her.

Carefully folding the letter, she placed it back on her desk and sat down on her bed. Breathing in and out, she returned to her meditation, turning over what had been written in her mind. What were the circumstances that lead her mother to accept the silver? Had she simply lost her 'job'? What had she meant about it being fitting that Ling Qi ran away? Her mother's habit of making indirect statements hadn't changed since last they talked.

Was the indirectness purposeful? Her memories of the woman had somewhat faded at this point, but she recalled that her mother had not been unskilled at wordplay. She didn't like to think badly of Mother, but was she being vague to encourage Ling Qi to continue writing and sending silver? Would Ling Qi be upset if she was? Ling Qi thought the depression exuded in the letter was genuine at least.

Ling Qi continued to cycle her qi and breath in time with the pulsations of her internal energies. She would continue sending the silver regardless, but she needed to think of what she wanted to say before sending another letter.

She left her house a few hours later. Han Jian and the others were going to make their first attempt at hunting today, and she wanted to get to the training field early so that she could ask Han Jian some questions. Of all her friends and friendly acquaintances, she felt that Han Jian would be able to give her the most unbiased view of her situation in regards to Cai Renxiang. She had no doubt Meizhen would answer her questions, but the other girl had some rather skewed views in certain areas.

Thankfully, Han Jian was present at the field early as was his wont. He seemed to be engaged in a silent debate with Heijin, staring down at the gold-furred tiger cub with a frustrated look as she entered the field.

"- do you think I am doing? What more do you want from me?" Ling Qi caught the tail end of his words as she passed through the barrier around the field and paused as she heard the uncharacteristic heat in them.

Han Jian stiffened as he met Ling Qi's eyes, but before he could say something, Heijin turned away from the boy to pad toward Ling Qi.

*'The slacker should cease shaming the Han and show his decisiveness,'* the cub's arrogant little boy voice chimed in her head. *'I will say no more. Songstress! I require head scratches.'*

Ling Qi gave the cub a consternated look as he flopped down at her feet, but nonetheless, she crouched down to scratch him behind the ears. It was simpler just to acquiesce in this case lest the cub turn the full force of his sad kitty face upon her or decide to side with Gu Xiulan when the inevitable sparring began.

"Good morning, Han Jian," she said carefully, looking up from Heijin.

"Good morning, Ling Qi," Han Jian replied tiredly, the frustration and stress that she had seen on his face smoothed away. "You're here early today." Ling Qi could sense the slight undercurrent of gratitude in his tone that she chose not to pursue whatever he and Heijin had been talking about.

"I was hoping to talk to you and get some advice and information," Ling Qi admitted as Heijin butted his head up against her hand, prompting her to get back to pampering the little feline. "I hope you don't mind. Bai Meizhen has a 'unique' view, and Gu Xiulan is ... a little aggressive. You seem like you have a more balanced view."

She flushed a bit as Han Jian chuckled, giving her an amused look as he crossed his arms. She was trying to be diplomatic, damnit. "Well, I can't speak on the first, but I can understand the second," he said. "What's troubling you, Ling Qi?"

"Everything really. It seems like I'm stumbling blindly through a fog some days," she admitted. "At that meeting with Cai Renxiang, I kept noticing little cues from Bai Meizhen or Gu Xiulan, but I didn't understand what they meant and I just feel lost!" Her feelings - frustration, concern about her ignorance - burst out in her words like a flood from a dam. "Bai Meizhen taught me a bit of etiquette, but I feel like I still don't know anything. Now, Lady Cai has invited me to tea, Bai Meizhen seems unhappy about it, and I don't even know why she's unhappy or why everyone seems to dislike Bai Meizhen so much!"

Han Jian's expression grew more serious and contemplative as he regarded her sympathetically. "You know, sometimes, it's easy to forget that you're totally in the dark on a lot of things," he mused. "Let me ask you bluntly. What IS your relationship with Bai



Meizhen?”

“She’s my friend,” Ling Qi said simply, idly stroking the purring kitten at her feet as she looked up at Han Jian. “She’s helped me a lot, and she’s had my back against others. I want to be able to do the same for her.”

He nodded, bemused. “It’s really that simple, huh?” he asked, seemingly rhetorically. “If it makes you feel any better, as far as I know, there’s no particular enmity between the Bai family and Cai family. I can’t speak for anything personal between the two of them, but I don’t believe there’s any more pressure there than Lady Cai’s insistence on being the leader of the council.”

That was relieving, but it cast Bai Meizhen’s reaction to the letter in a more confusing light. Did Meizhen think she was going to leave her behind for Cai or something?

“Alright. So why is Bai Meizhen so disliked? I know her aura is a little unnerving and that her family is not in favor right now, but is it really that bad?” One way or another, her own situation was tied to Meizhen, unless she wanted to break away from the other girl.

Han Jian’s expression tightened at her question. “It... kind of is,” he responded slowly. “I feel like you need some history for context if you’re asking that question though. Are you fine with listening to me ramble on this? We should have some time before the others arrive.”

“Yeah. That’s fine.” Ling Qi really needed to become more knowledgeable; her ignorance wasn’t doing her any favors.

“Alright,” Han Jian said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “You’re familiar with Sun Liling and her status? Well, her great-grandfather, Sun Shao, is at the root of the Bai’s disfavor. This was around four hundred years ago, several decades after Ogodei’s invasion and the formation of the Ministry of Integrity. Things were pretty chaotic at the tail end of Emperor Si’s reign.” Han Jian paused to consider his next words. “I won’t go into the details, but Emperor Si was a very... generous and permissive man. He allowed the noble families a lot of leeway in how they handled things.”

Ling Qi gestured for him to continue while placating Heijin, who had rolled over for belly rubs. She wasn’t sure what this had to do with Bai Meizhen yet.

“Right,” Han Jian said, gaining confidence. “So. At that time, Sun Shao was a highly ranked vassal of the Bai clan with lands at the border between Thousand Lakes and the Garden of the Red Sun. The Garden was a nasty place. The barbarians of the jungles

were vicious and cruel, and the great spirit they venerated demanded constant blood sacrifice. Sun Shao was - and still is - a peerless general though so he kept their raids and invasions from touching the province interior for over a century in that role. But one day, he returned from putting down an incursion to find his castle aflame.” Han Jian grimaced. “The people of the Red Sun weren’t kind to captives. Sun Shao lost his wife and all of his children save the two adult sons that had been with him on campaign.”

“That sounds awful,” Ling Qi replied. “But what does that have to do with Bai Meizhen?”

“I’m getting there,” Han Jian reassured her. “Sun Shao was understandably furious. He went to his liege, the patriarch of the Bai clan and the great-grandfather of Bai Meizhen. He asked leave to raise an army to punish the barbarians. Now, Bai Fuxi wasn’t unsympathetic. He granted leave to raise a hundred thousand men and burn every Red Sun settlement east of the River Tiesha.”

Ling Qi blinked. Han Jian said that as if a hundred thousand men wasn’t a ridiculous number of people. That was more than the population of her hometown. Han Jian wasn’t finished speaking though.

“Sun Shao wasn’t satisfied with that. He wanted to push into the interior and raze their temple city of Ramu... Rammad... Ramadh...?” Han Jian shook his head after stumbling over the word several times. “Eh, I can never get those names right,” he grumbled, ignoring the disdainful look from the cub at Ling Qi’s feet. “Point is, he wanted to invade further than the River Tiesha and hold the territory too.”

“I’m guessing Meizhen’s great-grandfather refused?” Ling Qi could see how that would play into the enmity between her and Liling, but she wasn’t sure how it tied into the general disdain for the Bai family.

Han Jian gave her a searching look, and Ling Qi’s eyes widened. She’d slipped and referred to Meizhen with more familiarity than was appropriate. She might have done that once or twice before too, now that she thought about it.

“He wasn’t a fan. The Bai had always refused to send anyone over the river at all, let alone try to hold it,” Han Jian continued after an awkward pause. “Long story short, Sun Shao acted like he accepted the refusal, but he was a charismatic and popular man. After he gathered up the army he was allowed to and went on campaign... he just didn’t come back. In fact, he drew on a lot of the Bai’s more dissatisfied vassals - which was most of them - and increased the army he had fivefold by the time he crossed the river. You have to understand, people of the West really, really hated the people of the Red Sun.”

“That’s basically open rebellion, isn’t it?” Ling Qi asked, confused. She didn’t know much about politics, but she was pretty sure that was some kind of treason. “How does that lead to everyone disliking the Bai?”

“They were never all that popular to begin with,” Han Jian said. “But suffice to say, while the casualties of that campaign were pretty ruinous, when the dust settled, Sun Shao had won and come out of the campaign with a stronger army than any individual province in the Empire could easily muster. His weakest soldiers were third realm at that time. Emperor Si had passed away in the ten years or so that the campaign had gone on. When Bai Fuxi went to Emperor An to have Sun Shao punished in the aftermath, the new Emperor declared that Sun Shao’s actions were just and that it was the Bai who had failed in their stewardship by allowing the Red Suns to do as they pleased for so long, instead of punishing the barbarian scum properly.”

“That didn’t go over well, did it?” Ling Qi asked, starting to see the shape of things.

“Yeah, Bai Fuxi was furious and humiliated,” Han Jian confirmed. “He defied the imperial decree declaring Sun Shao’s pardon and new rank and went after the man himself, along with the clan’s best warriors. But Sun Shao had ascended into White during the campaign, and despite being at the same level himself, Bai Fuxi was killed. That was the start of a lot of Emperor An’s crackdowns on noble power and the expansion of the Ministry and the Sects. There’s been more modern incidents involving the Bai too, but going any further would take us all day. The Bai didn’t have many friends in the first place, and a lot of people who would have been afraid to be their enemies weren’t anymore after the loss of a lot of their top warriors. It doesn’t help that since then, the Bai have been pretty cold with the Throne and the West, on top of losing a lot of influence and power.”

Ling Qi shook her head. It sounded like a real mess already, even with Han Jian skipping a lot of details, but she thought she understood better now.

“Alright,” she said. “What about Cai Renxiang then? Why would she invite me to have tea with her, and how should I handle that?”

“At a guess, the same thing she wanted from me,” Han Jian said dryly. “That girl is ambitious, and she wants a solid hold on authority in the Outer Sect. She’ll likely be probing you to see where you stand in that regard. I made sure she understood that I wasn’t interested in contesting her, but you...”

After a pause for thought, Han Jian continued, “Lady Cai’s pretty likely to try and draw you into her own group, I think. You’re a native of her province and show a lot of talent. She and her Mother are pretty big on snapping up new talents. For example, rumor says that Gan Guangli was a commoner too before Cai Renxiang picked him up, and Duchess Cai has been pretty ‘proactive’ in changing the face of her court with new clans beholden to her.”

The two of them continued chatting until the others arrived, mostly about appropriate behavior and etiquette, filling in the gaps in Ling Qi’s knowledge about how to behave properly in formal situations. Han Jian still seemed distracted and stressed, but she was glad to see some of the tension that had been rising between them fading.

However, the hunting trip that afternoon didn’t go well. No one was particularly familiar with the terrain of the forest, and they ended up getting turned around several times, losing track of the trails they did pick up. Ling Qi wasn’t a great help in that regard, having relied on Su Ling for her previous forays into the wilderness. Without any real success and the bickering that followed, Ling Qi could not help but feel that things weren’t really improving.

## Chapter 57 - Cooperation 4

Ling Qi found herself struggling to push through to the next plateau of physical ability. She had gone rather light on medicines this week, which she suspected might be part of the reason for her struggle. Her dwindling supply of red stones was beginning to limit what she could do, and the pittance of an allowance from the Sect hardly helped in that regard, only barely covering her expenses for this week alone.

She did not let it bother her too much. She wasn't entirely sure how to resolve the issue, but she wouldn't let herself fall behind. Her early morning training with Li Suyin continued apace, and the other girl continued to slowly improve, pushing toward late gold and improving her skill with the needles she had picked up as a weapon.

After a bit of thought, Ling Qi offered Li Suyin and Su Ling a chance to learn Argent Mirror as well. She was unsure about the implications of doing so, but Bai Meizhen didn't seem to disapprove, despite being present at the vent during her offer. Given her conversation with Han Jian, she suspected that Meizhen thought of those two as people Ling Qi was cultivating as subordinates.

It made sense, considering the aloof but not impolite way Bai Meizhen treated the two of them as compared to Meizhen's slightly more casual and respectful manner around Gu Xiulan. The idea also wasn't really correct, but she wasn't sure how to go about changing the pale girl's mind on the subject. She supposed the misconception wasn't harming anything for the moment.

It had been a little difficult getting them to accept though. Well, it had been difficult getting Su Ling to accept; Li Suyin had simply thanked her with her head down, which was a little concerning... but hopefully, the art itself would help with that. Ling Qi had managed to smooth over Su Ling's suspicions by asking for help and advice with a few things in return. Bai Meizhen had left some time ago, and Li Suyin was currently meditating, working to clear the channels for Argent Mirror.

"The hells do you want with a kiln?" Su Ling asked in confusion, slouched against a tree at the edge of the clearing. "I never took you for a potter." The fox tailed girl had filled out a bit over the past months, no longer seeming as gaunt as she had when Ling Qi had first met her, although she remained rather untidy with dirty robe hems and unkempt hair.

"It's weird, I know, but I need it for a... project," she answered. "I copied down some notes from the archive. The archive texts mentioned some special materials, and I can't

use the ones in the production hall for my project.” Ling Qi spread her hands helplessly. That was the real problem. She didn’t want to bring the egg to the production hall, and she wasn’t sure the mortal town at the mountain’s base would be able to sell her something that could handle the heat she needed.

Su Ling narrowed her eyes, giving Ling Qi a searching look. “Well, it’s none of my business,” she decided bluntly. “But sure, I can help.” She scowled. “Fatty owes me a couple favors anyway,” she grumbled under her breath.

Ling Qi considered this. She didn’t necessarily know Su Ling very well; ultimately, their only real connection was mutual friendship with Li Suyin. Still, the other girl knew a lot more about beasts than she did; it was the whole reason she had approached her after all.

“It’s an egg,” Ling Qi said, drawing a blank look from the bestial girl. “My project. I got my hands on a spirit beast egg, and the books in the archive say it needs really high, sustained heat to hatch.”

Su Ling blinked, straightening. “Huh, is that so? Yeah, I can see why you can’t use the production hall, even if you had the stones.”

Ling Qi watched Su Ling’s reaction carefully but didn’t notice any signs of greed or envy. Of course, Ling Qi hadn’t mentioned how rare a beast it likely was.

“Speaking of, what can you tell me about beast cores?” Ling Qi asked. “You seem to know what you’re doing with them.” She had seen the other girl grinding cores down into pastes and powders before when she stopped by their cave to walk with the two of them to the vent.

Su Ling shrugged. “I have to be. If you’re looking into beast rearing, you should know that cores are the best food for young spirit beasts, right?” She paused a beat for Ling Qi to give an acknowledging nod. “Same goes for people like me. I can get by on mortal food, but only barely. Least I’m lucky enough that I can handle greens if they have a bit of qi in ‘em,” she said with a tinge of bitterness.

“That makes sense,” Ling Qi said. Was that why Meizhen never ate anything she made? “So, for you, preparing cores was pretty much learning to cook?”

“Kinda,” the other girl replied. “Beast Cores are full of energy, but unless you’re like me or the snake princess, the energy is toxic to humans.”

"Please don't call her that if she's around," Ling Qi said, glancing to the side and half-expecting Bai Meizhen to be standing there looking displeased. She didn't think Meizhen would approve of an epithet that sounded similar to Sun Liling's.

Su Ling snorted but didn't disagree. "Right. Anyway, I can eat the cores and get some benefit, but the main thing you use beast cores for is as the primary ingredient in elixirs. You can't make an elixir without a beast core, and all the preparation and side ingredients pretty much exist to refine the energy and let a human body take in the beast qi safely," she explained. "That was my big problem: learnin' to make elixirs that won't leave other people throwing up blood."

Ling Qi grimaced, glad that she hadn't tried to use any of her beast cores like pills. "How do you know what each core is good for though?" Ling Qi asked. She had several, and she wanted to know what she could do with them.

"Take 'em to get appraised," the other girl replied bluntly. "Unless you wanna invest the time in memorizing bestiaries, leave it to the hall staff. I can generally pick stuff out by smell, but that's not really an option for you. You have something you want me to take a look at?"

Ling Qi flicked her wrist, drawing the core of the mimic worm out of her storage ring. It had lost some luster, and once she had cleaned it off, she had come to see that in ripping it out of the corpse, she had cracked it a little.

"How about this?" Ling Qi asked, holding out the small orb.

Su Ling leaned forward to get a better look and sniffed before wrinkling her nose and gagging.

"Ugh, what the hells," Su Ling gagged, shoving Ling Qi's hand away, and scrubbed her nose with the back of her hand. "Fucking gross," she grumbled, giving Ling Qi a dirty look, which quickly faded into simple irritation. "Wood and water. Reeks like a carcass full of maggots though. I wouldn't touch the thing, but it's grade two so even if it's damaged, you could probably sell it for maybe thirty or forty stones."

Ling Qi gave her an apologetic look as she placed the core back in storage. "Sorry about that. I should have known that thing's core would be gross too. Do you think you can give me some tips on harvesting cores better?"

Su Ling shrugged. "Yeah, sure. You're the one handing out arts. I can take the time to give you a few tips."

Between taking the time to learn from Su Ling, her continued training with Li Suyin, and the slowly improving hunting practice with Han Jian and his group, time passed quickly. Ling Qi soon found herself heading out to the pavilion that Cai Renxiang had requested she come to. Being cautious, she didn't immediately approach, but as far as she could tell, no one was present except the heiress herself, who sat out in the open on a chair in the center of the stone pavilion, facing the entrance of the area. Cai Renxiang showed no sign of concern or notice as Ling Qi lingered behind one of the stone pillars that marked the edge of the field.

Recalling Han Jian's words, she doubted that Cai Renxiang would begrudge her a bit of wary scouting before she approached since Cai's mother was said to favor practicality, but that didn't mean she wanted to push her luck by being late. So after checking the surroundings, Ling Qi slipped away and came back, this time taking the actual path toward the pavilion.

Ling Qi kept her gait even and her head held high as she approached, doing her best to appear confident despite the jittery feeling in her stomach. She took a deep breath as the girl's dark eyes fell on her but didn't flinch or pause. Instead, she came to a stop at the base of the short stairs leading up into the pavillion and bowed low as her quick refresher with Han Jian had reminded her to do.

"Lady Cai, I was honored to receive your invitation." Ling Qi had been getting more practice with speaking formally lately so the words came easier than she expected.

Cai Renxiang, for her part, remained seated, looking imperiously down at Ling Qi. She sat with one leg crossed over the other, which lead to her shimmering white gown riding up slightly to expose the jewel-studded golden shoes she wore. The small wooden table beside her held a fine porcelain tea set with faint wisps of steam escaping the pot.

"I am glad you chose to accept. I trust you found nothing untoward in your inspection, Ling Qi?" Cai Renxiang asked, a hint of reproof in her commanding voice.

Ling Qi raised her head slightly but didn't otherwise react. She was reasonably confident the other girl was just testing her reaction and making sure that she knew Cai Renxiang had not been fooled by her sneaking.

"I have no objections," Ling Qi responded carefully. "I thought it appropriate to make sure that the invitation was not a trap by one abusing your name, Lady Cai."

"A reasonable concern," the long-haired girl allowed, one hand resting on her knee.



“The chaos of the Outer Sect has not yet settled after all. I would not put such foolishness past the petty, small-minded grudges of your lesser peers. Seat yourself. You are my guest, and I would not leave you standing. I am afraid you will have to pour your own tea; Guangli has more pressing tasks than to play manservant today.”

Ling Qi straightened up and inclined her head gratefully, carefully ascending the steps to sit down at the seat prepared for her.

“It is no trouble,” Ling Qi said, knowing that refusing the other girl’s refreshments would be an insult. Besides, if someone like Cai Renxiang wanted to do something untoward, she would hardly need to resort to something like poisoned tea.

“Would you like me to pour your cup as well, Lady Cai?” Ling Qi asked. It seemed like the polite thing to do, and it didn’t cost her anything to offer.

“It would be appreciated,” Cai Renxiang replied, studying Ling Qi intensely. “I am glad to see that you have some knowledge of how to conduct yourself,” she added in what Ling Qi took as an attempt at a complimentary tone.

“It’s best not to offend others unnecessarily,” Ling Qi said in turn, lifting the teapot gingerly to pour the steaming liquid within into the two cups set out. She blinked as Cai Renxiang leaned forward to take a cup, her eyes drawn down to the bright red butterfly wings splashed across the bosom of the other girl’s gown. Had the embroidery just moved on its own?

“My honored Mother’s work is impeccable, is it not?” Cai Renxiang’s voice shook her out of her contemplation, and Ling Qi flushed as she realized that she had been staring at Cai Renxiang’s chest. The gown’s pattern had definitely shifted just then too.

Ling Qi brought her eyes back to the other girl’s face and took a brief sip from her cup to cover her embarrassment. “It is a very fine gown,” she said hastily. “I did not know your Mother did such work. I would think her too busy.”

“You would be correct for the most part,” Cai Renxiang admitted. “Her work is largely reserved for Empress Xiang and a handful of other clients these days. I am honored beyond words that she would bestow such a gift upon me. But we are not here to speak of such things,” she continued, meeting Ling Qi’s eyes unwaveringly. “Tell me, Ling Qi. What do you see when you look upon the Outer Sect? Do not mind your words, and speak from your heart.”

Ling Qi had a hard time not hunching her shoulders at the sudden inflection of absolute

command in the other girl's voice. She regarded the resplendent girl silently, noting the faint corona of light shining around Cai Renxiang's head even now. Despite their disparity in status, Ling Qi thought the heiress was speaking earnestly about her desire for plain words.

"For the most part, a bunch of desperate opportunists," Ling Qi found herself saying bluntly. She thought of Li Suyin's shattered expectations. "I can't really criticize, but I can't say it's very admirable either. It's not what people think of when they imagine cultivators, that's for sure." . Ling Qi was pretty sure she had caught a slight upward quirk of the severe girl's lips before it was quickly hidden behind a tea cup.

"An interesting statement. You are right that you cannot criticize. Your background hardly allows for that, bereft of virtue as it is."

Ling Qi frowned at the other girl, who simply raised an eyebrow.

"Lady Cai, I do not think you would invite me here just to insult me," Ling Qi said, doing her best to keep the irritation out of her voice but not entirely succeeding. "I won't apologize for my background. I survived as I could and made the best of the situation. Virtue is a luxury for those not living on the edge of starvation or worse."

She winced, fearing she might have gone too far there, letting her temper get the better of her. When she raised her eyes from the tabletop though, she found the girl across from her regarding her without disapproval.

"Virtue cannot exist without order, and there is little of that to be found in a city's gutters," Cai Renxiang agreed coolly. "I will not dispute that. Do you resent those who rule then? For leaving mortals to suffer in squalor?"

Ling Qi stared down the heiress. She could just reply with some platitude, but she felt like she was doing better for being honest with Cai Renxiang.

"Maybe a little," Ling Qi admitted. "But in the end, that's childish. There will never be enough resources for everyone. That's just the way the world is. Complaining about it is useless." Ling Qi had thought of such things before, but in the end, she didn't really feel much resentment toward nobles as a group. Why would she? It was like blaming water for being wet. That was just the nature of power. "I'll keep my grudges to individuals."

"Interesting - and rather different from Ji Rong's answer," Cai Renxiang said thoughtfully.

"Is that why you had him punished?" Ling Qi asked warily.

The heiress shook her head, sending her long black hair swaying. "No. I asked Xuan Shi to punish him for seizing additional funds on top of his enforcement efforts," she said flatly. "It is unacceptable for a government officer to profit directly from the fines he assigns. Tolerance of such behavior encourages untoward behavior."

Ling Qi thought that sounded off. "So... what do *you* do with the funds then?" she asked dubiously. "I mean, no offense, but not many people on this... council even need red stones."

"At the moment, they are being placed into a fund to take care of expenses that may be incurred in the course of our business," Cai Renxiang replied without pause. "This includes expenses like medical care for those injured while enforcing our rules or the cost of purchasing equipment and hiring other personnel as we expand the scope of our duties. I can supplement such things with my own income, but it is only sensible to use the punitive funds for this purpose."

Ling Qi still wasn't sure she was satisfied with that but decided to let it pass for now. "May I ask, what is it you wished to ask me here for, Lady Cai?" She could feel her patience wearing thin because so far it seemed like the girl was just needling her to get her to answer largely pointless questions.

Cai Renxiang took another small sip of her tea before answering. "I desire order. As you have noted, most cultivators are, without a well enforced structure of expectation and punishment, little more than savages and opportunists, hardly better than the beasts we bind."

Ling Qi found herself fixed under the other girl's intense gaze as a bit of passion began to make its way into her stern voice.

"If I cannot even command the obedience and respect of such a small number of cultivators, I have no doubt that Mother will remove me as her heir, and I would not blame her. I wish to bring the remaining dissidents and malcontents among us to heel, and I require your aid in doing so."

Ling Qi blinked. She couldn't imagine what she could do that the heiress could not. "I'd like to know what exactly you have in mind and why you would choose me to do it," Ling Qi replied, choosing her words with care. "And I'd like to note that I won't do anything against Bai Meizhen. She is my friend, and I owe her too much." Ling Qi wanted to make her limits clear.

"I have no ill intentions toward Miss Bai," Cai Renxiang said, inclining her head slightly. "Things are not as they were in past centuries. Change is coming, and grudges are washed away with the tides of time." Ling Qi narrowed her eyes at the vague wording. "Rather, there have been a number of incidents involving attacks upon female disciples in the outer sections of the residential area. The disciples have been beaten and humiliated, robbed down to their smallclothes."

Ling Qi thought ruefully that she really needed to pay more attention to things going on outside her immediate sphere. Understanding quickly dawned as she considered the other female cultivators that had attended the council meeting. If someone was attacking from ambush at night, they probably weren't going to come out if Cai Renxiang was around, glowing like a lamp. Ling Qi doubted Sun Liling or Bai Meizhen would be interested in trying to deal with it either.

"Do you know anything about the attacker?" Ling Qi asked.

"They seem to have an art which allows them to avoid my sight," Cai Renxiang said a touch sourly. "But I will admit, I have little use for subtlety in my personal doings. Other than that, the only confirmed information is that they inflict paralysis with their attacks. They have not struck at any capable of fighting back beyond their initial blow as of yet." She paused to study Ling Qi. "I am aware that cultivation time is valuable. Should you bring this person to me, I am willing to offer you recompense for your time, as well as my gratitude. Ten yellow spirit stones seems an appropriate compensation."

"Thank you for the offer," Ling Qi said. "I hope you will not be offended if I need to consider it for a time?" Ten yellow stones would go quite a long way, especially once she broke through to Mid Silver. But if she could not find and capture this ambusher, she'd waste time she could have been cultivating for no gain.

"Of course not," Cai Renxiang answered, setting her teacup down. "Know that if you do not undertake and complete the job by the end of next week, I will be forced to entertain other measures. Defiance such as this cannot be brooked."

Ling Qi nodded absently. This might just be a real opportunity for her.

# Chapter 58 - Tag 1

Over the course of the next few days, she continued training hard.

Her efforts pushed her through to Mid Silver Physique, further strengthening and tempering her body, as well as clearing a meridian to channel qi through her arms. Between her increased physical ability, Su Ling's advice, and the passing of the initial awkwardness, her hunts with Han Jian and his group began to bear fruit. They weren't hunting anything difficult, mostly just the white deer native to the surrounding forest which provided the ingredients for many basic pills and elixirs. It was still nice to profit, if barely, even after splitting the proceeds with everyone. She was even able to get that rabbit she had promised Cui.

Su Ling came through for her as well, delivering a stack of fragrant, qi-infused, pre-cut wood for use as fuel and earth qi-infused clay to use for her hatching kiln. Lacking any safer place to do so, she set up the construction in the little garden that lay in the center of the home she shared with Meizhen.

She had had to spend a lot of time pouring over the books in the archive about building kilns, but she managed to construct something approximating the illustrations she was using for reference. It took a long day's labor in her old disciple's robes that left her covered in mud and clay up to her forearms, but in the end, it was complete, and she was able to light it. She had been nervous about actually putting the egg into the flame, but she had tested the egg's safety with a smaller fire first, and the egg's qi did seem to react favorably to the heat.

She even managed her first real formation, a simple string of characters inscribed around the base of the kiln to keep it heated for several hours after the fire had gone out. This should mean she would not need to constantly attend to the fire.

It was in the aftermath of setting up the kiln that she finally got the chance to talk to Bai Meizhen again. The other girl had been incredibly busy between her lessons with Elder Ying and preparations for breakthrough.

"You are filthy, Ling Qi, and tracking mud on the carpets." Bai Meizhen's first words to her this week were hardly welcoming, nor was her expression. "You will not come any further inside until you have cleaned yourself," she added flatly, pointing back outside.

Ling Qi grinned sheepishly, still riding the high from seeing the egg's qi flare up, drinking in the energy from the flames and wood like a hungry whirlpool. She was pretty filthy,

she could admit, and her disciple's gown hung heavily with the mud caking the lower hem. "I suppose I could go rinse off in the pond first." She sighed. She really wanted a good soak in the bath.

"You will not use our garden pond to wash either," Bai Meizhen continued. "There is a public well. Use it."

Ling Qi raised a hand to brush through her hair but managed to stop herself before she smeared more dirt on herself. "I'm surprised you aren't against me doing something so plebeian as washing my feet in public," she said wryly. "Haven't you and Gu Xiulan been trying to get me to act more ladylike?"

"A futile effort indeed," Bai Meizhen said, not budging an inch. "However, your current state is your own fault. No one forced you to do such peasant work yourself. I would have lent you a few stones to hire a craftsman if you needed it."

"I wanted to do this myself," Ling Qi said firmly. "This egg was entrusted to me, you know? I don't want to risk some random guy from the crafting hall knowing what I'm doing, and the spirit deserves my personal attention and care."

Her friend's expression softened, and she thought she heard an approving murmur from Cui brushing her thoughts. "You will clean everything you touch, including the bath," she said flatly, stepping aside. "And it will not be 'later'."

"Of course not," Ling Qi said a bit nervously, remembering the one and only time she had left dirty dishes out in the kitchen. She paused as she began to move past her housemate though, recalling that she had wanted to ask Meizhen something. "Before I go though, do you want to try training together some time? I could use the practice against mental stuff from someone friendly now that I have Argent Mirror worked out. Ah - I'm not sure how it would help you though," Ling Qi admitted. "I guess I could demonstrate my movement art for you. I remember you mentioning some interest awhile back."

"I suppose I can consider it. Now that I think about it, I never had the chance to ask. Did your meeting with Lady Cai go well?" Bai Meizhen asked.

"It went... pretty well, I think?" Ling Qi responded with uncertainty. "She asked me some weird questions and requested that I take care of somebody breaking the rules at night. She seems fair, I guess. She even mentioned that she didn't have any enmity toward you."

"I see. Perhaps I shall have to speak with her about that spar after all," Bai Meizhen mused. "I owe her that much, and I really should speak with her again."

"Let me know if you do. I think I'd like to see that," Ling Qi said. "Now, I'm pretty sure I should move before I drip any more."

Bai Meizhen blinked and glanced down, wrinkling her nose at the sight of the mud on the floor. "...Yes, quite."

Ling Qi passed her friend by, only briefly noting the thoughtful expression on her face as she headed off to clean up. She wasn't done for the day after all. With the sun falling, she needed to continue cultivating the Eight Phase Ceremony.

Unfortunately, it remained slow going. Even perched on a high cliff under a clear sky, it was incredibly difficult to sense stellar and lunar qi and parse it from the other energies in the environment. Actually trying to absorb it was even more difficult; it was like trying to grasp a cloud.

She hadn't entirely failed though. By the time the end of the week neared, she had felt a few precious, tiny drops of qi seeping into her dantian. With just a little more work, she would master the first phase and finally learn some portion of the last of her arts from the Moon.

However, earlier this week, she had taken down the notice for the 'Moonfill' mission and accepted it. She would need to start working her way up to the mountain peak if she wanted to make it in good time.

According to the instructions she had been given, there was an artificial tunnel that started two thirds of the way up the mountain that would allow her to reach the glade where she could gather nectar from the moon lily. Ling Qi was wary about using it. She had noticed a few other disciples lingering in her peripheral vision when she had taken down the notice and gotten it stamped, and she was pretty sure one of the lingering disciples had been with Kang Zihao at the meeting.

She *could* just choose to climb the mountain. It would be more difficult and tiring than the tunnel, but it would also be harder to track her through the winding cliffs and crevices. She would probably need to deal with spirit beasts though, and the higher up she went, the stronger they would be.

In the end, Ling Qi decided that avoiding the tunnel was a better choice. Climbing the mountain would likely be safer. Just because she had managed to avoid serious trouble in fights so far didn't mean she should get cocky. She wouldn't have any allies with her this time, and while her fight with the worm had gone well enough, Ling Qi also knew that her fellow cultivators would be prepared for her if they were choosing to attack.

Besides, she had been meaning to explore the mountain more, and she had all night to climb. It might even be refreshing to have some time to herself to clear her head. With that in mind, Ling Qi prepared herself for the trip ahead, first by borrowing a few harvesting tools from Su Ling and secondly, by rearranging the contents of her storage ring for more space.

She left her qi cards at home since she could never seem to decide what technique was worth putting in them, and they didn't do her much good when empty. Likewise, her spirit stones and archive pass followed them out. Bai Meizhen would be home tonight so it was pretty unlikely that their home would be robbed. The chances of running into misfortune herself seemed higher.

That done, she dropped by the market to acquire a training bow and a quiver of arrows. While her knives were better for actual fights, her growing archery skills had proved invaluable for hunting, and she figured it couldn't hurt. It wasn't as if the bow weighed anything significant.

Feeling more prepared, Ling Qi set out as the colors of sunset began to paint the sky, circling the mountain to approach the peak from an entirely different angle than where the tunnel would lead.

Ling Qi often had trouble recognizing just how much she had changed. It was easy to forget the newfound power in her body when she was surrounded by peers, but here, alone with her thoughts, Ling Qi couldn't help but think about it. It was perhaps the first time she had lightly jumped across a ten meter gap to proceed. She found herself scrambling up a sheer cliff without any trouble at all, her hands digging easily into cracks in the stone to haul herself up. As a mortal, she would expect to be aching and probably nursing cuts and torn fingernails, but now, she just had to dust her hands off before she continued up the mountain.

It was still tiring, but even as she entered her second hour of climbing, she felt only a slight fatigue, easily dispelled by a few minutes rest. Even periodically cycling her qi to activate trackless escape to break her trail did not tire her much.

Things began to grow more difficult as she ascended. The wind around her took on a frigid chill, and she left the last scraggly bits of plant life behind. The cliffs grew higher



and sheerer, and yet, the peak still lay ahead of her. She was no longer alone; dark shapes flapped in the blackening sky above her, only to be scattered by well aimed shots from her bow when they grew too close or bold. It got her a handful of low grade beast cores too.

Soon, the mountain slope grew slippery with ice and snow, slowing her even further, and winds whipped violently around her as it began to snow. She found herself forging upward, her vision obscured by falling sheets of white. The sudden fierceness of it all surprised her. For so long as she had been in the sect, the weather had been calm; the worst weather she had previously seen on the mountain had been a few light rain showers.

Still, she didn't worry too much. Even with snow crusting her hair and soaking her dress, she only felt mildly uncomfortable. The poor light didn't affect her either, only the opacity of the driving snow. She continued her progress, careful not to slip.

As Ling Qi trudged and climbed on, she began to get a suspicious prickling sensation on the back of her neck. Something was wrong about this sudden snowstorm. It took more time to figure out just exactly what was happening. She was being guided, an unnatural tint of qi in the wind that kicked up now and then, forcing her to choose different paths.

Likewise, the ice slicks seemed to be growing in frequency and not always in positions that made sense. Ling Qi was becoming increasingly sure that someone was messing with her. This suspicion was only confirmed when she caught the sound of someone laughing under the howling of the wind and caught a shadow out of the corner of her eye on a cliff above.

Ling Qi didn't waste any time responding appropriately.

A white flash flew from her sleeve, blending with the falling snow as the dagger streaked toward the shadow on the cliff above her. Ling Qi's eyes narrowed as she summoned her flute to her hand, preparing to dance backward and throw up her mist, only to come up short as the figure gave a high-pitched yelp of surprise. As the knife struck, a dazzling burst of icy blue-white qi appeared... right before the figure tumbled from the ledge it had been on, flailing and landing headfirst in a snowbank.

"Owie, owie," the short, slight figure moaned, further throwing her off at its childish voice. She didn't allow her guard to go down entirely. Even if she couldn't quite bring herself to attack what she could now clearly see looked like a small child of eight or nine years, the 'child' was a second realm like her.

The 'little girl' pouted as she pulled herself out of the snow, snowflakes seeming to avoid her entirely. She had short, messy silver hair and unsettling white eyes, devoid of iris or pupil; her unnaturally pale skin was nearly blue in places. She wore a dark blue child's dress that came down to her knees but was entirely barefoot.

"Such a mean big sister! You threw a knife at Hanyi!" The child stamped her foot angrily in the snow, pointing an accusing finger at Ling Qi.

Ling Qi glared right back, despite the slightly foolish way it made her feel despite herself. This child was pretty clearly a spirit given the way she ignored the weather around her entirely.

"If you don't want to be attacked, you shouldn't lurk around dangerous paths," Ling Qi said unapologetically. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing. I can feel your qi in the wind and the ice." Ling Qi couldn't read qi so accurately yet, but her gut told her she was right.

'Hanyi' scowled, crossing her arms. "I was just playing," she said petulantly. "Mama said to go play in the storm 'cause she had things to do so I did! This place belongs to Mama anyway. Mean and ugly humans shouldn't be here!" She stamped her foot again, kicking up a burst of icy wind.

Ling Qi could not help but feel a spike of irritation at the childish insults, but she wasn't foolish enough to snap back. She didn't think the spirit was lying about having a parent or that this area was its territory.

"Well, your mother should mark her property then," Ling Qi said, not backing down. "I just need to pass through here." Ling Qi wished she could share whatever effect was letting the spirit ignore the weather to converse clearly; her eyes stung from the driving snow. Still, she had to be the mature one here. "... I'm sorry for attacking you, but I do need to be on my way. Can you please stop interfering?"

"No!" Ling Qi's eye twitched at the defiant reply. "Even if Big Sister has good eyes, I won't make it easy. You'll pay for being mean!" the child spirit yelled.

Ling Qi grit her teeth, considering whether she should just knock the obnoxious little spirit out. That ran the risk of drawing the ire of her 'Mother' though, and Ling Qi didn't know how strong that spirit would be.

"I said that I was sorry," she said with all the patience that she could muster. "What can I do to make it up to you?" Maybe Ling Qi could bribe the spirit with sweets or something; she had packed some food for the trip. Or maybe the cores would work better?

Hanyi's angry expression faded, and her round face screwed up in thought. "Since you ruined my first game, you gotta play a different one with me!" she decided, seemingly pleased with her conclusion. "I wanna play tag! If you can catch me twice, I'll let you go through mama's yard."

Ling Qi did her best to disguise her disgruntlement. It was already fairly late, and if she wanted to fulfill the mission, she needed to be at the glade at midnight. Despite Hanyi's game, Ling Qi was still roughly aware of where she was on the mountain and how far she had to go. Would she make it in time if she stopped to play a game with this annoying child?

Ling Qi sighed. She had a feeling the spirit would become a much bigger problem if ignored or snubbed; she still had several hours before the collection deadline would pass so it seemed like playing along was her best option. Ling Qi briefly considered countering Hanyi's offer with one of her own, such as to play the little spirit some songs instead, but decided that Hanyi probably wouldn't agree.

That didn't mean she would just go off blindly though. While spirits weren't always malicious, they were still often tricky, and she expected that in this case, her opponent was probably fickle too.

"I'll play with you," Ling Qi agreed. "But I want to know the rules first. I'm going to be mad if I catch you and you call it cheating or something."

Hanyi crossed her arms and pouted. "It's tag! I run away and you chase me, silly human. Are you dumb too?"

Ling restrained her urge to glare at the child. "So you won't complain if I use arts?" she asked in a sickly-sweet voice. "I won't go easy on you just because you're small."

"You'd better use them or you'll never catch me on those skinny crane legs, big sister." The snow child stuck out her tongue rudely. "Are you gonna play or just complain all night?"

Ling Qi's eye twitched, and she dashed forward at full speed, drawing on the dark around her. She felt gratified as the spirit's milky white eyes widened in surprise as she crossed the distance between them in an eyeblink. Ling Qi was less enthused when her hands closed on the girl's shoulders and went right through, Hanyi's figure exploding in a shower of snow, leaving her holding nothing but quickly melting slush.

"Haha! This will be fun! Big Sister is fast!" She heard the girl's childish, mocking laughter from atop the ridge and looked up in time to see a shadow vanishing into the snowstorm. Ling Qi leaped upward, landing on the ridge, only to feel the the hidden ice

slick beneath the snow at the last moment. She kept herself from falling off the cliff, but she couldn't avoid tumbling through the snow, leaving her already damp dress soaked.

... This was going to be a long game.

## Chapter 59 - Tag 2

Ling Qi thanked the moon above for Sable Crescent Step. It was only by drawing on the speed granted by the art that made keeping up with the laughing child remotely possible. Hanyi was little more than a blue blur between snowflakes at times, and it didn't help that she clearly knew this area like the back of her hand, leading Ling Qi on a merry chase through the often vertical terrain. Ling Qi's irritation grew when it became clear the girl could run straight up a cliff as easily as Ling Qi could down a flat path.

The task was made worse by the way Hanyi seemed to be able to vanish in a flurry of snowflakes when Ling Qi got close or the way Hanyi would trip her up with ice. Ling Qi took more than one nasty tumble that might have been fatal if she were a mortal. Once, the girl had even given her a shove after Ling Qi had barely steadied herself at the top of a ridge.

The little spirit either had no concept of the idea that Ling Qi might be hurt by falling or simply didn't care. Ling Qi wasn't sure which she hoped it was. She was not an amateur when it came to chases though; although she hadn't taken the role of the chaser before, she knew well the various tricks one could use to escape and good tricks for countering them.

She could also tell after a good half hour of 'tag' that the little snow spirit needed a moment's concentration to do her vanishing trick. So after she chased Hanyi into a ravine, she broke off and changed direction, silently dashing up the angled slope while activating Crescent's Grace.

Ling Qi blurred into the dark of the snowstorm, barely a black streak as she rushed suddenly unimpeded along the difficult slope. This time, Hanyi didn't even have a chance to notice her before she dove down from above and tackled the spirit into the snow, snaking her arms around the little girl's waist.

"That's one!" Ling Qi couldn't help but crow as she felt Hanyi squirming and trying to escape her grip.

The girl was as cold as a block of ice, and her hands and arms burned where she touched the girl. But Ling Qi had caught her; the child in her grip was solid. She sat up from the bank the two of them had landed in, shaking off the snow, and grinned victoriously at the obnoxious child pouting up at her. After that annoying chase, she didn't care if gloating was childish.

“Ah, no fair! Big Sister is way too fast,” Hanyi grumbled, squirming free of Ling Qi’s grip and dancing away, her bare feet not even leaving a mark in the snow. “It must be because she’s so tall, just like a mountain ogre! Hanyi will have to play more seriously now!”

What followed was probably the most miserable hour in Ling Qi’s recent memory. If chasing Hanyi down had been irritating before, it was infuriating now. She found herself buffeted by heavy winds, tripped by ice, and scrabbling up high rock faces; all the while, she had to deal with the little brat laughing at her every time she made a misstep.

Several times, she went for a tag only to end up with nothing but snow in her hands, and she found her nerves beginning to fray. She didn’t want to spend all of her qi chasing Hanyi down, which meant she didn’t want to simply chain together Crescent’s Grace, but the girl was too canny to be caught out the same way twice.

Ling Qi had other options though. She allowed her pace to flag and deliberately began breathing harder, playing at being tired. Sure enough, the snow spirit picked up on this, and after a time, Hanyi began to play around instead of keeping as much distance as she could. Ling Qi had to wait a little, but soon, the girl got close enough in the process of pelting Ling Qi with snowballs that she could strike.

Her flute, palmed in the time that she had spent waiting for Hanyi to lower her guard, was whipped up as she began to play, interlacing the first two melodies she had learned. Mist rolled out rapidly, mingling with the snowstorm to white out all vision.

“Eh... Mama!?” Hanyi’s head jerked back and forth as she was engulfed in mist on her snowbank perch, an expression of childish panic on her face. Ling Qi, being able to see through the mist, saw Hanyi’s expression of panic morph into a pout. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing, Big Sister? Trying to trick me won’t work!”

Ling Qi would have smiled if she wasn’t busy playing. A few graceful steps had carried her behind a boulder and out of the girl’s immediate sight. She could hear the snow child whining in frustration as Hanyi found herself getting turned around in the mist.

With her movement so limited and Ling Qi’s ability to hide, it was almost too simple to find a higher place and leap down in ambush, landing feet first on the annoying girl’s back and leaving her facedown in the snow. Normally, Ling Qi would feel terrible about sitting on the back of a child, but the chase had not inclined her fondly toward the spirit.

“Got you,” Ling Qi said a trifle smugly as she lowered her flute. “That makes two.”

She clamped a hand on the little girl's shoulder even as she moved to let her up. Unsurprisingly, Hanyi didn't look very happy. A dark blue, nearly purple flush of exertion and anger colored her childish face.

"No fair! You cheated! How could I run away like that? You're just being mean cause you don't want to play anymore!"

"You said there weren't any rules," Ling Qi replied unsympathetically, not releasing the girl's shoulder despite the way her fingers were starting to feel numb. "I played with you. Now you have to do what you promised and let me through."

"I don't wanna!" Hanyi said, stamping her foot. "I want Big Sister to stay and keep playing. It was fun until you cheated!"

If she hadn't just spent an hour and a half chasing down the little hellion, Ling Qi might have been affected by the little spirit's quivering lower lip and wide eyes. As the snow child opened her mouth to speak again though, a frigid burst of wind screamed over them, blasting away Ling Qi's mist and leaving the air briefly free of snow.

"Enough, Hanyi."

Ling Qi looked up and paled as she caught sight of the figure standing atop a half-buried boulder. She had heard the term "fatal beauty" bandied about in stories and poems, but this was the first time she had seen it. The spirit stood more than two meters tall and yet retained the sort of graceful, feminine look that Ling Qi often envied. Long, unbound silver hair fluttered in the wind like a cloak of silk, partially obscuring deathly pale and sharp features. Unlike Hanyi, the older spirit's eyes seemed lit from within by a frigid light, and her full lips were the color of fresh blood.

Hanyi's mother wore a gown of stark black, fully concealing her below her neck. Ling Qi wasn't even certain that there was a full body under the gown given the unnatural way the lower part rippled as the spirit moved. Most importantly, Ling Qi could perceive the weight and power of her qi. The spirit was fourth grade.

"Cease troubling this disciple," the older spirit chastised, making the little girl lower her head, pout still present. Then Hanyi's mother turned her frigid gaze to Ling Qi. "Disciple of Argent Sect, release my daughter." Her voice was as harsh as a winter gale.

Ling Qi released the younger spirit as if burned and hastily stood up to offer a respectful bow, scrabbling for memory of talks with Bai Meizhen.

"Of course, honored guardian of the peak." She nearly tripped over the words. "I apologize for the trespass and meant no offense."

The older spirit made a sharp gesture, briefly revealing the formless void of cold darkness beneath her sleeve, and Hanyi scurried to her side looking... Well - she looked like she was trying to look contrite.

"These passes are free for your kind. My home does not lie here. My daughter was simply playing mischief while out of bounds." The older spirit turned her stern expression on her daughter, causing the young spirit to wilt under her judgement.

"Sorry, mama. The yard was boring," Hanyi mumbled, scuffing her bare foot through the snow.

"Thank you for your patience, Disciple," the mother said, and Ling Qi noticed now that her lips weren't even really moving when she spoke. "I will clear the storm in your path. I assume your destination is the glade of the moon lily?"

"Yes, honored spirit," Ling Qi replied, clasping her hands in front of her, relief coloring her thoughts as she offered another bow. "It was... no trouble at all." She wasn't sure how sincere that had sounded. Going by the slight twitch of the older spirit's lips, the answer was not very.

"Is that so?" the spirit said, managing to sound dubious without changing her tone at all. "Regardless, you have my thanks for entertaining my daughter. Be on your way, and perhaps we will speak again when your melody has matured."

Ling Qi blinked, throwing up her hands to shield her eyes as the snowstorm intensified. When she lowered them, the spirits were gone, and the snowfall had begun to slow. As she looked down, she saw at her feet something bright and glittering. Picking it up, she found a fine silver hairpin, the attached ornament in the shape of a snowflake. If she squinted, she could make out the tiny characters etched into the metal.

Ling Qi called out a few times, offering to return the pin in case it had been left behind by mistake but received no response. Eventually, she stored it away and moved on, taking a few moments to get her bearings. The way was now largely clear of snow, swept clean as if by a giant's brush.

With that help, it only took another half hour to reach the glade, especially since the other denizens of the mountain seemed to be avoiding her. Every beast she spotted scampered away as soon as she spotted it.

The glade itself was almost anticlimactic. It was a simple hollow behind a narrow crack in the rock, unnaturally warm compared to the outside. A clear pond filled most of the space, but it was surrounded by out of place greenery. The moon lily was a faintly



glowing white flower that grew from the center of the pond. Silver nectar pooled in the cup formed by its petals.

Ling Qi followed the instruction provided in the mission packet carefully so as not to tear the delicate petals, draining the nectar into the provided container before sealing it.

It was at that point that she noticed the dozens of eyes peering at her from the darkness of the cranny-ridden walls of the glade. She didn't know how she had missed them coming in, but she was certainly aware now of the many, many white furred, red-eyed rabbits watching her from their rocky burrows, noses twitching and eyes glowing. Thankfully, they seemed content to just watch as she backed out of the glade, sweating under their regard. She was pretty sure at least one of those rabbits had been grade three too.

Ling Qi wasn't sure of the reason behind their behavior, but she was glad the rabbits hadn't been hostile. She had the nectar, and now, it was time to head back. The snowstorm was already beginning to fill in her cleared path though. Should she return the same way, brave the tunnel, or pick a new path down?

Well, she didn't really feel like dealing with a possible ambush from her fellow disciples tonight. So after sending the nectar into her ring, Ling Qi began to pick her way down the cliffs in the opposite direction of her original path. She had to assume any potential attackers weren't incompetent; it was likely that they would at least find the start of her trail. The tunnel was out for obvious reasons as well. Besides, the new path would allow her to poke around the mountain for interesting things.

Ling Qi began her meandering descent, her sense of urgency having faded with the acquisition of the nectar. As long as she delivered it by noon, she would be fine. The walk was actually rather relaxing now that the snow was no longer coming down so hard and the wind no longer so driven. That wasn't to say she found her path completely unimpeded, but there was nothing that troubled her too much. She managed to shoot down a few more minor buzzards and once found herself standing off with a silvery white mountain lion, who eventually seemed to decide that she was too tough a bone to chew.

She noted a few interesting things like a herd of shaggy, grade one mountain goats that might make for good hunting with Han Jian and the others and a few places where plants she vaguely remembered hearing Su Ling talk about grew. She didn't bother collecting them. Even if she managed to harvest them correctly, she would probably just forget about them before she could make use of them.

She really was a greedy girl, feeling put out that she hadn't managed to find anything of real interest when she had already had a fortuitous encounter tonight. Ling Qi shook her head in bemusement at her thoughts as she carefully hopped across another ravine, her dress fluttering in the mountain winds.

It was beginning to warm up a little as she worked her way back down toward the treeline, and Ling Qi was glad for it. Even if she wasn't harmed by the temperature, she was still soaked and cold and was looking forward to a nice warm bath when she got home. However, as she descended back into the frosted conifers that grew in this part of the mountain, she found that she still had some luck after all.

Working her way through the trees, she found a wide clearing atop a raised plateau where soft grass and hardy wildflowers grew. The light of the moon and stars seemed especially bright here. It might make for a good place to cultivate her Eight Phase Ceremony.

Unfortunately, it also seemed she wasn't the only one here. While she was exploring the meadow, her instincts and senses picked up the approach of heavy and numerous footfalls, allowing her to slip away and hide in time. What she saw chilled her joy at the find.

It seemed the meadow was home to a rather large pack of Rimefur wolves. She counted at least fifteen of them, all grade two, in the group that entered the clearing. There was also a rather large pair, closer to the size of a horse than a wolf, among them. One was a heavily scarred and thickly muscled beast with blue white fur, and the other was a slightly smaller and sleeker wolf with black fur flecked with white. Her art could not read the exact stage of their cultivation, but she got the impression that they were not far from grade three.

She didn't think she could take this group - not alone - and that was only confirmed when she found herself locking eyes with the smaller of the alpha pair. She fled at top speed, blending with the darkness as the incensed howls of the wolfpack followed her down the mountain. Thankfully, Ling Qi was as fleet as a mountain wind, and she was able to escape successfully with the aid of her Sable Crescent Step art, even if it was rather taxing on her qi.

It was the better part of an hour before they finally stopped chasing her, and her legs burned from the exertion. She had definitely been put through her paces when it came to speed tonight.

She was glad to return to the more civilized part of the mountain and head home for that bath. She exchanged greetings with Bai Meizhen, who was seated at their table staring

at a block of clay as if it had personally offended her somehow, and then settled in for what remained of the night.

In the morning, she took the time to cash in the common cores she had picked up. They were fairly low quality, and she still wasn't great at harvesting so she only managed to get five stones for each. Better than nothing.

Strangely, there seemed to be a rumor going around that a dozen odd disciples had come limping into the Medicine Hall in the early morning with nasty, badly bleeding wounds. What was up with that, she wondered with a slight smirk.

Well, it had nothing to do with her anymore. It was time to start preparing for the next week.

## Interlude: Bai Meizhen

*'This is boring, Sister Meizhen.'* Cui complained. *'Why do we need to do such a thing?'*

"We are hardly doing anything," Bai Meizhen replied sourly. "I am the only one capable of performing this task. You need not stay for this." She stared hard at the block of grayish brown clay in front of her, mocking her with its mundane and inert nature.

*'Where else would I go?'* Cui grumbled childishly, and Bai Meizhen felt her coils shifting around her neck. *'It is cold outside, and Sister Meizhen has forbidden me from doing anything fun.'*

"I have forbidden you from playing tricks or eating pets and familiars, yes," Bai Meizhen said dryly. "Now hush. I must concentrate."

*'Hmph. If Sister Meizhen wants to play in the mud so much, Cui will just be silent then,'* Cui said in a tone that Meizhen knew meant she would have to placate her with something tasty later.

Bai Meizhen returned her attention to the clay, narrowing her eyes. She did not even disagree with her cousin. She felt that this was a pointless waste of time, but it was also a task assigned by an Elder. She just wasn't certain whether the insufferably cheerful woman was mocking her by giving out meaningless tasks instead of real training.

Elder Ying confused her, and it was not a feeling she enjoyed. The woman was far too informal and behaved more familiarly with her than was appropriate. She had certainly not been condescended to so blatantly in... ever, really.

*Cool, dry hands brushed affectionately through the soft fuzz of hair that had just begun to grow out, and a cold voice was tinged with rare warmth as Mother chided her for some childish misdeed.*

Bai Meizhen pushed away that fragment of memory; such sentimentality was pointless. Even if it was mere pettiness, she would not fail her lessons. She had been given a block of qi-absorbing clay and told to tease out the true shape hidden within it as she meditated on her relationships and connections with the world. Bai Meizhen had never learned to sculpt as it was not among the artistic endeavors considered necessary for her station. As a cultivator, her work would outstrip all but the best mortal craftsmen, even without tools, but that was hardly the point.

What did the woman even mean? What did she want her to shape from the clay? Bai Meizhen was aware that earth was the element of acceptance and community, but she

already knew her place in the world. What did she have to consider here? Was she meant to create some pro-Empire image then? An offer of loyalty and solidarity from a treacherous Bai to prove that their program was working?

She felt her lips curling in disdain and Cui's coils tightening in response to her emotions but calmed herself. It was beneath her to react so. She would simply perform the task as instructed.

Closing her eyes, she considered where to begin. Family was the single most important connection a cultivator had. So who among her clan did she feel connection and 'affection' for?

Her thoughts turned first to her grandfather, and his cold and pitiless eyes flashed through her thoughts, disapproving as they always were. Grandfather had trained her - as he had the rest of the youngest generation of the Bai in the hopes of teasing out outstanding talent. No, that was simply the bond of familial duty; instinctively, she felt that it wasn't what Elder Ying was looking for. Grandfather had rarely ever even spoken to her directly, save for an occasional correction or word of grudging praise at success.

Should she consider Father then? She felt a twist of bitterness at even considering the thought. Father was an embarrassment to the clan, a rabbit in the den of serpents and a concession in the name of financial concerns.

Bai Meizhen breathed out, clearing her thoughts of such unfilial musings. That was unfair. Father was an outsider, married into the clan. It was unreasonable to expect more of him. She wished he could manage a simple family dinner without looking as if he were going to faint though.

Should she consider her cousins then? She allowed memories of familiar faces and rivalries to pass through her thoughts one at a time. No, they were rivals for position in the clan. There might be a degree of polite cordiality and the acknowledgement that they would back one another against outsiders but little else. She had been too busy with her cultivation to engage with the little cliques that had formed among them, and she was aware of the various minor resentments many in the clan held toward her for one reason or another.

Aunt Suzhen then, the hope of the clan, said to have the greatest chance of breaking through to White and restoring a degree of the Bai's honor. It was thanks to her Aunt that she had Cui, had been awakened, and had mastered the Abyssal Mantle art so well. It had disappointed her in her earliest days that she had little talent for the metal arts which her Aunt made such prominent use of. Despite that Aunt Suzhen, of all her family, had shown her the most kindness and consideration, but her aunt was incredibly

busy with the business of the clan and her provincial government duties. Meizhen could count the times she had spoken to her aunt on the fingers of one hand.

Cui was the obvious answer, and she unconsciously raised her hand to run her fingers along her cousin's cool emerald scales. Cui, for all her gluttony and sloth, was a good sister. Her lips quirked up in amusement as she felt Cui's tongue flick against her throat irritably. It seemed she had been thinking a little too loudly there.

Meizhen traced her fingers over the clay thoughtfully. Was that the answer then? She scowled at the block, feeling like she was still missing something.

Her hands jerked slightly as the door banged open, and she quickly raised her head, ready to stare down an intruder. Likely, it was that vulgar Sun witch, back for another round. She had been focused too hard on her task if she had failed to notice the approach of a rival. Her gathering qi scattered a moment later when she found herself looking upon Ling Qi instead.

Her housemate currently resembled a wet cat, soaked to the bone as she was. Meizhen pursed her lips as she examined the skinny girl. Really, it had taken long enough for Ling Qi to start dressing properly, but the other girl still showed little care for her dignity, appearing with brambles caught on her dress and twigs in her flyaway hair. It was frustrating.

"What happened to you?" Meizhen found herself asking, distracted from her task.

"Played tag with a snow spirit, then had to run from a pack of wolves," Ling Qi muttered tiredly, absently kicking the door closed behind her.

Bai Meizhen glanced away, not wishing to take advantage of the girl's slovenly state to stare. Ling Qi was practically indecent right now. Meizhen hoped that Ling Qi at least had the presence of mind to stay out of sight and avoid scandal on the way back. The other girl was so oblivious to the importance of appearance and presentation.

"... I see," she said, returning her gaze to her project. "Were you able to complete your mission regardless?"

Ling Qi was unhurt so there was not much reason for concern. She had worried that the other girl would find trouble, going out alone among her fellow disciples, but she had not voiced it. She would not stunt Ling Qi's growth by coddling her.

"Yeah. It went fine honestly," Ling Qi said, glancing briefly at her as she passed through the room, idly brushing strands of hair from her face. Ling Qi's braid had come loose,

and her hair was now clinging distractingly to the curve of her neck. "I really want a hot bath and a nap though so I'm going to turn in. G'night Bai Meizhen."

"Good night," Meizhen replied as the girl slumped off into the hall leading to the baths. Ling Qi... She did not know what to make of the girl at times. The girl had bouts of incredible good fortune and was clearly talented, but she simply refused to fit into Bai Meizhen's understanding of things.

*'The mouse is getting in trouble again. Perhaps I, Cui, should accompany her next time she goes out to play. Better than poking at mud,'* her cousin suggested.

"Do as you will," Bai Meizhen said. "I doubt Ling Qi will have any patience for your gluttony either."

*'Sister Meizhen is cruel,'* Cui sulked. *'Maybe I should tell the mouse that you find her legs distracting.'*

"You will be hunting for yourself for the foreseeable future then," Bai Meizhen hissed quietly. She did not think of Ling Qi in that sense, but the girl was simply so indiscreet. It didn't help that she had been growing more distracted by such things since coming to the Sect. It was frustrating, but she was aware that it was simply a foible of her age and development.

No, Ling Qi was complicated.

She called Ling Qi her friend, and the other girl seemed to return the feeling. Friendship with outsiders was a matter of convenience though, favors offered for favors owed. That was how their relationship began. She had not been so foolish and conceited as the lesser nobles. She knew that an unawakened commoner brought to the Sect would obviously be of high talent. The Ministry would not bother taking her in and bringing her here otherwise.

It had cost her little to offer Ling Qi some minor favors at first, explaining simple things as one would to a child. The girl would likely rise to some degree of prominence and be a useful contact when she left the Sect, provided that Ling Qi made it through her tour of service.

Meizhen had even toyed with the idea of offering her vassalage. The Bai were certainly short on vassals still, lands lying fallow and abandoned by the treasonous scum who chose to serve the barbarian Sun. She suspected Ling Qi would not have asked for much if she had brought it up in the beginning.

Something had held her back though. The casual way the girl interacted with her was refreshing in a way. Meizhen enjoyed it and hadn't wanted to end it by placing a clear and obvious delineation in rank between them.

Ling Qi's vulgar behavior was also frustrating. Meizhen wondered sometimes if the other girl had been raised by wolves like some barbarian legend, but it was not her place to pry into personal matters. Things changed gradually, and she grew comfortable with the status quo between them. She grew complacent.

Then they had attempted the trial together, and she had been faced with the betrayal of the thing wearing the girl's face and the subsequent revelation of the girl's apparent death.

Her rage had been unseemly. The Bai were a clan famed for their self control - and for good reason. A Bai's fury was as cruel and destructive as the great storms spawned by the dreams of Grandmother Serpent. She did not regret making that creature beg pitifully for death, but she did regret the weakness it represented in her.

She had grown too attached to an outsider, too invested in her well being. The Bai had been shown time and again that they could only rely on themselves. Outsiders would fall to the siren call of power, whether it be to the Imperial Throne that had used them for so long or the murderous drumbeats of the Red Garden. Grandfather would be so disappointed in her if he knew.

She could not say she loved Ling Qi as she did Cui, who was her sister in all the ways that mattered, but she would be lying to herself if she said that Ling Qi was not important to her. Lying to herself was a greater sin than even the existence of a bond; lies would stifle and slow her cultivation if left to fester.

It was fine. Ling Qi could stand on her own and had gained the attention of the Cai heiress. They could remain in contact even after parting ways, and Bai Meizhen would not have to show such a glaring weakness to her family. She shuddered to imagine Ling Qi behaving with her usual Ling Qi-ness in front of her clan or, ancestors forbid, Grandfather.

Still, perhaps these thoughts were what she was meant to think of for this project. She turned her attention back to the clay, focusing on finishing the task. She would need to complete it by sunrise, for her next lesson with Elder Ying.



# Chapter 60 - Simmering 1

Ling Qi had not been focusing as heavily on cultivation in the past few weeks, but she felt that it was time for that to change, at least temporarily. As much as she was growing quickly, there was still so much she needed to do.

To that end, she began her week by heading to the archive. This week, she wanted to obtain a dedicated offensive art. Zephyr's Breath was good, especially when she was with Han Jian and the others, but she wanted something useful for when she was on her own, something that she could use to end battles more quickly. She wouldn't always have the time to dance around an enemy while they were worn down by a thousand cuts after all.

Ling Qi found several interesting possibilities during her search. The Falling Stars and Ashen Shadow arts were both great for different fighting styles, and she spent quite a while reviewing the arts and agonizing over which of them she wanted to learn. She ended up spending several hours longer in the archive than she intended actually, paralyzed by indecision as she was.

It turned out for the best as she turned up a lucky find while researching elements and combat tactics to help her make her decision. Buried behind a pile of scrolls on archery theory, she found a small, dusty clay container still sealed by wax. Inside was a single, dull white pill with a very strong medicinal scent. Hurriedly, she tucked it into her storage ring for later identification.

In the end, she chose the Falling Stars art. Ling Qi felt that she was rapidly getting better with a bow, and having an art to actually make use of the weapon could only improve her hunting ability, which was her best way of making money at the moment. She thought she might come back for the other art later, but for now, she had to focus on learning her new art, or rather, opening the meridians needed for it and Sable Crescent Step.

It turned out her fortune had been particularly good. The dull white pill she had found, although on the verge of expiration, greatly aided in the opening of new meridians. The Medicine Hall disciple said it was still safe to use for a few more weeks as the wax seal she had broken had kept it preserved.

In any case, she found herself rapidly clearing a new pair of meridians in the spine and arm with the medicinally-induced surge. Her body once again tingled with energy and drive from the quantity of cultivation drugs she had taken.

Sadly, with everything else she needed to do, she didn't have time to train the art itself despite her desire to get in more practice with her archery. Ling Qi was able to continue improving her mundane skills with simple practice though.

Her burgeoning archery skills were a great help when she joined Han Jian and the others for their weekly hunt; she still wasn't good enough to outright kill the beasts they hunted with a single shot, but she was more than able to slow or cripple them for her companions to finish. It was enjoyable, sighting a target from dozens of meters away and allowing all but her target and her arrow to fade from her mind. It was almost like meditation.

That feeling had only grown when she punched an arrow through the shoulder of a Black Steel Bear, causing the powerful grade two beast to stumble and crash to the ground rather than bowl over Fan Yu and Han Jian. It hadn't put the beast down, but it had given her friends the opportunity they needed to finish the fight.

Perhaps it was because of her own good mood that she noticed that Gu Xiulan seemed withdrawn compared to her usual boisterous and outgoing self. So after parting ways with the boys, she broached the subject on the way back home.

"Did you want to go to the springs together?" Ling Qi asked as she fell in beside Gu Xiulan. "It's been some time since we've had an opportunity to relax together."

The shorter girl cocked her head to the side slightly, giving Ling Qi an appraising look. "Oh? I had thought you would be busy this week. You are practically giving off medicinal fumes, you know," she teased.

Ling Qi surreptitiously glanced down at herself, just to make sure the other girl wasn't being literal. "Is it really that obvious?" she asked. "I didn't think I was behaving strangely."

Gu Xiulan laughed into her sleeve at Ling Qi's reaction. "No, no. Worry not. You have not had another little episode like the days after Elder Zhou's test. You are running rather warm though," she said lightly. Ling Qi shot her a confused look, and Gu Xiulan smirked, showing a bit of her usual arrogant pride. "You are not the only one who has been mastering new arts. Father sent me instruction for several family techniques inside my new storage ring."

"Oh," Ling Qi said. She supposed it made sense that a perception art of the Gu clan would involve some kind of heat-based sensing. "I'm glad you're progressing well then," she offered, noting the minute twitch of displeasure in the other girl's expression. "I am training hard this week, but that's no excuse to ignore other people entirely. I'd like to

think I'm getting better at that," she added self-deprecatingly, offering the other girl a lopsided smile.

Gu Xiulan shook her head, a slightly bitter twist on her lips. "I suppose not. You may just become civilized yet," she said airily. "If only others could remember the same," she grumbled under her breath, looking to the path ahead.

Ling Qi gave her friend a sidelong look as she walked beside her, gown fluttering around her legs. She really did need to consider getting some wrappings or something. It was hard to remember to control the thing at all times. That, too, was training, she supposed.

"Has something been bothering you lately?" Ling Qi asked bluntly. "It must be tricky if you haven't confronted it head-on yet."

The fiery girl shot her a heated look, which Ling Qi met with a calm and cool one of her own. They paused in their walk before Gu Xiulan snorted in a distinctly unladylike fashion and looked away.

"What happened to the Ling Qi who flinched at the first sign of my displeasure?" Gu Xiulan wondered. "Perfectly happy to follow along in my shadow and allow me the lead in our interactions."

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes, irritated at the other girl's insinuations. "Well, I got stronger," she said flatly. "As for the second, she never existed. I might have found you intimidating at first, but I'd like to think we're past that. I just want to know what is bothering you."

"I suppose we are," the haughty girl responded, crossing her arms under her chest as she looked up at Ling Qi. "I had imagined I might hire you on as a handmaiden, you know, in the aftermath of the test. How foolish that notion seems now." A slight wave of heat around her betrayed Gu Xiulan's irritation. "I am trapped on the cusp of breaking through to Silver," she admitted, anger coloring her tone as she looked away from Ling Qi. "It is infuriating to see you overtake me further every day. Is that what you wished me to say?"

"I didn't wish for anything," Ling Qi said simply, giving the other girl a hard look. "We're friends, right? Gu Xiulan, you said you had my back that first day the truce ended, and I have yours, but I'm not going to slow down. Not for anyone. I'd think you would approve of that."

"I do," the girl responded grudgingly. "I might have thought you a potential servant at first, but I cannot deny that you are a peer now. I apologize. It seems my composure is more frayed than I thought."

"It's fine," Ling Qi dismissed. "I don't doubt that you'll be able to manage soon." She thought it best not to mention that Han Fang had broken through to Yellow Soul, evening out his cultivation, if her new sense for qi was correct. "Do you want to soak for a bit then and maybe get something to eat? You may just need some time to relax and reflect to clear things up."

"Perhaps," Gu Xiulan allowed. "In fact, yes, that may be wise. Taking my mind off things for an afternoon may be what I need to center myself properly."

Ling Qi nodded in satisfaction. "So that aside, how have things been with you and the others? We don't have much time to chat when we're hunting."

Gu Xiulan frowned. "It has been... well enough, I suppose," she said. "I do wish Han Jian would stop avoiding me. It is becoming irksome."

Ling Qi gave her a curious look as she caught up. "He's been avoiding you? I didn't notice anything weird during training."

"Of course not. I would not so undermine his authority as to question him on personal matters during such exercises," Gu Xiulan said dismissively, even as her gaze drifted to the ground. "He has been avoiding me outside of them though, and it is not merely due to a busy cultivation schedule. I know it."

Ling Qi made a sound of agreement as she walked beside her friend and allowed the girl to vent. It seemed that Gu Xiulan was feeling ignored by Han Jian, and she got hints that there were other pressures involved as well. Her comments on Fan Yu had a particular edge to them that hadn't been there before, and she seemed reluctant to speak further on the sister in Inner Sect.

Ling Qi simply went with the flow, offering an attentive ear and occasionally interjecting her own grumbles, such as her creeping concern at how quiet Huang Da was being and her worries over the mission Cai had asked her to perform. In the end though, their chat turned to lighter things. Gu Xiulan complimented her new talisman and expressed relief that Ling Qi had finally ditched the 'tacky' bracers, and Ling Qi recounted a slightly altered story of her game of tag with the spirit Hanyi.

Once they were finished with their bath, the two girls strolled down to the market to continue chatting. They ended up purchasing some kind of flavored powdered ice served in a bowl that had intrigued Xiulan. It was as they were sitting together at one of

the tables set up near the market stalls that the subject turned to something more serious.

"We need to make more of a name for ourselves, I think," Gu Xiulan declared haughtily, only to ruin the moment as she shivered, closing her eyes and scrunching her nose as she took a slightly too large bite of her odd, icy treat.

Ling Qi was rather more careful, taking only a small spoonful of the dark blue powder. The treat satisfied her sweet tooth quite well, but it wasn't something to eat quickly.

"What do you mean?" Ling Qi inquired after the icy flakes had melted on her tongue. "We're already doing pretty good, aren't we?" The number of second stage cultivators was increasing in a steady trickle by the week, but they were still among the first.

"Pretty good is hardly good enough," Gu Xiulan said, prodding her own red dyed ice with her spoon, seemingly hesitant to take another bite. "No, we both deserve more glory and renown. What do you say - once I complete my breakthrough, shall we find some older Outer Disciples to challenge?" she asked, taking the plunge and furrowing her brows as she took another bite.

Ling Qi's eyebrows climbed high. "What in the world makes you think that is a good idea?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, there is hardly anyone in our year to challenge, is there?" Xiulan explained haughtily, waving her spoon for emphasis. "Crushing some of those who have recently straggled into the second realm will hardly be looked upon well, and I am not quite proud enough to consider challenging the Sun princess or the Cai heiress. I suppose we could make an attempt on that Kang fellow..."

"Alright, granted," Ling Qi hurried on, not wanting the other girl to talk herself into thinking that challenging Kang Zihao directly was a good idea. "Why do that at all though?"

"I need a proper challenge. My Sister said as much," Gu Xiulan replied. "Hunting beasts is all well and good, but it is not the same as fighting a fellow cultivator. I think that is why I have slowed down of late. Nothing has brought my blood to boil since that first day after the truce ended."

Ling Qi was silent as she eyed the other girl continuing to daintily eat her powdered ice. "... Won't older disciples be even stronger than the top of our year though?"

“Of course not,” Gu Xiulan said dismissively. “Some certainly, but not all. I am certain I could find us an appropriate challenge or two, and once we defeat a few, the challenges will come to us, and we can stand in our own glory rather than playing second.”

Ling Qi wasn't sure that Gu Xiulan's plan was a good idea, but she didn't reject the idea outright. She still made an effort to steer Xiulan back to safer topics for the remainder of their meal though.

The two girls parted ways around sunset with Ling Qi heading off to cultivate Eight Phase Ceremony on the high cliffs and Gu Xiulan heading home to begin preparations for her next breakthrough attempt.

## Bonus 10: Death of the Sage

... and so the brute Qin, supported by his own mountain savages, the monstrous bandits of Zheng, and the peerless blades of the Bai, struck down the last of the Sea Kings of Jin, and as had become his custom, took his slain foe's daughters as his own. Long did our mourners weep for the people of Jin, erstwhile friends of the Golden Kingdom, just as they wept for our kind and beautiful Princess Bluesun, who offered herself to be caged rather than incite the great fires of the Purifying Sun and reduce the land and people to ash.

The brute, now ruler of six kingdoms, grew more arrogant still, styling himself "Sagacious and Divine Emperor of the Celestial Empire." Yet even then, the brute's pride and lust were not satisfied.

His lascivious eyes turned west and fell upon the Kingdom of the Red Sun and the Great Priestess of their people, said to be an incarnation of the Great Mother herself. To the rutting brute Qin, such a temptation could not be resisted. When his demand for submission was rejected by the Priestess and Kings of the Red Sun, he once again called his armies to war.

However, the Red Sun Kingdom was mighty and gave pause to even the bellicose Bai. The Red Sun Kingdom knew the secrets of the sacred metal from which the Bai forged their weapons and armor. A fierce and proud people, they bent their necks to no one, and unlike the similarly proud Horned Lords, their people were not a collection of barely connected enclaves, grown unused to war.

In the far past, in the days of the Legendary Yao and his daughter, the first White Serpent Queen, even the Bai's conquests had ground to a halt against them. In the courts of the brute, the serpents advised caution.

However, the brute Qin showed his true nature, and with the support of the barbarous Zheng, he overruled all objections and mustered his armies. How many of our sons and daughters were sent to die for a conqueror's pride and lust? How many fields lie fallow and dead without their guardians to safeguard the people in their labor? Too many! The Golden Kingdom starved and withered in the face of this feckless and unending war!

How weary then, must have been the Jin, whose harbors still lay shattered and whose ships still lay at the bottom of the sea from the brute Qin's recent conquest? Or the Horned Lords of the South, whose redoubts and trails had been salted and burned, their council of chiefs dragged through the streets of the brute's capital in chains like mere beasts?

The armies of Qin clashed with the Red Sun, and men died in thousands, gaining nothing. When the man himself rode forth with his advisors, the Kings and the Priestess met him, and though the world shook with their warring, neither side could slay the other. The people of the Red Sun were not numerous; their harsh land and poor soil had never allowed for fields as great as ours, their rivers were not rich with fish as the Bai's lakes were, and their cities lacked the unbreakable fortresses of Zheng. The brute cared not for his losses for there were always more men to pull from the fields of the six kingdoms, but the people of the Red Sun mourned each and every loss.

Despite this, for fifty years, the people of the Red Sun resisted with a fervor that shames this son of the Golden Kingdom. Infuriated by the lengthy resistance, the brute's tactics grew harsher and more cruel with every day. Drenched in blood, the jungle grew red in truth, and it is said by those who survived that the very earth and the jungle itself began to fight the armies of Qin. Crippled veterans of the Red Sun began to return to war, changed and twisted, merged with spirits to replace missing limbs and shattered channels.

In the end, it was not enough. No matter the sacrifices made, no matter the valor of the people of the Red Sun, the brute's armies ground on. When a city was captured, the brute would build a great pyre and burned their inhabitants, one and all, without regard to age or mortality. The air of the Red Sun choked with ash, the rivers ran red, and the jungle grew bloated and monstrous.

At last, it seemed the people of the Red Sun had enough. In the hall of their most holy temple, the Great Priestess supplicated herself in submission before Qin. His greed and arrogance having only grown in the face of defiance, the brute quickly claimed his prize. But in the end, the brute's lust proved his undoing.

By morning, the brute lay thrashing in his bed. The empty streets of the temple city quaked with his choked screams as his own blood burned in his veins and melted his flesh and his own qi seared his soul to ash. Assured of his invincibility, the brute had given the seed of his downfall to the one who could most use it.

Hail to the Great Priestess of the Red Sun, weaver of blood, weaver of life! The blood of the mother and unborn the focus and the blood of a city - all given to end his menace forevermore.

How the brute's monstrous mother did rage! Lightning rained like water from the skies and wiped the temple city from existence. The dragon's rampage fell upon the jungles, and the people of the Red Sun suffered another great reaping.



The people were not without hope however. The spirit of the Great Priestess lived on. Born of sacrifice and rivers of blood, a new Goddess was born, and her thorns struck the brute's dragon mother harshly, piercing scale and organ. Wounded, the beast fled back to the capital.

Without the brute at its helm, his court fell into disarray. The Bai glared across the empty throne at the Zheng, each seeking to place their own blood upon the Dragon Throne. The loyalists of the other kingdoms schemed and maneuvered, each seeking to gain their own power in the chaos. The children of the brute squabble and fight like savages. Already, tales of kinslaying spread through the land. It saddens me to know that the children of our princess are among their number; it seems that even our radiant blood cannot withstand the foul corruption of the brute. Cowards, all of them, seeking only personal power rather than freedom!

This is not a time for mourning or petty politics! The brute is dead, his beastly mother sleeping off terrible wounds; the Celestial Peaks lie in disarray. The snake and the ape feud and fight! Now is the time to throw off the conquerors! At last, the Golden Kingdom will rise again. From ashes, just like our great Matriarch, the Purifying Sun, we will emerge stronger than ever before! No more will we bow to mountain savages! We will free our princess, and once more, be ruled by a true Golden Queen! The foul edifice of this accursed empire will be brought tumbling down, its name erased from history!

*- Surviving fragment of an unnamed text, translated into modern imperial, banned under the first imperial dynasty, the Qin*

## Chapter 61 - Simmering 2

Ling Qi's week only grew busier as time went on. She had managed to get Meizhen to agree to train with her, but she almost immediately regretted it. The other girl was absolutely pitiless in training, pushing her to the edge of her ability to keep improving her movement art. Ling Qi found herself coming up short, unable to fully sheath her body in dark-aligned qi as the next step demanded.

The fact that she had asked Meizhen to help her train her mental defenses just made the spars worse. Several times, Ling Qi had been nearly reduced to tears by Bai Meizhen's powerful, fear-inducing techniques, cracking her newfound confidence.

Meizhen had somewhat awkwardly offered her salves to heal the wounds inflicted during their training sessions, but when Ling Qi found herself having a hard time trying not to flinch in the other girl's presence, she couldn't help but wonder if the training was really worth it. Meizhen's stiff expression and posture in the aftermath seemed to display similar thoughts on her part.

Ling Qi's cultivation at the vent was more relaxing, the simple steady feeling of progress as her spirit expanded to catch up with her physique. Her practice with Suyin also went well; the other girl had improved a great deal over the previous weeks and had now reached Late Gold. Su Ling, on the other hand, had withdrawn into the woods this week to attempt her breakthrough into Yellow Soul.

Despite Suyin's focus on cultivation, it had been pretty trivial to convince Li Suyin to continue studying formations with her, which lead to them breaking off training a bit early to settle in for a study session at the pair's cave home.

"Next week then?" Ling Qi asked casually as she found a seat in the cluttered cave, withdrawing the stack of copied notes she had made from some of the archive texts in preparation for this. "I've noticed that you stopped cultivating your spirit this week."

Li Suyin blinked, pausing before nodding sheepishly and finding her own seat at the battered table the pair had found to furnish their cave. "Ah, yes. I've actually begun already. One more push should do it. I just wanted to master the next stage of my new art before I fully broke through."

"I'm happy for you," Ling Qi said brightly, examining her friend's face. "What do you want to do after you've kicked that girl's ass?"

Li Suyin looked briefly uncomfortable at the use of vulgar language but shrugged awkwardly. "I will keep trying to grow stronger I suppose," she said with uncertainty. "That is what cultivators are meant to do, right?"

"Well, yeah," Ling Qi said, paging through her scribbled copies to search for the ones which should have been on top; the pages had gotten jumbled up in her ring somehow. "What do you want to do though? Are you going to try for the end of year tournament? If you try, you can probably be in late second realm by the end of the year."

"Ah, I don't think so. I could never keep up with you, let alone the others at the top." Li Suyin fidgeted with her sleeves. "What do you think I should do, Ling Qi?"

Ling Qi did her best not to frown. "I think you should do what makes you happy. Your cultivation should be about the path *you* want to walk," she said, stressing her words. "Anything else is just going to hinder you. If you really still don't know, you might not want to break through yet."

"O-oh," Li Suyin replied, sounding a little discouraged. "I suppose I will need to think on it then. Um - Anyway, which part did you want my help with?"

Ling Qi decided to let it lie for the moment and slid a page across the table to Li Suyin. "This part right here, talking about the linking and layering of characters. Can you try to explain more clearly?"

Li Suyin furrowed her brows, squinting at the markings on the paper. "Ah, just a moment. I can hardly make out the hanzi on this," she murmured in consternation.

"Ah-ha, I don't really have much practice with my calligraphy," Ling Qi admitted with a slightly sheepish laugh. She probably could have done a decent job if she had slowed down, but she had been in a hurry too.

Li Suyin stilled, and Ling Qi started to worry that she had said something wrong.

"... You shouldn't be practicing formations if you aren't in practice with your brush." Ling Qi blinked as the one-eyed girl actually scolded her. "It's dangerous. Do you know what could happen if you mix up your strokes like this with formations characters?" Li Suyin asked, gesturing to some of the more ill-formed characters on the page.

"It won't work?" Ling Qi responded, not entirely sure where the heat in her friend's voice had come from.

"It could explode, damage your channels with the qi backlash, or plenty of other bad things!" Li Suyin exclaimed. "It's very important not to be lax about your brushwork. You could get hurt badly otherwise!"

Well, thus far, Ling Qi's focus had been on simply identifying and possibly breaking formations, not actually creating them, barring the simple bit of utility work on her kiln.

"Sorry," she said, holding up her hands defensively. "I'll be more careful in the future." She thought Li Suyin was blowing problems out of proportion, but it was nice to see her speaking up so Ling Qi kept those thoughts to herself. "So, the passage?"

Li Suyin continued to look at her sternly but then flushed, hunching her shoulders and looking down. "U-um, right. My apologies for getting heated. The meaning of this passage is quite simple. You just have to..."

Ling Qi rested her chin on her palm, following her friend's more concise explanation. Formations were a bit of a pain, but she felt like it would be a good skill to have in the future. Li Suyin was pretty good at explaining things so they worked through her notes pretty easily over the course of the next few days.

She even managed to learn the basics of a few common anti theft arrays. The Alarm and Thieves' Bane formations weren't too useful for her personally, but they did give her an idea of what to expect if she ever found herself having to find her way past security formations, as well as give her a foundation to learn more useful formations.

In the end, Ling Qi felt that something more important had been accomplished. She had let Li Suyin take the lead and act as the teacher in their studies, and it seemed to have restored some of the girl's self-confidence. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but when she left their last study session for the week, she felt like Li Suyin's posture and body language had improved significantly.

"Ling Qi." Li Suyin's words shook her from her thoughts and caused her to look over her shoulder, pausing on her way out of Li Suyin and Su Ling's shared abode. "I know I haven't been... I have not been the best friend, and I apologize for that," Li Suyin said, bowing her head.

Ling Qi gave her an incredulous look. "Li Suyin, you haven't done anything wrong. If anything, I should be thanking you," she said with slight frustration, turning to face the other girl.

"I have been very needy," Li Suyin plowed on, more firmly than Ling Qi was used to, seemingly ignoring her interjection. "I am glad that you were willing to support me, but I -

I do need to learn to stand on my own. So, I want you to promise that when I challenge that girl, you won't interfere, even if I lose."

Ling Qi scowled at her friend's words but grudgingly nodded. "That's - I can do that. I still want to be there in case she tries something dirty though."

"That is fine," Li Suyin replied, smiling slightly. "And when this is over, I would like to take the exam to join the Medicine Hall as an apprentice."

What could she do but smile back? Ling Qi was still worried for her friend, but it seemed Li Suyin had found her path again.

With that weight no longer pressing down on her, Ling Qi found her cultivation of Eight Phase Ceremony proceeding smoothly. Soon, she found herself breathing in the celestial energies, letting it mingle with the qi in her dantian. It was difficult to process the more diffuse energy at first, but she could feel the qi cycling in and out of her core beginning to take on the more ephemeral qualities of lunar qi. If her Argent Foundation, which had firmly settled in her bones and muscles, was the 'earth' of her cultivation, then the light, misty qi formed by the cultivation of the Ceremony would be the sky, floating free above her denser qi.

There was something missing though, a part of the information in the jade slip that remained a cipher to her. Even that was progress though as before her mastery of this first phase, she hadn't even been able to perceive that she was missing something. Ling Qi felt confident that she would get it with time.

Leaving aside the mystery of Eight Phase Ceremony, she still had other things that needed to be done. First, her egg needed tending. It had shifted a few times in the last week, the green veins pulsing as it drank in the heat. Once she had adjusted the fire for the egg, Cai's mission beckoned.

Ling Qi had learned more about the attacker's patterns by speaking to previous victims and those who had found them in the aftermath. It was weird having people treat her as if she had authority; she even recognized a handful as girls who had laughed behind their hands at her when she had been weaker, but now, they spoke with wary respect. Ling Qi had known things had changed, but it was her first time having the change put so obviously in front of her face..

It seemed the attacker only struck in the outermost two streets and on the road leading into the residential area. It also only struck after midnight and only if the target was alone. Everything else was as Cai said. The attacker struck from out of sight and took its victim down with a single paralyzing blow. The attacker was either using their fists or

a blunt weapon because the victims had no cuts or puncture wounds. A couple of the ones she spoke to noted something else that Cai hadn't mentioned though. They remembered hearing flute music before they blacked out.

There was little detail to be had further than that so Ling Qi began to plan to take the attacker down. They had struck three nights ago; it was about time for an ambush to happen again. She managed to convince a friend of a victim to play bait for her. She would shadow the girl as she arrived home 'running late' from training.

Ling Qi was confident that no one would see her. She had been good at sneaking before becoming a cultivator; now, she could practically become one with the shadows, flitting from one piece of cover to another with nary a sound as little more than a blur. She followed the girl she had asked to be her bait home from training, silent and out of sight, remaining tense and ready to move at a moment's notice.

It was a dark night with the narrow sliver of the moon concealed by clouds, but that didn't affect Ling Qi, who saw every rustle in the trees lining the path with perfect clarity. Still, it was nerve-wracking, trailing the girl's slow trudge back toward her house, and Ling Qi nearly jumped out every time a bird took off from the trees.

It paid off in the end though. As the girl was approaching the top of the slope that would lead down into the residential area, Ling Qi spotted something amiss. A shift in the stone ridge on the right side of the path preceded a tall, dark figure seeming to melt out of the rock. It was shrouded from head to toe in dark clothes, including a face-concealing veil, but Ling Qi saw a long, dark braid of hair trailing behind the figure as it rushed the victim, flickering and vanishing from one step to the next.

Ling Qi was ready, and one of her knives flashed out from her hiding place in a streak of light. It struck home, stabbing into the attacker's lower back and causing the figure to stumble and let out a feminine gasp of pain. The noise was enough for her bait to spin around, spot the figure, and let out an alarmed shriek before dashing off toward the houses.

She couldn't blame the girl really, and frankly, she was glad to keep potential complications to a minimum. Ling Qi drew her flute and moved cautiously forward, only to pause as the figure did the same. The figure straightened up with an instrument in her hands and called forth a mist with the first notes played.

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes in consternation. The tune was light and reedy and worst of all, slightly off-key. It also wasn't her Melody, and although the mist was thick and difficult to see through, it was easily engulfed by her own mist.

The figure seemed confused and hesitant as Diapason took hold, huddled in her own pocket of mist, and Ling Qi noted with some alarm that despite the knife in her back, the figure wasn't bleeding. On instinct, she activated Argent Mirror, qi flooding into her eyes as she sought the truth of what lay before her. Argent Mirror's Discerning Gaze seemed to have no effect though, aside from letting her see clearly through the enemy's mist.

The figure turned and rushed away from her, clearly seeking escape, but the attempt was futile. Ling Qi watched as the attacker was turned around at the edge of the mist. This was... not impressive.

Ling Qi lowered her flute, and another knife flew from her hand, this time striking the back of the target's knee, causing her to crumble to the ground. Even a weaker cultivator should have more tricks than this. She stalked forward through the mist until she stood over the huddled figure on the ground. Her target was tall and thin and was struggling to get up, but the movements seemed jerky and uneven. Ling Qi was beginning to get a bad feeling as she saw some sort of fine black dust leaking from the target's wounds.

"Stop and surrender. Now," Ling Qi commanded flatly, voice distorted oddly from the mist. "Or the next one takes out your other leg."

Unsurprisingly, the figure did not stop, managing to shakily regain its feet in an attempt to run. Ling Qi made good on her promise, and the target crashed to the ground again, twitching weirdly. Ling Qi strode over and reached down, snatching away the girl's - no, the thing's - veil. It was as she expected given the thing's fighting style. She looked down at her own face, locked in a grimace of pain, eyes blank and glassy.

The thing jerked, and its hand rose, crackling with electric qi, but Ling Qi batted the slow movement aside and drove her palm into her doppelganger's throat. It twitched once more and let out a soft hissing sound before it crumbled. Literally. The facsimile of her appearance collapsed into a mound of black earth and dust, and laying half-buried in the center of the mound was an eerie little china doll with a cartoonish caricature of her face painted on its ceramic visage.

Ling Qi wasn't happy at all. Someone had tried to set her up. She picked the thing up and put it in her storage ring, dusting her hands off as she stood up. It seemed she owed Cai Renxiang a visit.

The other girl's appearance was as impeccable as ever despite the late hour that Ling Qi made her visit, but her expression grew stony as Ling Qi explained what had happened and showed her the doll. Ling Qi winced as one of its legs cracked and fell to shatter on the stone tiles of the path in Cai Renxiang's front garden.

“Unacceptable,” the heiress’ voice cut through the quiet night air like a whip as she glared at the doll in Ling Qi’s hands. “It seems some foolish person intended to use my justice for their own ends.” Cai Renxiang sounded more than unhappy at that fact.

“I can’t say I’m happy to have my face stolen either,” Ling Qi said stiffly, feeling more than a little irritated herself. “I want to know who did this,” she added, deference forgotten.

Cai Renxiang looked up, expression stern and light glimmering in a corona behind her head. “As do I. You have my word that this will be investigated. Thoroughly. If I may?” she asked, gesturing to the doll. Ling Qi handed it over, wanting nothing to do with the creepy thing. “You have done well. I will have you informed when the culprit is found.”

Ling Qi nodded, accepting the small handful of glittering stones in payment before leaving the heiress’ home. She was certainly glad that she hadn’t ignored Cai’s request. While the doll hadn’t been able to escape her, she suspected that it was never intended for actual combat. It would have been all too easy for the doll to allow a victim to catch sight of its face by ‘accident’ with time, and then she would have been in a tight spot.

It seemed she would need to watch her back in coming weeks.



## Chapter 62 - Simmering 3

Darkness had not been among the elements described in her lessons with Elder Su. Ling Qi had often wondered, while practicing her related arts, what the Elder would say if asked what qualities the element had.

Now though, after immersing herself in it, she felt she knew. How could she not? Even if her transformation was still unstable and immature, she could very briefly become little more than a shadow. She had often felt muted calm while practicing her darkness arts, but with the deeper understanding brought by her practice of Sable Crescent Step, she felt like she had comprehended some of its true essence.

Darkness was absence. It did not really exist, except as a gap left by something else. It was the empty spaces in the earth, the lack of light, and the void where even the wind did not reach.

But that was not its only aspect. The void ached to be filled. It was want and desire and avarice, ever hungering for more to take in and absorb. She had never felt a stronger urge to go out thieving and take the unearned profits of her lesser peers for herself.

... Yet Ling Qi remained in control. She breathed out, banishing the dark qi flowing through her channels for the moment. She was glad she did not practice these arts exclusively.

Ling Qi had other arts to practice, and the coursing energy of the heavens surging through her arms did much to dispel the lingering feelings brought on by her greater mastery of darkness qi. With a proper archery art in Falling Stars, she found the barrier between herself and the bow crumbling all the faster.

Ling Qi had charred quite a few training bows to ash in the process, but she found herself quickly picking up proper qi channeling methods, her previous practice with guiding the wind aiding her ability to create lanes of still air for her arrows to be fired down, unimpeded by natural winds. Infused with the explosive power of lighting, her arrows could blow craters in stone and pierce the hides of tougher beasts with ease. It felt good to have that kind of power at her fingertips, and although the art might be lacking compared to her spirit-given ones, she was sure she could master it quickly and greatly improve her ability to do damage.

With her improved ability in combat, Ling Qi felt confident enough to begin taking minor sect jobs, hunting troublesome spirit beasts in order to earn Sect Points that she could use later for medicines or tutoring.

However, most of her free time went toward taking her first serious steps in weapon use. With Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan both absent for much of the week, secluding themselves for breakthrough, Han Jian was a great help with that, which gave her an opportunity to talk to him as well. Han Fang was hardly intrusive after all; it was pretty easy to forget the large boy was even there outside of battle. He had a habit of fading into the background that she suspected was at least partially deliberate. Still, she didn't worry about him listening in on her questions.

"So, what's on your mind?" Han Jian asked as he batted away the blunted head of her training spear, angling his sword to let her spear slide off to the side and circling to her right with light steps. "Guessing you're worried about the upcoming meeting?"

"Something like that." Ling Qi grunted as she ducked under his lazy swing and managed to draw back her unfamiliar weapon, dancing back to open up space. "It's more that I don't even know what I don't know, you know?" She set her right foot and made another thrust, but this time, Han Jian just leaned out of the way. Based on his reflexes, Ling Qi was sure Han Jian had reached Mid Silver.

"I know that 'know' doesn't even sound like a real word anymore," Han Jian replied with amusement, stepping inside her guard in a blur and testing her defense with a slash. "I suppose if you aren't raised in it, all the rules and little things guiding society must seem pretty foreign."

"Right." Ling Qi would have nodded if they weren't in the middle of a spar. "Like, I don't even know what's expected of me really. People seem to assume that I'm Bai Meizhen's retainer or whatever, but I don't know what that means. You say I'm on track to become a noble, but I'm not sure what that means either."

"It's not really a bad thing," Han Jian pointed out as he continued to work over her defenses, forcing her to rapidly twist and spin the spear shaft in her hands to keep him at bay. "Being considered a retainer, I mean. It's not really a big deal yet, but folks, especially talented and clanless ones who don't have any connections or obligations, make people nervous. I figure that Ji guy is gonna get himself in trouble that way eventually - more so than he already has."

Ling Qi grimaced as his blade pressed down on the haft of her spear, unable to contest the tall boy's greater strength. She swung the butt of her spear up, angling it to force his blade to the side and making him step back to avoid being cracked across the ribs.

"I get that," Ling Qi acknowledged. She could kind of understand why unattached cultivators were viewed with caution; individual cultivators would probably be ridiculously destructive at higher realms. "Like I said, I don't understand what it means

to be a retainer though. The obligations and stuff?" she asked uncertainly as Han Jian avoided another clumsy thrust from her. "Fan Yu and Gu Xiulan are your retainers, right?"

His lips thinned briefly. "The Gu family are subordinate to the Han," Han Jian said carefully, warily circling around her. "Fan Yu's father and mine are just very close friends and Sect Brothers though. The Fan family is pretty close to the Han in status."

"Alright," Ling Qi said. "So what do they do for you? And what do you do for them?"

"Well, we took the Gu in when their lands were destroyed," Han Jian answered, feinting to the right before spinning left and almost catching her out with a straight thrust. "They administer territory for us and pay a portion of their income in taxes. In return, we support them in disputes against other clans and if they run into trouble." He jumped over her countersweep, and this time, she wasn't fast enough to stop the blunted training sword from slipping through her guard and tapping the side of her neck.

Ling Qi huffed in irritation and lowered her weapon. "That's your win again," she grumbled.

Han Jian shrugged, falling back into an easy stance, training blade dangling loosely from his fingers. "Only because you're playing around with new weapons, and we aren't using arts," he said ruefully. "I'm honestly not sure I could take you in a fight anymore, even with my progress on my family arts," he added with some frustration, scrubbing his free hand through his hair.

Ling Qi shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. "I don't know. It would probably be down to a bit of luck," she hedged. Han Jian's sword art was reasonably good, leaving trails of shimmering heat that transformed into blade mirages in the wake of his attacks, but she wasn't sure it was enough given her fighting style. "Anyway," she said, changing the topic, "I get that clans are subordinate to others, but how do ranks work? You said the writ would get me the lowest one. What rank is your Father?"

Han Jian gave her a look that told her he saw through her ploy. "There are five noble ranks. The lowest one is Baron, then Viscount, Count, Marquis, and Duke," he listed off. "My family holds the title of Marquis, but my father doesn't. He's the heir right now." Ling Qi detected a hint of something troubled in his tone when he said that. "We're only subordinate to the Duke of the province. Our title is pretty uncommon in the core regions since it's mostly granted to families administering hostile borders."

Ling Qi leaned on her spear, idly wiping sweat from her brow as she nodded in understanding. "So, what about the Sun? Where do 'Kings' fit into that list?"

“Generally speaking, they don’t,” Han Jian said with a grimace. “The title was usually used to placate the losing branch in imperial disputes. Before Sun Shao, no one had been awarded that title in a very long time. In the past, the understanding was usually that the rank wasn’t hereditary, and the clan would revert back to its previous rank after the claimant passed.”

Ling Qi shook her head. This was just the surface, she knew. Before she got into questioning him about further details though, she had something else that had been bothering her. “Thank you for answering my questions. I know they must seem pretty childish,” she began.

“It’s no trouble,” Han Jian replied with an easy smile. “It’s nice to feel like the learned one once in awhile,” he added with a chuckle.

She nodded and glanced away briefly asking awkwardly, “... Can I ask why you’re avoiding Gu Xiulan? It’s driving her nuts.”

His smile froze before fading. “Will you accept that it’s personal?” At her look, Han Jian raised his empty hand defensively. “I just need to think about how I’m going to say some things. Heijin is right. I... need to stop being indecisive.”

Ling Qi gave him a hard look but eventually nodded. “That’s fine,” she said without conviction. Shaking her head, she moved to set her spear back on the weapons rack. “So back on what we were talking about...”

Ling Qi spent a fair bit of time in their pre-hunt spars chatting with Han Jian about various etiquette and trivia. Apparently, achieving Indigo, the fifth realm of cultivation, was enough to automatically raise a cultivator to the rank of viscount. Achieving Violet would raise a cultivator to count. However, a family would also be demoted after a grace period if they no longer had cultivators of the appropriate realm.

There were a lot of responsibilities that came with ranks too. The ruling clans were tasked with ensuring the stability of all anti-beast formations in their region, overseeing tax collection, and a dozen other duties that sounded pretty intimidating to her. At the lowest rank, that usually just meant keeping an eye on a village or two, but the amount of territory that a family would be responsible for increased greatly with each rank.

For once, Ling Qi was thankful that she had a nice long stretch of time in the military to think about whether she even wanted such a thing. She had other options after all. She could join some other family or stay a wandering cultivator. Who knew. Maybe she could even travel beyond the Empire’s borders after her service ended. It was just too far away to think about at the moment.

Aside from hunting and discussing politics with Han Jian, Ling Qi continued her efforts to cultivate at the vent. Although Suyin was absent early in the week, Su Ling was back and cultivating again. Ling Qi was glad to see the other girl had broken through to the second realm of cultivation.

More worryingly, she heard a rumor that Ji Rong had disappeared from the archive path, and no one was sure where he was. Despite her concern, Ling Qi remained too busy to investigate the matter herself since she was continuing her training with Bai Meizhen, this time to further temper her physique.

The spars were just as brutal as last week. Bai Meizhen was merciless when it came to training, and although Ling Qi felt she had improved, her friend had broken through to Green Soul, and the breakthrough had only further intensified her aura, increasing the potency of Meizhen's techniques. The air itself seemed to darken around the pale girl when she fought now, twisting and bending under the weight of her qi.

It didn't stop Ling Qi from seeing the complicated emotions in the girl's eyes when Meizhen beat her into the ground again and again. Nor was the aura going to stop Ling Qi from confronting the issue, even if it took a couple sessions to work up her nerve.

Ling Qi panted heavily, sweat stinging her eyes and arms trembling from exertion as she pushed herself up from the ground. She could feel dozens of stinging cuts on her limbs where Bai Meizhen's metal ribbons had tagged her. Her hair had long since come loose, sticking to her shoulders and neck from the sweat and blood streaking her skin. She felt completely drained, mentally and physically.

Yet she managed to raise her head to look at Meizhen, who stood serenely at the other end of their house's training room, looking down at her with a blank expression. "Are you spent then, Ling Qi?"

It took every drop of willpower Ling Qi had not to flinch away from her friend's dispassionate gaze, but she gritted her teeth and maintained unblinking eye contact. The simple animal part of her mind still gibbered in remembered terror of the visions inflicted by the snake-like girl's techniques, but she refused to allow that to show on her face. Instead, she offered a tired smile.

"Yeah... You're still way too strong," Ling Qi replied, doing her best to sound upbeat as she shakily worked to make it back onto her knees. "Congratulations on your breakthrough by the way."

Bai Meizhen inclined her head slightly. "Thank you. It was a trifling thing, but I am glad that the first real milestone of my growth lies behind me. Can you stand?"

“Y-yeah,” Ling Qi said, forcing her trembling muscles to obey as she rose to her feet, swaying. “And Bai Meizhen, I really want to thank you. I know this isn’t easy.”

Meizhen raised a snowy eyebrow at Ling Qi’s statement as she dismissed her weapon back into storage. “Such simple training does not trouble me. You are progressing acceptably, I think,” she replied, either not understanding or more likely, ignoring Ling Qi’s actual point.

Ling Qi grimaced. She wasn’t good at subtle when it came to social things. Her instincts had improved and her thoughts seemed to race faster these days, but she wasn’t sure what to say in this case. The last time she had implied that Meizhen cared about her, Meizhen had gotten angry.

“That’s not what I mean,” Ling Qi said quietly. “I know you don’t like doing this.”

Ling Qi could recognize the signs of Bai Meizhen’s temper rising in the slight narrowing of her eyes and the set of her shoulders. “It is somewhat tedious, yes -”

“No,” Ling Qi interrupted, managing to not flinch as the other girl’s irritation flared and her fear aura intensified. “I know you don’t like hurting me like this, but I asked for it.” Ling Qi blinked as she spoke and almost laughed at her own words.

“Literally,” Ling Qi added. “I need to get stronger, and you’re doing a lot to help me do so. I’m still weak now, but I won’t stay that way. So don’t feel guilty for putting me on the ground or even making me cry. I’d much rather you do it now than an enemy later.”

Bai Meizhen stared at her, her expression flat, before letting out a soft breath and shaking her head. “Your determination is admirable, I suppose,” she drawled.

“It’s kinda all I had to work with for most of my life,” Ling Qi said wryly, managing to finally make her legs stop shaking. “But seriously, I’m improving, aren’t I?”

“You are,” Bai Meizhen allowed. “However, I hope you intend to pause and reinforce your foundation before attempting the next bottleneck. It would be disappointing to see someone who did so well on the first rush the second.”

“I won’t,” Ling Qi assured her. “I’ve already started working on an archery art, and I have my eye on some others as well.”

“Is that so?” Bai Meizhen asked. “Well, it seems I have no complaints then. Allow me to fetch the medicinal salves for you.”

"Thanks," Ling Qi said, moving over to one of the stone benches set into the wall to sit down. "Bai Meizhen?"

"Yes?" Meizhen asked, looking over her shoulder, a hint of impatience in her golden gaze.

"I'm going to take you out to celebrate your breakthrough at some point. You deserve it," Ling Qi said. "So you better consider what you want to do if you don't want me to decide."

The pale girl blinked, looking nonplussed. "There is no need for you to spend time on such a thing."

"There is," Ling Qi said firmly. "I won't back down on this."

Bai Meizhen narrowed her eyes but then sighed, shaking her head. "I will get the salves. Do try not to hurt yourself in the interim," she said, stepping out of the room and cutting off the conversation.

Ling Qi frowned at the doorway. This might be a little harder than she thought. Maybe she could enlist Cui if Meizhen wasn't going to cooperate? For now, all she could do was close her eyes and begin diffusing qi into her muscles and tendons for further reinforcement.

# Chapter 63 - Rebellion 1

That night, Ling Qi continued to cultivate Eight Phase Ceremony, attempting to decipher the missing section. It remained beyond her, but she could feel the strands of starlight beginning to accumulate faster in her dantian, forming glittering veins through her more terrestrial qi.

All too soon, morning came, and with it, the time for the meeting dawned. She still had things she wanted to do this week, but hunting the condor for the sect mission she had picked up and going out with Gu Xiulan to challenge older disciples would have to wait until after the council meeting.

Ling Qi left the house with Bai Meizhen and ended up linking up with Gu Xiulan as well since she was also on her way there. Her other friend had obviously broken through to Silver given the length of the hair loosely gathered into a tail that hung down to her hips and the clear smoothness in her skin. Sparks seemed to leap in Gu Xiulan's brown eyes, marking her ascent to greater heights of cultivation.

Ling Qi congratulated her and even Meizhen politely acknowledged Xiulan as they walked, listening with distant interest as the two of them discussed their plans to find a proper challenge. As they approached the pavilion, conversation drifted off as raised voices reached them. Ling Qi shared a worried look with a frowning Xiulan but continued forward.

When they rounded the corner, the sight they saw was more alarming still. The council stood divided. On one side stood Cai Renxiang, Gan Guangli, Xuan Shi, and Huang Da. On the other side stood Sun Liling, Lu Feng, and Kang Zihao and the two boys who had been with him at the last meeting. They were all at least in the second realm, except for one of Kang's minions, a miserable looking boy who looked as if he dearly wished to be elsewhere.

There were two things that surprised her. One was Ji Rong, who flanked Sun Liling with crossed arms and a furious scowl. Thin red lines like tattoos burned on his neck and hands, peeking out from under his robes. The second was that Sun Liling was fully in the third realm if her senses weren't wrong.

"Looks like the snake showed up. Thought you were gonna skip this one," Sun Liling drawled as she caught sight of the three of them. "At least someone on this mountain is making a go of keeping up with me. Figures it'd be you."



“Bai Meizhen, Ling Qi, Gu Xiulan,” Cai Renxiang greeted in a tight voice, not taking her eyes off Sun Liling. She wasn’t the only one to do so. Gan Guangli’s expression was thunderous, and he was already swelling in height. Huang Da wasn’t much better. “It appears that I have been far too trusting and merciful. Already, rebellion forms in our ranks.”

Sun Liling snorted. “Oh, come off it. I agreed to play your game because I figured it’d lead to some good scraps. Turns out everyone’s too spineless to even try and stand up to you. How boring is that?”

“Spoken like the rabid dog you are, daughter of Sun,” Bai Meizhen said, eyeing the scene before them with distaste. Ling Qi spotted Han Jian and Han Fang in the distance, approaching from a different path.

“Nah, I’m just keeping to the natural order of things,” Sun Liling replied with a shrug. “The strong rise to the top. And I’m thinking you’re less qualified than I thought, Cai Renxiang, if you haven’t even broken through to green or bronze yet.”

“Raw cultivation is hardly the only measure of strength,” Cai Renxiang said, the light behind her steadily growing. Ling Qi had a feeling the only reason Gan Guangli wasn’t deafening them all with angry declarations was a refusal to interrupt his lady. “I will remember this betrayal after I have defeated you, Princess.” Her hard gaze swept over the rest of Sun Liling’s group, including them all in her statement.

“I am of the West. My life belongs to the Sun family and the princess,” Lu Feng said. “My resolve won’t be shaken so easily. Besides, another chance to humiliate the buffoon beside you is welcome.”

“My apologies, Lady Cai,” Kang Zihao said, seemingly sincere for once. “I cannot ignore the obligations of my clan. That you would invite the serpent into your council is but the tipping point.”

“Man, are we done bullshitting yet? You said I’d get my shot at making that jackass eat his ugly hat,” Ji Rong grumbled at Sun Liling. “Besides, that elixir you gave me has my blood boiling. I’m gonna need to scrap soon.”

“I name you fool and savage,” Xuan Shi intoned, staring evenly at Ji Rong and Sun Liling while clutching his staff tightly in his hands. “Another taste of silence awaits you.”

“VILLAINS AND TRAITORS, ALL OF YOU!” It seemed Gan Guangli could no longer restrain himself. “To spit on Lady Cai’s generosity and disrupt her order so. Do not think you will be forgiven!”

Huang Da remained silent, his normally easy-going expression set in a scowl as he sized up Ji Rong.

Ling Qi's fingers twitched, wishing for a weapon, and she shared a look with Bai Meizhen. Her friend looked as if she dearly wished to step in, out of sheer dislike for Sun Liling. However, it seemed that Ling Qi's presence made her hesitate.

A bizarre thought occurred to her then. Ling Qi could probably tip things in Cai's favor pretty heavily. Aside from Bai Meizhen, Gu Xiulan had been spoiling for a fight for weeks and would likely follow her in, which meant Han Jian and Han Fang would join battle on Cai's side. Was joining in the best idea though? She could still easily stay out of this. That thought lasted barely a moment. Even if she had little investment in the Cai heiress' government, her foes were Meizhen's enemies, and wasn't that enough?

Kang Zihao opened his mouth as if to speak again, but before a word could escape, a white streak of light flashed across the field toward the nervous boy standing at Kang Zihao's side. The son of the imperial guard captain moved almost instantly, bringing up his gleaming silver shield to deflect the projectile. But he was a hair too slow, and rather than deflecting it entirely, the wind-guided blade sliced across his subordinate's shoulder, drawing a thin burst of misty-blue qi.

Kang Zihao scowled at Ling Qi, who had thrown the knife, but before he could speak, Ling Qi said flatly, "Whatever you're going to say, stow it." Ling Qi, who had triggered her Against the Wind technique off of the first realm, felt her qi take hold of both of Kang's minions and surprisingly, Lu Feng, wind grasping at their limbs with currents of wind. "I know where I stand," she continued, nodding to Bai Meizhen, who gave her an unreadable look as the twisting metal ribbons of her weapon appeared in her hand. "Let's just get to the part where we beat you down over with."

Ling Qi thought she sounded pretty cool despite the pounding of her heart in her ears and the screaming from the more cautious part of her mind at her impulsiveness.

"Ha! It really is too bad you're with the snake," Sun Liling said, her features lighting with a feral grin. The princess slashed her fingers across her right forearm, drawing a spray of blood.

Then everything went mad.

Gan Guangli charged forward with a bellow of righteous fury, light blazing from his forearms as a pair of heavy iron gauntlets appeared, studded with spikes longer than Ling Qi's knives. The gauntlets looked more like something that would be used to batter down gates than something to be worn, and the impression was only reinforced by the

explosion of dust as he slammed a ham-sized fist into the ground where Lu Feng had just been standing.

Sun Liling became little more than a red blur, dark armor spreading across her limbs and torso in the time it took her to cross the distance to Cai Renxiang, her grinning face vanishing behind the toothy maw of the demonic visage that formed her helmet. Cai Renxiang's oversized saber was torn from the ground in a spray of dirt, its sheath unraveling before Ling Qi's eyes into a cloud of dark blue thread and exposing a similarly colored blade. It swung up to meet the thorny spear forming in Sun Liling's hands. Ling Qi was forced back a step, throwing up her arm to shield her eyes from the shockwave that erupted from the meeting of their weapons.

"Awaken, Liming." Cai Renxiang's harsh voice cut through the growing cacophony, and the wings emblazoned across her chest burned with sudden light and intelligence, the patterns warping into something like bestial eyes. The sleeves of Cai Renxiang's gown shredded apart, exposing her pale, sleekly muscled arms. Ling Qi could see the unraveled thread glittering in the air around Cai Renxiang before it gathered at her back, mingling with the blazing light she emitted, to form wings of radiance.

Even as Cai Renxiang rose into the air, the clearing shook with a thunderous gong like the great bell in a temple being struck by a battering ram. Ji Rong had reached Xuan Shi, his fists blazing like miniature suns and crackling rings of electricity forming around his ankles. His charge was stopped by a wall of stone raised with a stamp of the other boy's foot, but it was blown apart by the power of the scarred boy's fists. Huang Da blurred, vanishing from sight in the wave of dust and shrapnel that Ji Rong created.

"Cui." Meizhen's voice reached her ears, but whatever instructions given must have been silent because it was followed only by Cui springing from her perch on Meizhen's throat and swelling rapidly in size before landing on the ground with a crash. Venom glistened on Cui's exposed fangs. For her part, Meizhen had begun to draw on her mantle, streamers of water forming a dark hood that shadowed her face, lending her the terrible presence that Ling Qi had started to grow so used to in previous spars. Her friend's golden eyes snapped open, burning with internal light, and Ling Qi shuddered as the very air seemed to warp and ripple with the force of her presence.

Even without having it aimed at her, Ling Qi could feel the terror that Bai Meizhen exuded, and she saw a shudder pass through Lu Feng. For Kang Zihao's unnamed minions, it was worse. The first realm went pale as milk, a strangled scream escaping his throat as he began to rapidly back away; the other held on better, but Ling Qi could see his teeth chattering.

“Stand steady,” Kang Zihao barked, handsome face set in a severe expression. His words were backed by qi, and the air seemed to briefly shimmer in the space around him, pushing back against the growing pall of Meizhen’s presence.

Meizhen simply began to advance with steady steps, uncaring of his efforts to resist. Their impending duel was interrupted by a searing beam of flame that Kang Zihao caught on his shield, and Ling Qi looked beside her to see Gu Xiulan grinning like a madwoman, the air around her rippling with heat while sparks danced around her fingers.

Individual actions became harder to track after that as Ling Qi focused on playing the Melody of the Vale, mist rolling out in a cloying wave from her flute and deadening slightly the sounds of battle. The cost of including so many allies was sharp, but she thought it worth it, particularly as she felt her qi latch onto Lu Feng, muddling his senses.

Everything felt slightly unreal to Ling Qi. Her previous battles had never seemed quite so... beyond human in scope. Sun Liling, now fully encased in demonic red armor with a triumvirate of fanged faces on her helm, wielded her spear with impossible skill. Another pair of skeletal arms formed on her shoulders, already wielding vicious, jagged-edged blades that clashed with what seemed like a living star. Cai Renxiang was barely even visible within her corona of light save as a vague, winged figure unleashing scorching arcs of burning light with every sweep of the dark blade in her hands. She flitted through the sky, shockwaves erupting each time she fell upon Sun Liling like a meteor.

Sun Liling’s voice snapped out something garbled in a language Ling Qi didn’t understand, and bloody mist streamed from her back, solidifying into the tall and willowy form of a beautiful bronze-skinned woman in scant, red silk scarves and nothing else. Ling Qi felt qi begin to exude from the captivating form of the spirit and her mist shimmered, growing warm around the woman as flowers began to bloom at her feet.

It was an oddly captivating scene, and for a moment, Ling Qi found herself with the urge to step forward and lie among the flowers... until Cui struck, sinking venomous fangs into the creature’s thigh. Then spirit’s eyes burned red, and its beautiful face twisted in a rictus of bloodthirsty fury, cheeks and lips coming apart and exposing sinewy muscle and inch long glistening fangs. It roared and hurled Cui away, uncaring for the spray of blood as it tore the serpent’s fangs free.

Ling Qi no longer had the luxury to observe when Kang Zihao charged toward the three of them, earth cracking beneath him as metallic coloring flowed across his skin. Behind him was a great white hound with an iron collar. Kang Zihao engaged Meizhen with a

shout even as the hound dashed past, blazing fast, to leap at Ling Qi, seemingly unimpeded by the mist.

Ling Qi twisted out of the beast's path, dancing away into the mists and leaving the hound behind. Kang's slightly recovered minions threw out their hands, having finished a chant of some kind, and scattered what looked like small clay tiles with glowing characters carved upon them.

Ling Qi flinched as the pulse of qi washed over her but threw it off before it could take hold, only stumbling for a brief second as the weight of her limbs seemed to quadruple. Xiulan grimaced and stumbled as well, throwing off her aim as she attempted to burn the hound that had just attacked Ling Qi. Out of the corner of her eyes, Ling Qi saw Huang Da go flying like a ragdoll as one of Ji Rong's fists slammed home on his chest.

Then, both of Kang's minions went flying as well when thunder boomed across the battlefield, a crater appearing where they had stood. Han Fang's muscular frame was emerging from the dust before the dust was whipped up into a spinning cone and slammed into the stronger of the two minions at the direction of Han Jian's sword. Kang's minion screamed as the scouring wind shredded his robes and tore at his skin.

Ling Qi drew her bow to help put down Kang Zihao's spirit beast. It seemed to her that Kang Zihao's intent was simply to prevent Meizhen from engaging anyone else with the defensive manner he fought, hunkered down behind his shield and focused entirely on avoiding Meizhen's furiously hissing metal ribbons. All around him, the air seemed to warp weirdly, and Bai Meizhen grimaced as she found herself drawn back toward Kang by an invisible force whenever she tried to disengage. Kang's face grew paler each time Meizhen made the attempt though.

"Red Thorn Death Flight."

Ling Qi looked up at the sound of Sun Liling's distorted voice to see the girl floating in midair, well above her mist. The extra limbs she had grown had solidified fully, with muscle and armor appearing over the initial bone. Sun Liling flung her spear downward, and it exploded into a hundred blazing streaks of bloody light. Then, Ling Qi could only dodge and desperately flare her qi to initiate her Gale Shield technique, blasting out a circle of wind to deflect the deadly rain.

Ling Qi screamed as several of the jagged blood shards tore right through her spinning winds, slicing across her limbs and in one case, embedding itself in her shoulder. The wounds burned painfully, and she could see smoke rising from her cuts as the skin around them blackened and burned.

The technique had rained down on the entire battlefield and blown away her mist, revealing the battlefield in its entirety. Bai Meizhen still battled furiously with an increasingly battered Kang Zihao, although she now bled from several wounds. Gu Xiulan's right arm hung limply from her shoulder and she bled freely as well, now desperately retreating from Kang's advancing hound.

Further back, neither of Kang's minions still stood, and Han Jian was unharmed but at cost. Han Fang slumped down in front of him, arms which had been held out collapsing to his sides as he fell to his knees, bleeding from a dozen wounds. Han Jian's normally relaxed expression was set in fury as he scowled up at the figures in the sky.

The brawl between Ji Rong and the other two boys was in its late stages as well. Huang Da struggled to his feet, his chin stained with blood as he clutched his ribs. Ji Rong was hardly in better shape, letting out panting breaths like a winded bull even as steam began to rise from the tattoos on his flesh. His left arm was frozen stiff and unmoving. Xuan Shi looked unscathed as the dome of rock around him crumbled, but Ling Qi thought his qi seemed to be quite depleted.

Gan Guangli stood bloodied but unbowed, nearing four meters in height. Lu Feng lay at the bottom of a meter deep crater at his feet.

Meanwhile, the struggle between Cui and Liling's spirit continued unabated. Cui hissed and thrashed furiously as the thing tore at her scales with claws of jagged wood, and bloody flowers bloomed around them. Liling's spirit had only grown more hideous, bone and sinew exposed as flesh sloughed off under the assault of Cui's venom.

Ling Qi's eyes were torn from the battlefield when a blazing ray of light slammed down on the descending figure of Sun Liling, blasting her into the ground. A molten crater was burned into the pavilion floor as the armored girl was driven into the foundation by the force of the beam. Cai Renxiang's light had faded since the start of the fight, enough to see the girl. She was pale and winded, strain showing in the set of her jaw and unnatural exhaustion in the trembling of her limbs.

Sun Liling's laughter preceded her leap from the glowing crater, and she landed on the pavilion's crumbling roof. "Ha! I guess your mother knows what she's doing after all." Sun Liling's armor was charred and cracked. One of her extra limbs had broken off, and a chunk of the helmet was missing, exposing the feral grin still on her face. "That thing you're wearing is ridiculous."

"You have little room to speak, Princess Sun," the heiress replied stiffly, the wings of light on her back flaring as she stilled the trembling in her limbs. The lower part of the

gown had begun to unravel, revealing knee-high boots. "Yield. Your side of this conflict is crumbling around you."

Ling Qi thought that might be an optimistic assessment, but on second thought, even with the destruction Sun Liling had rained down, her side was losing. Kang could only hold against Meizhen for so long, and she was fairly confident Xuan Shi and Huang Da could handle the increasingly unsteady Ji Rong.

"As if I'd end such a good fight before it's even over," the redhead rejected. "This is doing just fine at settling my foundations, Cai. Come at me!"

Ling Qi grimaced. It might not be the wisest course of action, but Ling Qi did not care. Gu Xiulan was hurt badly, and she would be damned before she let Kang's mutt maul her. Ignoring the renewed sounds of battle and Gan Guangli's roar, she spun toward Xiulan, nocking an arrow. The wind around her spiraled inward, howling as it condensed around her arrow, and a crackling electrical current sparked on the iron arrowhead.

Ling Qi felt a rush of dark satisfaction as the arrow screamed from her bow and plunged into the dog's side, puncturing through its shielding qi and its metallic white fur. She bared her teeth in a vicious expression at the dog's yelp of pain.

"Do not falter! CRUSH THESE REBELS!" A voice she barely recognized as Han Jian's echoed across the battlefield, cutting through the noise along with a sudden blaze of golden light. Han Jian stood over his unconscious cousin, black stripes tracing themselves on his face and hands while a golden banner of light formed behind him. This wasn't a technique she had ever seen him use before. Ling Qi felt the pain of her wounds fading, and a rush of confidence and drive burned in her veins and set her heart pounding.

She wasn't the only one to feel so either. Gu Xiulan straightened, regaining her agility just in time to dodge the hound's attack. Fires bloomed on her fingertips, and a trio of curving white hot lances burst out, two twisting to cut off the hound's avenues of escape and the third carving a blackened line of burned flesh across its shoulder.

Another shockwave struck then. She glimpsed Gan Guangli falling back, his footsteps shaking the earth, when Sun Liling's spike-heeled boots crashed into his cheek, snapping his head to the side violently. The laughing redhead used the massive boy's face as a springboard to launch herself up at Cai Renxiang.

In the other battle, Ji Rong was screaming, his tattoos blazing brightly as whatever effect had bound his arm shattered. He was immediately wreathed in a halo of lightning,

his hair spiked and on end. Ji Rong launched himself fist first at Xuan Shi, whose ringed staff rang like a struck bell when Ji Rong punched the black barrier of pure qi it raised.

She could not spare much attention to Meizhen, but she could tell the girl was growing ever more infuriated with her opponent. It occurred to her that many of Bai Meizhen's techniques seemed to function best in response to an attack, something that Kang had not given Meizhen the opportunity to exploit. Ling Qi supposed it likely that Meizhen was also trying not to expend too much qi in taking down Kang given that she'd likely be moving on to fight Sun Liling next.

Ling Qi drew back her bowstring, circling Meizhen's fight so that when the dog went down, she would have a clear shot at Kang Zihao. This time though, she had nothing to show for it. Her arrow glanced off the hound's metallic fur, doing little but ripping a patch of hair free.

The dog lunged at Gu Xiulan, and Xiulan screamed as its jaws closed on her lower leg with a painful crunch. Even as the hound knocked her from her feet with a vicious twist of its head though, fire bloomed in Xiulan's hands, and a half dozen lashes of blue-white fire scoured the spirit beast's hide, finally causing the thing to whimper and collapse, its grip on her leg loosening.

The battle with Sun Liling appeared to be going slightly better. Gan Guangli, joined by Han Jian, harried her movements. Sun Liling was forced to dodge the falling boulders that Gan Guangli's fists had become. Han Jian circled her, the flicker of afterimages in his wake, and he prodded her defenses with careful strikes while Cai Renxiang rained down destructive beams.

It was not to last though. As Sun Liling ducked under an arc of destructive light, the butt of her spear swung around in a red blur, slamming once then twice across Han Jian's face. The first blow staggered the boy, and the second sent him flying to slam into the stone foundations of the pavilion with a crack.

"Enough screwing around!" The redhead launched herself away from her foes, landing a dozen meters away. Ling Qi felt a surge of unease as Sun Liling gabbled something unintelligible and was answered by tinkling peals of laughter from her spirit, which seemed little more than a bloody, spike-studded skeleton of wood at this point.

The feeling of dread grew when she saw the thing, Cui's fang's buried in its throat, explode into a blizzard of yellow flower petals. Ling Qi winced as she heard Cui's voice scream in her thoughts, but even that was overshadowed by the riot of color that erupted. Flowers twisted and erupted from the ground, rising and blooming into bright



yellow flowers atop stalks nearly a meter tall. The qi on the battlefield began to drain into the flowers, visible as motes of light.

Her attention was drawn back to her side of the battlefield though as another scream rang out. Kang Zihao's shield had been torn from his hand, and Bai Meizhen's pale hand was wrapped around his throat. He thrashed in her grip, weapon forgotten and dropping from nerveless fingers, and his veins stood out as red lines on his skin. Meizhen flung the screaming boy aside.

"Destroy those things now!" Meizhen's icy voice cracked across the battlefield.

Sun Liling slammed into Cai Renxiang like a red comet and smashed the glowing heiress to the earth. Ling Qi could see Sun Liling's armor repairing itself and what wounds she had closing visibly before her eyes. Gan Guangli barreled into her from behind like a runaway cart, forcing Sun Liling away from his lady.

Ling Qi wavered briefly, unsure of what to do, but then rushed forward, dropping her bow to draw her flute. She summoned her mist and constructs of dissonance, engulfing the sunflowers in mist. In the distance, Sun Liling let out a cry of irritation.

Fire bloomed, and she saw Gu Xiulan rising to one knee and raising her hands above her head, gathering a churning orb of flames wider than her shoulders. Bai Meizhen's mantle of dark water exploded outward, cutting a swathe through the flowers like a pressurized hose and sending up a spray of mud as it dug them out by the roots.

She spotted Cai rising to her feet unsteadily from the trench her body had dug into the ground, a grimace on her face as the wings on her back flickered and stuttered in and out of existence, sending strobes of light across the battlefield, even as she reengaged Sun Liling, driving her away from the flowers.

As Ling Qi's fingers danced over her flute, a thought occurred to her. If the flowers were absorbing qi... She shifted her tune to Starlight Elegy, the song growing mournful and dirge-like. She felt satisfaction as the flowers' qi gathering slowed to a trickle, even as Gu Xiulan's fireball carved a wide circle of destruction in the flowers that remained outside of her mist.

Then a crimson blur tore through her mist, scattering it, and Ling Qi desperately ducked beneath a blur of blood-red metal she could barely see. Her eyes widened as she realized that Sun Liling had come straight after her. Ling Qi could only fall back, frantically dodging attacks that seemingly came from impossible angles. The twin swords in the girl's extra arms hemmed her in and reduced her options. She ducked and weaved in an attempt to avoid the thorny point of the demonic figure's spear, but it

was in vain. She had an instant to feel regret when she dodged in the wrong direction and saw the incoming red blur.

Pain lanced through her stomach as the barbed spear slammed into and through her abdomen. Burning agony from the Crimson Princess' corrosive blood overwhelmed her. Darkness.

## Chapter 64 - Rebellion 2

Ling Qi was tired. Her limbs felt leaden, and even opening her eyes seemed like a monumental effort. The dewey grass under her back, and the cool night air at least made her rest comfortable though. She wouldn't mind lying here forever. It was peaceful and quiet, and that was enough given how frantic things had been.

Ling Qi frowned, finding the thought discomforting. What had been frantic? She couldn't really remember. Voices yelling, a tearing pain in her abdomen, incomprehensible sounds. It all made her so tired. She didn't want to think about it. Wouldn't it be better to just drift away and relax? When was the last time she had slept for more than an hour at a time?

"Isn't that a little boring though?"

Ling Qi's eyes snapped open at the sound of her own voice but not from her lips. She lay in the middle of a field of shining white flowers beneath a starry sky and a crooked crescent moon.

She found herself staring up at her own face. Wait, not exactly her own face. It was older and mostly hidden behind a partially transparent black veil. Those were her eyes though, bright blue and piercing. She stared up at her own amused expression for a time but eventually closed her eyes again. Ling Qi felt like she should be feeling something more than exhaustion, alarm maybe, but she just couldn't manage it. Her older doppelganger seemed content to simply watch her so she could just go to sleep.

There was something wrong with that thought, but she couldn't say why.

Ling Qi began to drift off, the only sound in the clearing her own breath and the soft rustle of the wind through the flowers. It wasn't to last. She only had a moment to feel cool fingers brushing up her sides before the assault began. Ling Qi let out an indignant squawk, the leaden feeling in her limbs vanishing as she felt the other's fingers tickling under her arms. She squirmed away quickly, rolling into a crouch as she glared at the older her.

"Hm, that's a good face," older Ling Qi said, her lips twisted into a smirk behind her veil. "Are you sure you want to glare at me like that though? That's hardly polite."

Ling Qi shuddered under the sudden, enormous weight on her shoulders.

"What is even - I was resting. Why are you bothering me?" Ling Qi shook her head like a dog trying to shed water, and the feeling of pressure faded. "And don't touch me like

that either," she snapped indignantly. The older copy regarded her with twinkling amusement in its blue eyes. Ling Qi didn't like being touched. A hand was fine, but whatever that was...

*- She giggled, twisting away from Mother's hands, knowing that she could no longer pretend to be asleep. But she didn't care much. Momma was smiling today. -*

"Well, it's hardly entertaining to let you lie there like a lump," her doppelganger said. "Besides, isn't it the elder sister's right to tease the younger?"

"I don't have any siblings." Ling Qi glared at the figure accusingly, her fuzzy thoughts moving slowly. Where was she?

"Don't you?" the veiled figure asked. "Well, I suppose it doesn't matter."

"What do you want?" Ling Qi shot back, growing irritated. "Who are you?"

"That's a hard question to answer," the figure mused, tapping a finger thoughtfully against her lips. "I'm you, but also, not really? You wouldn't understand." The older-her shrugged. "As for what I want, I guess you could say I'm curious. You aren't exactly what I was expecting. The determination is good, but you're so uptight. You're just puttering along playing by the rules."

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes. "And what's wrong with that? The rules have been in my favor for once. Why shouldn't I take advantage? Maybe I want to be better than I was."

Other-her frowned. "That's a lie, and not even a good one. You just don't want to look bad in front of your little friends," she accused. "Do you really think that you can get by playing nice? That there's no value in your old skills? You aren't happy just letting things go either. What happened to your fangs, little rat? Have the snake and the tiger plucked them out?"

Ling Qi shook her head, remembered indignation from the slights she had suffered bubbling back up. "It's... not important, and I have too much to do. They aren't worth my time. Not anymore."

"You're afraid," the Moon corrected, eyes no longer blue but solid pools of silver. "Afraid of what others will think of you," she said, sounding disappointed. "Afraid of being who you are. Do you remember what you felt when you saw that boy's face as he fell into the well?"

Ling Qi remembered the satisfaction and delight at her success well enough, even if it had been quashed by other feelings shortly thereafter.

"Life is boring without risk," the spirit continued. "What is the point to a trick or a scheme that has no chance of failure? If all you do is plan and train, you may as well stay home in bed or cultivate in a cave until you are old and grey." The figure was growing indistinct, more a shadow than a human shape now. "You have enemies now, ones you can't dismiss as beneath you. I wonder if you will have more excuses... or if you will remember your own fangs."

"I remember," Ling Qi replied, scowling at the dissipating mist. "I just remember my other priorities too." Still, she was reminded now how she had been treated prior to her breakthrough... Maybe she would have to look into getting some payback. Even if she didn't steal from them, some humiliation might be in order.

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Ling Qi coughed from a suddenly dry throat and opened her eyes. She found herself staring at a polished, wood paneled ceiling rather than a starry sky. Her throat felt completely parched, and her stomach throbbed with pain. As she tried to sit up, she flinched and made a rasping sound when she tried to speak.

A moment later, a cup of water was pressed into her hands, and she looked over to see Bai Meizhen sitting in a chair beside the bed she was lying in. They were in a small, sparsely furnished chamber that she recognized as one of the Medicine Hall's private recovery rooms. It took her a moment to take everything in. Bai Meizhen gracefully set down the pitcher of water she had just used to pour Ling Qi a cup. There was a bundle of silvery-white flowers set in a vase on the table as well.

Surprisingly, they were not the only ones in the room. Cai Renxiang was seated across from Bai Meizhen in a chair with its back to the wall. Her hands were clasped together over her knee, and she wore a soft grey mantle that covered her from the neck down.

"Did we win?" Ling Qi asked after she had taken a swallow of water, glancing between Meizhen's somber expression and Cai Renxiang's neutral one. Bai Meizhen gave her a reproachful look.

"The Sun Princess was forced to yield," Cai Renxiang answered.

"It is always troublesome to determine just how far their kind are from defeat," Bai Meizhen said sourly. "Barbarians such as her fight at their full vigor even an inch from death. Your art prevented her from recovering the qi she had spent. It was enough."

"So what happens now then?" Ling Qi asked carefully. "Did Xuan lock them up?"

“Unfortunately not,” Cai Renxiang replied, a hint of irritation leaking into her harsh voice. “Her status prevents me from doing such a thing.”

“So what - she just gets away with starting that huge fight?” Ling Qi asked, incredulous.

“Such is the luck of the Sun,” Bai Meizhen said, her anger barely concealed to Ling Qi. “But no, not this time. She went too far in planting that... corruption on the mountainside.”

“Sun Liling has been temporarily removed from the Outer Peak by command of Elder Ying,” Cai Renxiang elaborated, the drumming of her fingers on her knee the only sign of her emotions. “As for the others, unfortunately, I was instructed that we were not to retaliate further than taking prizes of battle, the majority of which was required for immediate medical costs.”

Ling Qi wasn't really certain how to feel about that. On the one hand, Sun Liling wasn't going to be a problem for some time, but it didn't quite seem like enough. She also had a feeling that she had been the biggest recipient of medical costs given the lack of a gaping hole in her stomach. She glanced over at Meizhen, who looked to be having similar thoughts.

“I would, however, like to thank you for your support in this matter, Miss Ling,” the heiress said. “It seems that I was too naive and soft in my efforts to date. Be assured that I will not make such mistakes in the future.”

“As we discussed, you will have my support, Lady Cai,” Bai Meizhen said coolly. “It would not do to be unprepared for the barbarian's eventual return.”

“Your support is appreciated, Miss Bai,” Cai Renxiang said, dipping her head in response. “It is earlier than I would have liked, but the preparations are already being made to arm and supply my enforcers. The newer crop of second realm cultivators and older Outer Sect Disciples are useful for that role. You and Miss Ling are naturally exempted from the upcoming changes.”

Ling Qi narrowed her eyes. It looked like she had missed some things. “I do not know all the details you might have discussed,” she said slowly, forcing herself to speak carefully despite her throbbing head. “But I would appreciate some consideration for the disciples Su Ling and Li Suyin as they are good friends of mine.”

Cai Renxiang regarded Ling Qi silently but then nodded. “Of course. For your contributions, such a thing is more than reasonable,” she allowed. “Perhaps it might be best if we discussed what will be changing in the future.”

Ling Qi didn't really feel up to it, but she could hardly say no now. The conversation that followed was enlightening. Cai Renxiang had apparently been quietly organizing things among the newer second realm cultivators and the amenable older disciples using her family contacts to form a proper enforcement group. The meeting arranged for today would have discussed the enforcement group and the rules it would enforce. With half of the 'council' gone, Cai Renxiang and Bai Meizhen were the ones whose say mattered.

The rules sounded pretty reasonable to Ling Qi. They included things like enforcing fairness in duels and ensuring that the fighters were not preyed upon by opportunists in the aftermath. Order would be enforced in public areas and during the collection of monthly spirit stones. The possibility of organizing training and providing a certain amount of resources beyond simple spirit stones for those who joined up under Cai seemed like a nice idea as well.

Ling Qi was less sure of the tax the heiress intended to levy to pay for those services despite the fact that she herself was exempted. Ling Qi's tentative idea of making allowances for impoverished cultivators was met with some approval though. Defiance was likely going to be punished much more harshly, and those who refused to knuckle under would receive no recognition of rights from her enforcers.

"This is all a lot to take in," Ling Qi grumbled under her breath as their talk wound down. She had begun to go through the contents of her storage ring while Cai Renxiang and Bai Meizhen discussed details that were over her head. It was a habit of hers to make sure all of her possessions were in place.

"I will leave you to your recovery soon, Miss Ling," Cai Renxiang said politely, briefly meeting Bai Meizhen's eyes. "There is only one more thing."

Ling Qi was distracted though. Something was missing. She patted her sleeves and failed to find it there either. "Wait. Where is my flute?"

"It slipped my mind," Meizhen admitted. "It was broken in the melee. I will ensure you have a replacement before you leave the hall. You really should consider a proper talisman though."

Ling Qi blinked then clutched her blankets, vindictive anger at Sun Liling rising in her thoughts. "Yeah, I should," she said flatly. "I don't suppose you picked it up, did you?"

Bai Meizhen paused while Cai Renxiang looked on with a hint of irritation at being interrupted. "... I did not. It was only a mundane flute," she replied slowly.

"I will have someone retrieve the pieces," Cai Renxiang offered coolly. "I apologize if it was an item of importance."

"I would appreciate that," Ling Qi said distantly, thinking on the many many times she had kept the old thing intact and in her possession despite the hardship in doing so. "I am sorry. What was the last thing you wished to discuss?"

"Nothing of great importance," Cai Renxiang said. "I merely wished to once again extend my thanks to the two of you. As loyal members of my council, it is only right that you be rewarded for your contributions. One of my honored Mother's apprentices is a core member of the Sect. I intend to have garments commissioned in thanks for the two of you and Sir Han. It will take some time to complete. So for now, please simply accept my thanks."

Ling Qi nodded, knowing she should probably be ecstatic at receiving an item of such high quality, but she couldn't quite manage it given the loss of her flute.

She was out of the Medicine Hall by the next morning, having been healed quickly at great expense on Cai Renxiang's funds, the pieces of her flute in her storage ring, and a new, white armband pinned in place on her sleeve. The character for Cai embroidered upon it declared her to be a member of Cai's group, and the gold lining identified her as a member of the ruling council. It was a strange thing to think about - that she, Ling Qi, was apparently an influential official in a pseudo-government. She wasn't entirely certain what expectations the other girl had of her. Cai Renxiang seemed reluctant to push overmuch with either Bai Meizhen or Ling Qi.

Ling Qi found her thoughts continually coming back to her flute though. It was the one thing she had carried with her through all her years in the streets, and now it was broken, snapped in half with part of the length pulped, likely by someone's foot. She should have gotten a talisman or at least a basic flute instead of using it in combat. Yet, she couldn't quite bring herself to buy another flute, even if the lack of instrument was a weakness.

Dredging up half-remembered plans from before the battle, Ling Qi descended the mountain in a fugue. She needed to begin stockpiling Sect Points, especially now that it had been made clear how far she still had to go. Sect Points could be used to purchase valuable medicines and tutoring from Inner Sect disciples or in a pinch, traded for more spirit stones.

In the absence of her flute, Ling Qi took to the bow as she ranged out to exterminate spirit beasts marked for death by the Sect. Her new archery art proved its worth here, letting her nail down birds and fleeing beasts a hundred meters or more distant.



It seemed she had been underestimating herself. It would probably be a good idea to look into taking harder missions in the future. She had been too cautious to look at anything but the lowest missions before. The funds gained by selling the cores and carcasses could go toward replacing her flute.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to locate Gu Xiulan to discuss the inevitable changes to their plans to challenge older Outer Sect disciples. Xiulan wasn't at her house or the spring nor did she join the group for training even after Fan Yu had done so, the belligerent boy having finally managed to break through to Silver Physique.

Han Jian was evasive when she pressed him on Xiulan's whereabouts, saying that she wanted to cultivate alone for a time. Under the effects of Argent Mirror's Discerning Gaze, Ling Qi thought he felt slightly guilty. She wasn't sure how to press him on it without being rude so she left it alone.

Somehow, she felt like the turmoil on the mountain was only just beginning.