

The Ages 31

Chapter 31 - Prime Disciple!

“Free him now!” Liu Qing said once again, her heart aching just by looking at Liu Qianyang’s suffering. Li Tianming couldn’t help but sneer, knowing that she was the very person Liu Qianyang desired the most.

“Relax, I still have a question for our friends from Lightning Manor. According to your rules, I have defeated all your disciples. Then do I, a friend of Princess Qing, have ownership of the manna now?” Li Tianming really was like a crazed demon, his actions unpredictable. There was no way Li Tianming would lose with Liu Qianyang’s life as his bargaining chip, even to those with greater seniority and strength than him.

Liu Qing gritted her teeth, “I admit the manna is yours.”

“Aha, since you’ve admitted it, then make sure y’all don’t regret this later. You’ve all lost enough face today.” Li Tianming’s voice was loud and clear, echoing through the city.

“That’s enough, let go of him.” Li Yanfeng’s patience was at a dangerous level. Li Tianming was right that he had lost enough face today.

“No, no. Just one more thing, something more personal.” Li Tianming grinned.

“Don’t push my limits, Princess Qing can’t save you from everything!” Li Yanfeng threatened, forcing the words out one by one. He wanted to scare Li Tianming using his aura, but Li Tianming wasn’t going to succumb to that!

“Of course not. It is my humble wish that the governor would send the winner of the Flameyellow Order off just like what you did for previous selections. And you will wish me a bright future in the Flameyellow Scions Institute!” Li Tianming declared, shocking the city yet again.

To Li Tianming, he was merely repeating his request a month ago, and it was something more important to him than the manna and the Flameyellow Order combined. It was a matter of dignity for both him and his mother. He would not let Li Yanfeng silently evict the pair from the city, nor did he want the city to just laugh and forget about them. It was a move to ridicule the governor in front of the entire Flamehaven!

At that instant, Li Yanfeng went silent.

“Are you not going to agree to my conditions? Surely you wouldn’t want to disappoint your new bride right?” Li Tianming smacked Liu Qianyang in the cheeks again while staring coldly at Li Yanfeng.

“Just agree. Get him out of my sight.” Liu Qing’s mind had gone blank looking at the state her brother was in. She had done so much to help him get the Flameyellow Order and manna. But now, everything went to Li Tianming instead.

“Oh and please prepare a horse cart, a slightly bigger one than usual.” Li Tianming added. He could even feel the air around Li Yanfeng freezing, knowing that the thought of killing him must have crossed Li Yanfeng’s mind at some point in time. But no matter what Li Yanfeng said, he was still scared of the jade pendant. Considering that he had plans and ambitions in the Lightning Manor, he couldn’t afford to make enemies with the wrong people.

“Horseman!” Eventually, Li Yanfeng shouted to his subordinates. He didn’t address Li Tianming, but the word was enough to show his concession. This result was good enough for Li Tianming.

A short while later, a luxurious horse cart had parked itself in front of Li Tianming. The three horses were all tamed one-star wildbeasts, a guarantee of the cart’s speed. Now the only step left was for the governor to send them off personally, before Liu Qianyang could be released.

“Thank you Mr Governor.” Li Tianming acknowledged the gift with a light bow, his smile speaking of his defiance. Without hesitation, Li Tianming walked towards the courtyard, Liu Qianyang dragged along in his hand like a broken rag.

“Mother, are you ready? It’s time to go.” Li Tianming poked his head into the courtyard.

“Let’s go then.” To his surprise, Wei Jing had already woken up, and was standing at the doors. She had kept her lifebound beast in her lifebound space, and there was no other luggage with her.

She walked up to Li Tianming, gently wiping off the blood from his face. She didn’t mention a word on the day’s happenings, but from the relieved smile on her face, Li Tianming could tell that she was freed from the pain that Li Yanfeng had brought upon the family.

“Mother, after you.” At the center of everyone’s attention, Li Tianming escorted an elderly woman out of the courtyard. Even though her hair was an ashen white and her skin wrinkled, onlookers could tell from her elegant posture that she was once a charmer.

With a ragged Liu Qianyang in one hand and his mother in the other, Li Tianming carefully supported her up the horse cart.

Before the curtains of the cart lowered, Wei Jing took a final look in Li Yanfeng’s direction. He was dazed by her gracefulness, as it reminded him of her charm during their youth. Back then, he often wondered what he had done to deserve this wonderful woman.

But now, as she disappeared from sight with a smile still on her face, Li Yanfeng couldn’t help but feel ashamed. She was as calm and composed as ever, as if Li Yanfeng never deserved her in the first place.

But she was the one that was sick and dying! Why was it that even when she’s leaving the city, she was more dignified than he ever would be? Her smile was like a knife, hurting him more than anything Li Tianming had done so far. But as the curtain closed completely, he had lost his final chance to question her, and they would never meet again.

Li Tianming seated himself on the cart too, personally manning the horse cart. Liu Qianyang was still by his side, only to be freed once they left the city. As the group rode off, Li Tianming turned back and shouted at Li Yanfeng. “Esteemed Governor, remember to keep up! Wouldn’t it be sad if I just dump this genius beastmaster outside of the city and no one even picks him up?”

There was no one to reply to him, as Li Yanfeng was still pondering over Wei Jing’s reactions. But as Li Tianming rode off into the distance, they had no choice but to run after him in fear of Liu Qianyang’s safety!

What a rare sight it was for Flamehaven! A group led by the governor Li Yanfeng himself, consisting of disciples of Lightning Manor and the officials and generals from Flamehaven, chasing after a horse cart!

Li Tianming drove along the familiar streets of the city he grew up in, with all the rich and famous behind his back 'sending him off'!

Countless citizens watched his departure in awe, his achievements today something they would remember for life. They would never forget this image of Li Tianming breaking free from this city, while all the big-shots could do nothing to stop him.

Li Tianming could feel the gentle breeze caressing his face, as all the buildings and stunned residents flew past his sight. It was a refreshing feeling that he had never experienced before!

"Perhaps this is the purpose of all my cultivation, to fight for my dignity and to be the master of my own life!" From now on, Flamehaven was history to him. He would never return to this heartless place, nor see these cold-blooded people. His goal would be the Flameyellow Scions Institute, the place where he had lost many things, and also the place where he would take everything back!

"What a badass. From now on, you should change your name to Tianming the Badass, so you can truly cut all ties with your father!" said the little chick who was positioned on top of one of the horses.

"Screw off!" Li Tianming laughed. He may have cut ties with many family members today, but he had gained a new brother. In fact, there were many more siblings in his lifebound space, waiting to join him, and that was more than enough for him.

Li Tianming could already see the city gate by now. Even the travelling time felt so much shorter when he was in a good mood. The moment he crossed the gate, he casually tossed Liu Qianyang away. By the time Li Yanfeng's group caught up and brought Liu Qianyang back to his feet, Li Tianming was already disappearing into the distance.

"Lord Governor, you forgot to wish me a bright future in the institute!" Even as he left, his voice seemed to linger across the city.

"Where's the Thunderfire Chain?" Li Yanfeng realised something was wrong when he helped Liu Qianyang up. Obviously, Li Tianming had pocketed that precious grade three beastial weapon.

"That bastard!" Li Yanfeng stood up and prepared to chase down the horse cart, knowing that they got fooled yet again.

"Forget it, we have lost enough face today. Can you imagine what the people would say about us if we pursued him now?" Liu Qing shook her head. Indeed, every single one of them there had been played by the young man, and they really shouldn't stoop any lower.

"He wouldn't be laughing much longer. Even with the Flameyellow Order, he can't make it into the Flameyellow Scions Institute since it is impossible for him to clear the entrance exam," Zhang Chong stated, hoping that it would make everyone feel better.

"It would be a joke if a one-star lifebound beast made it into the institute," replied Jiang Tao.

"I heard that the Entrance Exam this year would be extra difficult since it is a very competitive year. We are seeing a large number of capable youths, but the number of people admitted to the institute is fixed."

“That’s right, and no matter how many prodigies there are, out of all the disciples who can clear the entrance exam, only one of them gets to become the prime disciple and enter Heaven’s Sanctum directly!”

To get first place in the entrance exam and directly enter Heaven’s Sanctum was every youth’s dream. While there were still plenty of opportunities to be enlisted in the sanctum, the honor of being the prime disciple in the quadrennial examination was something unique.

Four years ago, the prime disciple of Li Tianming’s batch was Lin Xiaoting of the Lightning Manor! And today, he had become the number one genius in Heaven’s Sanctum!

“Four years ago Lin Xiaoting won the position as the Prime Disciple. I wonder who would be the lucky one this year?”

“I’m not sure about the rest, but our very own Lin Xiaoxiao is definitely one of the popular picks. She is the closest to Lin Xiaoting’s level in the past four years.”

“Not only is she Xiaoting’s younger sister, she is also a twin beastmaster just like him! Both of them commands two lifebound beasts!”

“Xiaoxiao had been putting in a lot of effort in the past years to reach her brother’s standards. Even if we have strong contestants from families like the Vermilion Bird Clan, I suppose our Lightning Manor prodigy will shake the world once more.”

Naturally, Li Tianming didn’t hear all these discussions going on in Flamehaven. Four years ago, he had barely made it past the entrance exam to study in the Flameyellow Scions Institute. While it was a marvelous result for Flamehaven’s standard, it was nothing in Ignispolis.

But this time, Li Tianming’s goal was different. This time, the only result he would accept would be to become the prime disciple!

Chapter 32 - Xing Mansion And Chen Chateau

It wasn’t Li Tianming’s first rodeo in Ignispolis. It was a blazing hot city, and even its walls seemed to be dyed a fiery red by the scorching sun. From afar, the city looked like a giant stove bustling with heat and activity.

Of all the cities Li Tianming had seen, it was the most prosperous of all. The city was occupied by the most famous clans and families, a hub for the nation’s wealth, talents, experts and resources. It was the ultimate dream for every youth in Vermilion Bird.

Four years ago, Li Tianming was just like many other youths. He arrived in Ignispolis with great ambitions and cultivated in the Flameyellow Scions Institute. Everything seemed to be going so well back then.

Four years had passed, and here he was, with a totally different meaning in life. Not only had his mindset changed completely, he even had his mother with him this time.

Wei Jing rolled up the curtains from inside the horse cart. Her gaze was as calm as water, hinting at experiences entirely different from Li Tianming’s own. She never told him any stories from her time in Ignispolis before, but Li Tianming always knew that she had lived in the capital before her marriage. Her childhood was situated in this passionate city.

Wei Jing wore a faint smile, but her eyes seemed to be misty. What could be going on in her mind, after returning to her hometown after twenty years?

Watching her silvery hair getting blown up by the breeze, Li Tianming suddenly found himself imagining her youth. Like Jiang Feiling or Princess Qing, she must have been a lovely and lively girl.

“This disease has been way too cruel to her.” Li Tianming could only exclaim in his mind.

“How do you find this place? Do you miss it? Are you holding back your tears now?” Li Tianming teased his mother.

“Ha, your mother was never a sentimental person. I just really miss the pastries in Ignispolis, those mung bean cakes and osmanthus jellies were heavenly.” She was almost drooling when she talked about the delicacies of Ignispolis. Did she spend her childhood strolling the street with snacks in hand? Li Tianming could only imagine.

“Rest assured, when your son makes enough money, you’ll get to eat all you want. Once we settle down in Ignispolis, I’ll bring you the best pastries in the city everyday.” Li Tianming smiled.

“Pinky promise. I will lock you out of the house if you ever forget.” Wei Jing tried to make a stern face.

“What a heartless lady.” Li Tianming shook his head, but he could barely hide his grin. Once they left Flamehaven, with that man out of their sight, life was so much more joyous.

“We have a problem now though. We have nothing with us, where are we going to stay in Ignispolis?” This was the most urgent problem Li Tianming had to solve right now. Had he arrived alone, he could live in the institute once he entered it. But his mother couldn’t — she needed a place to call home.

“I can settle this. Your mother still has some friends in the city.” Wei Jing smiled. Clearly, she had planned this through.

“It’s just that we haven’t met for a good twenty years, I hope they are all living a better life than me right now.” No matter how close they used to be, they all each have their own life, their own family now.

Ever since they entered the city, Wei Jing had guided Li Tianming towards the western part of the capital. The city was huge, and one would probably take a good week or so to tour it completely. They were headed for the commercial district of Ignispolis, where business was bustling all day.

“Do you know where the ‘Chen Chateau’ is?” Wei Jing asked.

“Who doesn’t? The Chen Chateau and Xing Mansion are the most luxurious mansions in the western district, only surpassed by the Imperial Palace.” Li Tianming lived in Ignispolis for a year, and was quite familiar with its geography. In fact, the only thing stopping the two mansions from one-upping the palace was out of respect for the Vermilion Bird Clan.

The owners of the brilliant mansions were none other than the two presidents of ‘Xing & Chen Merchantry’. The merchantry was the largest business union in the entire Vermilion Bird, and controlled most businesses interests that ran in the nation. It also had branches across the nation, including Flamehaven. One could have an inkling of the union’s power from the popular saying: There’s nothing you can’t get from Xing & Chen Merchantry.

As for its two presidents, they were both legendary icons of Vermilion Bird. The two of them started from scratch, and were known as the 'Starry Twins' twenty years ago. Now everyone knew them as the 'Starry Sages'.

In a short twenty years, they expanded their business across the nation, and accumulated wealth matching that of a small country's. They even had the strength to compete with old school powerhouses in the nation, such as the Lightning Manor.

Xing Mansion and Chen Chateau were Sage Xing and Sage Chen's residences respectively, and had hosted many reputable personages over the years. It wasn't a place for regular citizens, and at least Li Tianming had never visited it before.

"Why are we heading there? Do you know anyone from the Chen Chateau?" Li Tianming was curious about his mother's connections.

"A girlfriend of mine married into the Chen Chateau." She too was nervous about seeing a friend for the first time in twenty years. Things had changed, and she was now just a sickly old lady evicted from her own family.

Before long, mother and son found themselves in front of a gleaming manor. The estate was like a small castle, seated in the center of the most luxurious district in Ignispolis. Perhaps, the most outstanding aspect of the building was the glowing gems engraved into the walls and statues of the estate, making the place shine like a star in the night sky.

The gates to the Chen Chateau were guarded by fearsome sentinels and ferocious beasts. The sentinels purely used lifebound beasts of adult tiger and lion species, scaring most pedestrians even though they were dozing off.

Li Tianming parked his horse cart in front of the gates. The horse cart was fancy and well-furnished, as it used to be Li Yanfeng's personal ride. Therefore, he easily attracted the attention of the guards.

"Sir, may I know if you intend to visit Chen Chateau? Do you have an invitation?" They were rather polite to him, since they did not know which reputable family Li Tianming hailed from.

"Please inform your Madam Xue Lan that her old friend Wei Jing wishes to visit." Wei Jing rolled up the curtains and answered.

"Our mistress? She doesn't usually entertain guests. I'm sorry, but I can't let you in." The guard treated his job very seriously.

"Please, just tell her my name. If she doesn't want to see me, then I will take my leave." Wei Jing asked politely.

To be safe, the guard ended up reporting to their mistress anyways. In the end, Wei Jing was an elderly lady, and could be their mistress' senior. They would get into trouble if they chased the wrong people away.

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It has been a while since the guard left to notify their mistress. That was understandable, considering that Chen Chateau was a huge place.

“Mother, is this madam you know famous in Chen Chateau?” Li Tianming was curious.

“Of course, how can Sage Chen’s wife not be famous?” Wei Jing replied with a smile.

“What?” Li Tianming gawked at his mother in disbelief. If she was friends with Sage Chen’s wife, she definitely had quite a background in Ignispolis twenty years ago. It was Sage Chen they were talking about, the legend of Ignispolis who held equal power as some of the highest-ranking officials in the nation. Li Tianming could only dream of meeting someone like Sage Chen.

Before Li Tianming could voice his doubt, the guard had already returned. “Madam Xue Lan extends her warmest greetings and invites her guests to the Daybreak Snow Pavilion. Please, follow me.”

Only when they stepped foot in the chateau did Li Tianming realise that he underestimated the wealth of the household. Pavilions and towers sprouted in the estate like bamboo shoots, each of them decorated with a myriad of ornaments and jewels. The governor’s manor back in Flamehaven was nothing but a shack compared to the glory of the Chen Chateau.

To be the mistress of the Chen Chateau, Xue Lan must be an extraordinary lady as well. It was hard to imagine how sisters from years ago ended up so differently, one being the mistress of a grand chateau, and the other homeless. Life had been really cruel to Wei Jing. But looking from Wei Jing’s expression, she seemed genuinely happy about her sister’s fortune.

It was quite a distance to the Daybreak Snow Pavilion, and the group walked past an arena where many youths from Xing & Chen Merchantry were training at. Many trainees from the merchantry enrolled in the Flameyellow Scions Institute each year, and today’s training was probably a final preparation for the entrance exam, which was only three days away.

A particular boy about the age of fifteen caught Li Tianming’s attention. He was tall and slender, dressed in a sky blue training robe. His long hair was combed neatly behind his back, giving him a meticulous look. The most prominent feature about him was still his eyes, sparkling and crystal clear.

From a single look, one could tell that the teenager came from an impressive family. The nobility that ran in their blood was not something you would find in common youths. Even in an arena filled with promising youths, he stood out among the rest like a shining star.

His lifebound beast was a stout purple lion, cultivating by his side. The lion had six distinct stars in its eyes, indicating that it was a six-star lifebound beast. That put him as one of the most promising youths in the entire Vermilion Bird, incomparable to those like Liu Qianyang or Jiang Yilin.

“This is our young master Chen Yao’s lifebound beast, the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion. Even among the six-star lifebound beasts, it is a high-tier one,” the guard explained, his expression filled with pride and envy.

Li Tianming was aware that Ignispolis categorized lifebound beasts into more specific tiers. Even within five-star and six-star beasts, they would be specified into low, mid and high tier beasts. For example, his Four-Winged Goldroc was classified as a mid-tier five-star beast.

This Hex-starred Clinquant Lion was not just any six-star lifebound beast, but a high-tier one. This further illustrated the young master Chen Yao’s superb talents.

“Is that Xue Lan’s kid?” Wei Jing asked.

“Of course! Young master Chen Yao is the madam’s youngest son. Her eldest son, Chen Hao, is currently training in Heaven’s Sanctum and is one of the best disciples there!” The guard replied.

Chen Hao? Li Tianming found the name familiar. Chen Hao had ranked third place in the exam three years ago and didn’t get the direct entrance into Heaven’s Sanctum. But ever since then he worked even harder, and made his way into the Sanctum some time later.

“Young master Chen Yao will be attending the entrance exam three days later. He is one of the most hopeful ones to get first place and enter Heaven’s Sanctum directly. Did you know, the earlier a person makes it into the Sanctum, the more opportunities and resources they will get? If young master Chen Hao had gotten first place for his year, he would be doing even better than that Lin Xiaoting.” The guard explained enthusiastically.

It went without saying that this young master would be another of Li Tianming’s rivals three days later.

Chapter 33 - Reality

Spiritsource was the base requirement to be number one in the entrance exam. Four years ago, Lin Xiaoting had accomplished it as third level Spiritsource, and the standard today should be roughly the same.

In contrast, Li Tianming had only joined the institute with great difficulty four years ago with a seventh level Beast Vein cultivation. Joining Heaven’s Sanctum was just a pipe dream.

He had made great strides recently and had hopes of rising up through the entrance exam this time. He would make progress on his mother’s illness if and only if he joined the Sanctum.

They soon reached Daybreak Snow Pavilion. A beautiful madam dressed in golden clothes was waiting for them inside. Even though she was likely forty as well, no traces of time could be seen on her. Her flawless skin seemed to belong to a teenage girl instead.

Her tall and slender frame was delicate and strong. She had obviously maintained her body well, and combined with her noble air, gave her a sort of grace. If she were to go to the streets, anyone would identify her wealthy background easily.

“It really is you, Jing’er!” The madam hastened to Wei Jing, her eyes reddening.

“Lan’er.” They had finally reunited after twenty years. Wei Jing held her hand, her fingers trembling slightly. Her eyes were already red.

“Let’s go inside to talk.” Madam Xue Lan led her into the pavilion before taking a seat. She looked sadly at Wei Jing. “So in the end, your Lifesbane did flare up. You already look so old at forty. I never knew you were having it so tough. Jing’er, I’ll have visited you earlier if I had known.”

“I’m used to it.” Wei Jing smiled peacefully. She pulled Li Tianming forward, “Let me introduce you, Lan’er. This is my son, Li Tianming. Tianming, greet your Aunt Lan.”

“Hello Aunt Lan.” Li Tianming paid his respects politely. He was sincerely happy for his mother to find an old friend in Ignispolis.

“Your kid has grown so big. That’s nice, he should be close in age to my Hao’er.”

Li Tianming stood by the side and listened to them chat.

“Jing’er, it’s been twenty years. Your reason for returning this time...”

“I’ve ended it with Li Yanfeng. I won’t be returning to Flamehaven. I’ll be in Ignispolis from now on. I’ve missed this place and the rest of you.”

“If only you hadn’t been so stubborn then,” Xue Lan sighed.

Wei Jing shook her head. “No need to mention old matters.”

Xue Lan pursed her lips. “Fine. Did you return because you hope the Sanctum Potentate will help you resolve the curse? I don’t think it’s likely. He’s the one who kicked you out then. With his personality, I doubt he’ll have forgiven you even after twenty years.”

“No, not for that.” Wei Jing still wasn’t interested in pursuing old topics, which led to a slight disconnect in their conversation. “I returned because I want to reside peacefully in Ignispolis and spend my last days with my son. I thought I’d visit you while I was at it. I’m happy you all are living so well.”

“Is that so.” Xue Lan nodded. “I respect your choice regardless.”

“I have a favour to ask.” Wei Jing leveled a serious look at her.

“Don’t speak like that! You and I, we’re sisters! I’ll definitely help you as much as I can,” Xue Lan said.

“I’ll like a residence near Flameyellow Scions Institute if possible. It doesn’t need to be grand, as long as it’s livable. My son and I haven’t had a place to rest ever since we arrived.”

“How could I let you do that! Listen, just stay at Chen Chateau. It’s easy for me to take care of you too.”

“It’s too much trouble for you. I’m someone who’s going to pass away soon, so I just want some peace and quiet.” Wei Jing shook her head.

“Jing’er...” Pain was written all over Xue Lan’s face. “Don’t worry. I’ll make the appropriate arrangements immediately.”

“Thank you.”

“On that topic, are you looking for a residence near the institute as your kid got a Flameyellow Order and is about to take the entrance exam?”

“Yes.”

Xue Lan considered Li Tianming, before asking, “Child, what’s your current cultivation?”

“Seventh level Beast Vein stage.”

“Decent, but the competition this time will be fierce. You’ll need to work pretty hard to secure a place so you don’t let your mother down.” Xue Lan warned.

“I’ll try my best.” Li Tianming nodded. He was definitely thankful to her for helping to resolve some of his mother’s worries.

However, an unpleasant voice cut in. "Seventh level Beast Vein, and you're from the sticks? Don't you think you're somewhat dreaming to want to enter the institute?"

A young man walked in from outside. Several maids were helping him remove his exercise clothing and don a luxurious set of long robes. Finally, they proffered him water with which to wash his face and hands.

"So, we have guests, mother." It was Chen Yao, who had completed his drills.

"Yes, this was my sister in the past." Xue Lan looked at her son with warmth and love.

"Sister?" Chen Yao snorted out loud after taking a look. "Amazing. You became sisters with an old lady when you were young? She's old enough to be your grandma!"

While the words were spoken in jest, they were quite unpleasant to hear. Li Tianming frowned.

"Don't say that, Yao'er! It's rude." While she scolded him, her tone wasn't particularly critical.

"I can't be bothered with this." He was already done washing his face and continued, "Just send them away already. It really is just so annoying to see penniless friends trying to come and beg. It's ruining my mood for the exam."

"Alright, I'll speed this up. I won't hold up your herbal soup." Xue Lan spoke lovingly to her son.

She smiled at Wei Jing, "Sorry about that. My kid just hasn't grown up. He still wants my herbal soup even now. It's just so expensive and hard to make! Just look at how calloused my hands are these days!" She extended flawless hands to Wei Jing that had obviously never seen a day of housework in their life. They were obviously in much better condition than Wei Jing's.

Li Tianming immediately understood many things. How could he not realise by now that this woman's show of affection was just a pretense?

Now, she had made such an overt mockery, and she had even done it without batting an eye. It really was very incisive.

"How could that be? Lan'er, your hands are just as beautiful as twenty years ago." Wei Jing smiled.

Li Tianming had expected his mother to feel uncomfortable, but it turned out she was made of sterner stuff than that.

Wei Jing got to her feet. "Well, we just arrived at Ignispolis. We still have many miscellaneous matters to handle, so we won't impose on you anymore, Lan'er."

"Why not stay a little longer? I'll get the servants to prepare a feast!" Xue Lan said, reluctant to part.

"No need." Wei Jing shook her head.

"Fine. We'll have lots of opportunities to meet now that you're back. I'll get the servants to prepare Chen Yao Inn for you all to stay tonight. Someone will bring you over in a while." Her arrangements seemed rather considerate.

"Much thanks."

“Someone, come help send off these VIPs.”

Xue Lan was still smiling brightly after Li Tianming and Wei Jing left.

“Why do you look so happy?” Chen Yao asked curiously.

“Am I? You can’t say that! My sister has been suffering for twenty years, and will even have to pass on alone soon. I pity her so much!” Xue Lan’s mouth twitched.

“Is that so? I feel like you’re close to dancing, though.” Chen Yao’s mouth twitched back.

“Nonsense. Life really is full of twists and turns. It really is incredible sometimes.” Xue Lan could no longer resist chuckling.

“How boring.” Chen Yao recalled Li Tianming’s features and suddenly said, “I find that guy rather familiar. What’s his name?”

“It was... Li Tianming or something? He’s Li Yanfeng’s spawn. That year, it really was a case of a toad eating swan meat.” Xue Lan shook her head.

“Li Tianming...? I remember now! He had entered the institute four years ago! Now, he’s the butt of their jokes there.” Chen Yao was laughing too.

“How so?”

Chen Yao described what had happened three years ago. Even today, people were still discussing it.

“One woman born with a hard lot in life and a depraved son. What a wonderful match.”

“He’s still seventh level even though his lifebound beast died? He should have used a blood pact. He really is underestimating the entrance exam, if he’s expecting to get in.” Chen Yao couldn’t stop himself from shaking his head. He couldn’t understand why someone with his reputation in tatters wanted to come back for round two.

Xue Lan had had her fun. She was just about to start making the herbal soup when a servant reported that Sage Chen was back. She immediately dressed herself up before going to welcome him.

Chen Chateau plunged into silence the moment he entered. This influential figure of Vermilion Bird looked young enough to be Chen Yao’s elder brother. However, it was impossible to hide the experience and power shown in his eyes.

All the guards along the way bow and scraped as if this was the emperor himself. If what was within Chen Yao’s eyes was described as a star, then what lay in Sage Chen’s eyes could only be as a galaxy, the brightness within illuminating the entire chateau.

After his return, Xue Lan helped him to change his clothes, before entering his embrace like a happy young girl.

“Who were those two who left? They looked familiar.” Sage Chen stroked her long hair.

“You saw her?” Xue Lan curled her lips.

“Who was it?”

“That person you couldn’t obtain that time.” Xue Lan smiled.

Sage Chen shot to his feet and leveled Xue Lan with a deep look. His expression was grave and shocked as he asked, “Her?!”

“Yes, did you see her clearly? She’s ugly and old now. Don’t you just want to puke by simply looking at her? I’ve done it myself already today. Need me to help you to the bathroom so you can do it too?” Xue Lan looked up at him, amused as she teased him.

He didn’t respond.

“So, do you still love her? Now that she’s forty and so very ugly?” Lan Xue smiled charmingly.

Sage Chen took a deep breath and left the room wordlessly.

“Take a close, close look! Burn into your mind how ugly she is now! If you haven’t puked enough outside, don’t even think of coming back!” Even after he left, her shrill voice continued to echo out, growing louder and louder.

Chapter 34 - I Wouldn’t Let Anyone Hurt You!

“So that lady is asking us to wait at their Chen Yao Inn, until she arranges a spot for us to live?” Li Tianming drove the horse cart along the Ignispolis streets. Chen Yao Inn was one of the best hotels in Ignispolis, and with the money they had, they simply couldn’t afford a single night there.

“Forget about Chen Yao Inn,” Wei Jing said from inside the cart.

Li Tianming was not naive — how would he not perceive the smugness in Xue Lan’s voice? If she wasn’t going to hide her pretentiousness in front of them, what she would do and say behind their backs wasn’t too hard to imagine.

“Forget about all these so-called sisters. There are always people who would suck up to the rich and powerful, but can’t wait to take advantage of other people’s misfortune. A lot of things can change in twenty years.” Li Tianming shook his head.

“She didn’t use to be like this...” Wei Jing’s voice was slightly shaky.

“Mother, I don’t wish for you to bow down to others for me, and I will never let anyone hurt you for that.” Li Tianming could tell that she was upset by the events today, and that angered him more than anything. They weren’t just fooled, they were fooled by someone they trusted deeply. If Wei Jing had not treated Xue Lan as her real sister, she would not have approached her for help in the first place. But in the end they achieved nothing except for bringing shame upon themselves.

“I know.” She nodded her head. As much as she tried to hide her emotions, Li Tianming could tell that she was deeply hurt today.

“Li Yanfeng’s horse cart is of decent quality, and can probably be sold for a tidy sum. With that money, we can find a hotel to stay for about a month. Once I enter the institute, we can think about subsequent plans.” Li Tianming planned their next steps.

Xue Lan would definitely arrange a place for them to stay, and with her power she could get it done in a minute. But Wei Jing wouldn't even step foot in the Chen Yao Inn. They were no longer sisters, but complete strangers.

Ignispolis was like a giant whirlpool, things come and go and the people here adapt to survive. Many may have lost their way, but Li Tianming wasn't going to be one of them. In fact after today's events, Li Tianming swore to himself that he would never let anybody have the chance to ever hurt her again!

"Mother, it's about time you tell me about Heaven's Sanctum. What is Lifesbane? Who is the Sanctum Potentate?"

"You are too young, there's no use for you to know all of these. I'm happy enough to be back here in Ignispolis and breath my hometown's air." Wei Jing said casually, rolling up the curtains.

"Are you saying that you wish to just be forgotten, to leave this world without anyone realising? Will you not count on me just this once?" Li Tianming turned his head back abruptly, and gazed at Wei Jing. She had her usual smile on — it was possible that she really had these thoughts.

"Mother, listen! I will make it to Heaven's Sanctum, and I will cure your illness. No matter how difficult it is, I swear I will do it!" Li Tianming said earnestly, every word a promise to his mother.

Wei Jing shook her head. "The road to enter Heaven's Sanctum is arduous and back-breaking. Curing my illness, even more so."

"Of course I know that. But you have to trust your own son, just like how I trust you, mother. I trust that my mother is not a slave to fate, and is not someone who will back down from difficulties! You must have many regrets and unaccomplished things in your life! And therefore, as your son, I will do whatever it takes for you to live a normal life once more!" Li Tianming was more excited than he ever was, holding Wei Jing's hand in his, looking firmly into her eyes.

"But Tianming....." Wei Jing didn't know what to say. Of course she didn't want to just leave the world like this, but what do they have to fight against this cruel fate that awaits her?

"Mother, you have gifted me with life. If you die, I will follow you. I will never let you be alone." Li Tianming was dead serious, and he had always been a man of his words.

"No my child, you have a great future ahead of you."

"My future is meaningless without you. I'm not giving in to fate, and I will do whatever it takes to fight till my last breath. Promise me, mother, that you won't give up, that you will stand up against this fate!" If anything, Wei Jing was the one who taught all these to him; only her presence had enabled him to labour through the past three years!

"Alright I promise you, I will tell you everything once you enter Heaven's Sanctum." She finally picked up her spirit again. Hearing the answer that he wanted, Li Tianming let out a sigh of relief.

"Mother, I'm telling you we will not take anything from that bitchy Xue Lan. One day, your son will buy you the biggest house, and grab a whole group of maids to serve you," said Li Tianming.

“No, no, your mother is happy enough when she gets to see you. As long as you are happy, I will be happy no matter how small the house is.” She smiled, reminding Li Tianming of an eighty-year-old child...

Ignispolis was huge, so huge that nobody would notice an unfamiliar horse cart crossing the streets. People went about with their own business, and perhaps the only thing that could arise everyone’s interest was the Flameyellow Scions Institute’s entrance exam three days later.

But Li Tianming did not know that while they spoke, a man lurked in the shadows around the corner. He watched the cart with a profound look, even following it for a while before stopping, a smile with mixed feelings on his face.

“Such is life.....” He lightly shook his head, before continuing to follow the horse cart.

.....

Li Tianming sold the horse cart and managed to get thirty spirit gems with orange heavenly patterns in return. There was a mix of crimson gems, golden gems, and other types of gems. It was quite a good sum since all three horses were tamed wildbeasts. If they were regular horses, getting a single spirit gem would already be lucky.

The little chick was drooling just by looking at the spirit gems, but they simply couldn’t afford to use it for cultivation. The thirty gems were to sustain them for a good period of time, especially since Wei Jing needed a lot of money, not just for a place to rest but also to buy medicines.

As he would attend the exam three days later, Li Tianming found a regular inn and booked a room for a month. There was only one bed for his mother to rest, and Li Tianming only needed a solid floor to cultivate. Ever since he obtained the Aeternal Infernal Body, his system was much stronger, and he could cultivate for days on end without needing to rest.

Having settled down in their room, Li Tianming brewed a bowl of medicine with clear spirit grass and fed it to Wei Jing. Before long, Wei Jing fell asleep and he finally had time to cultivate with the little chick.

“Ahh money, the root of all our problems. Luckily, I had the foresight to borrow Liu Qianyang’s Thunderfire Chain. Push comes to shove, we can sell it for enough money to buy a small house here,” Li Tianming said, a smile on his face.

The little chick fretted. “What have I done wrong in my past life to deserve this impoverished master?”

“What happened to going through any kind of difficulties together as brothers?” Li Tianming’s face twitched.

“Food before bros. Can’t talk about brotherhood on an empty stomach,” the little chick retaliated.

Just as they were joking around, Li Tianming suddenly felt a chill behind his back. He jumped up, realising that a man had silently appeared in a corner of the room. The man wore a loose black robe, and the only observable feature were his sparkling eyes. Apparently, he had observed the two for quite some time without being detected.

“Shhh, don’t wake her up.” Thankfully the man had no ill intentions, and Li Tianming let down his guard. The man was definitely way stronger than him, considering that neither Li Tianming nor Ying Huo realised his existence until now.

“May I know who you are, sir?” Li Tianming asked.

“Unimportant.” The man was studying him from head to toe.

“Then what may you be here for, senior?” Li Tianming asked.

“Li Tianming, I know you.” The man was smiling slightly.

“Should I feel honored?”

“Do you know why I know you?”

“Please elaborate.”

“Because I know that the Saintbeast War-Soul was your prize, and it was Lin Xiaoting that took it away from you. Three years ago, your story ended tragically, because you had no background and no support in Ignispolis. Nonetheless, it was you who obtained the Saintbeast War-Soul first, and you are the rightful owner that it recognizes.” The man’s eyes were sharp as he threw out the bomb.

Li Tianming jolted when he heard the man talk about the secret he had. Li Tianming had never told anyone about this before, since he knew that the Lightning Manor was influential enough to turn his own words against him.

Only when a person makes a breakthrough to the Spiritsource stage would they understand how important the Saintbeast War-Soul was. Simply put, its net value was probably ten times of the wealth of Flamehaven. Lin Xiaoting was never talented enough to become the number one disciple in Heaven’s Sanctum, but the Saintbeast War-Soul had let him achieve that!

Becoming a saint beast was the highest level a beast could go, and all of them were accompanied by myths and legends. The War-Souls that they left behind were priceless treasures that could bless a lifebound beast with tremendous power. Just like top grade manna, Saintbeast War-Souls were invaluable treasures that were unobtainable in the market.

Words could not even begin to describe how shocked Li Tianming was when someone who knew about his ownership of the War Soul suddenly appeared.

Chapter 35 - Xing & Chen Repository

“Senior speaks correctly. Not many know of the truth. Do you have any advice for me?” Li Tianming asked respectfully.

Indeed, him lacking a backer had been one of the reasons for his failure.

“Not really. No one can help you get back what you’ve lost, especially when it’s against Lightning Manor.” Then, he caught sight of Ying Huo, which he stared at for a while. “It seems I underestimated you. I thought your trip back was meaningless. However, I never expected your new lifebound beast to be a six-star one!”

He must have seen the six stars in the little chick's eyes. However, he would not expect that the truth actually wasn't that simple.

"It's a true miracle to do this with a blood pact. That shows you're rather lucky, except that you're still lacking a backer." The man continued.

"Yes."

"You want to take the entrance exam again?"

"Yes."

"The exam will be easy. Entering Heaven's Sanctum is another matter altogether. You'll most likely need a few years in the institute before you get the chance."

"How exactly did senior know that was my goal?" Li Tianming suddenly asked.

"..."

"Could senior have heard my conversation with my mother?" Li Tianming continued that line of questioning.

"..."

"Your eyes remind me of someone too. Chen Yao from Chen Chateau. Would you happen to be..."

"Alright, no need to continue. What a smart kid." The man chuckled. As soon as he revealed a flaw, Li Tianming had asked a quick three questions that pulled aside the veil of his identity.

"Sure. I'll just take it as you're one of my mother's friends," Li Tianming nodded. He knew when to quit. Obviously, the man didn't want to reveal his identity if he had hidden his face. Furthermore, his first action upon revealing himself was to make Li Tianming not wake up his mother.

And most of all, Li Tianming didn't believe he himself would attract such people.

"I feel slightly more relieved now that I've seen your new beast. Take good care of your mother." Now that Li Tianming had guessed his identity, he had become more forthcoming.

"She's a great person, but also plagued by misfortune. I'll naturally do whatever I can." Li Tianming said.

"I heard what you said during the day. You're one filial kid alright." The man praised. Li Yanfeng, who cursed his son everyday, wouldn't have agreed... but he didn't know that. Filial or unfilial, it really depended on the parent.

"Senior really was eavesdropping."

The man spluttered, "Don't let your mom know I came here today, understood? Otherwise, it'll be more troublesome for me to help you in the future." The man gave a solemn reminder.

"Don't worry. My lips are sealed." Li Tianming hurriedly said. Only an idiot would reject it when this man wanted to help him because of his mother.

"Mine too!" Ying Huo interjected.

“Interesting,” The man nodded before taking out a crimson gem with red heavenly patterns and placing it into Li Tianming’s hand

“It’s kinda stingy for your greeting gift to just be a crimson gem with red heavenly patterns.” The little chick stared. After all, those were the spirit ores of the lowest value.

The man chuckled. “This contains my power. Crush it if you meet trouble you can’t resolve. It’ll help me locate you. However, it’s only good for one use.”

Li Tianming had just known there was no way he would be so stingy! He quickly kept it. It was a good item. After all, there were definitely going to be lots of unresolvable troubles on this trip back.

“Remember, I can’t help you openly,” the man warned.

“Don’t worry, senior. I know the score.”

“Fine. I wish you luck for the exam. I’ll be going now.” The man was rather satisfied with Li Tianming.

With his strength, he could easily vanish in the blink of an eye, so Li Tianming hurriedly shouted, nearly loud enough to wake Wei Jing up, “Wait a moment!”

“Softer!” The man was rather panicked too.

“My bad,” Li Tianming said.

“What else is it?”

“Senior, any chance I could take a really small loan?”

“...” The man stared at Li Tianming with a strange expression, before snorting with amusement. “Your personality is rather like your mom’s while she was younger. Very direct. You don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

“Thanks. Still, when I make big bucks in the future. I’ll pay you back ten times. Not one cent less. And I’ll do it within a year.” Li Tianming said sincerely.

He needed more capital for the entrance exam. And, he needed even more to become the prime disciple. Still, he was really poor now, so he needed money! That was no way he would let the chance pass when such a helper appeared!

“What if you can’t afford to pay up?” The man’s expression was unreadable.

“Well... You can have the chick, I suppose. It’s like my brother. You can’t place a price on that bond. Losing it will be like losing a part of me.” Li Tianming said righteously.

“You traitor!” The little chick nearly coughed up blood.

“I accept the deal.” The man said cheerfully, “Six-star beasts do make rather nourishing soup. Since you’re giving such a good interest rate, I could consider lending more. What’s the most you can handle?”

“No need to be polite. The sky’s the limit!”

“Pretty gutsy. Take care of it. I’ll be back for debt collection in a year. Let’s see how much you can cough up then.” The man searched his chest area for a little, before tossing a pouch of money onto the ground, where it landed with a loud thud.

The two men and one chick flinched.

The man hadn’t expected such a loud sound since he was busy talking.

They stared at each other, going completely silent until they were certain Wei Jing hadn’t woken up. Finally, they heaved a sigh of relief.

“Li Tianming, remember. Ten times!” With those parting words, the man flew out the window.

The two left exchanged a look.

“Quick!” The chick quickly burrowed into the pouch, before coming back out. It looked pitifully at Li Tianming, “Welp, you’re kaput.”

“How much is there?” Li Tianming asked.

“Take a look yourself.”

Li Tianming picked it up and opened it, upon which spiritual energy gushed out. He casually took out a crimson gem. It was currently burning at a high temperature and a yellow heavenly pattern was on it!

Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Yellow was the third from the bottom. Yellow heavenly markings made it worth ten crimson jades with only orange markings. It was wealth only a Spiritsource beastmaster could use.

“And there are one thousand of them. You have to return ten thousand in one year! Kaput. You’re done for, Li Tianming.” The little chick looked at him mockingly.

“Alright, Ying Huo. In such situations, we need to think this through rationally. Who’s going to become chicken soup if I can’t pay up. Me? Or you?” Li Tianming said solemnly.

A shudder ran through the little chick’s body. That’s right, he was the one bound to become soup if Li Tianming failed!

“You’re inhuman, Li Tianming!” The little chick raged.

Jokes aside, Li Tianming really hadn’t expected this much wealth. A thousand crimson gems with yellow heavenly patterns was definitely worth a lot. It would help him resolve many troubles.

Still, he had his principles. Since he had borrowed it, he would pay it back. He hadn’t been joking when he said he would pay back ten times.

These one thousand gems were like charcoal sent during winter, something very much appreciated!

Li Tianming was very thankful to that man, even if he couldn’t say the identity he had guessed out loud. Even moreso, he couldn’t let his mother know. She wouldn’t accept it.

“Grace accepted today will be paid back another day.” Such kindness shown, especially when he was down on his luck, had to be paid back in spades one day! That was his belief!

Their cultivation speed would reach terrifying speeds with this, and it would let him choose some good battle arts. He was clear that what he had wasn't enough if he wanted to rank high in the exam.

The exam had two parts: the admission and ranking tests.

The admission test was just to decide if you could join the institute if you passed. After entry, you would receive guidance and enjoy the resources of the Flameyellow Scions Institute.

Participation in the ranking test rested on passing the admission test. It would generate a ranking list of the new disciples.

Placing first would grant a direct ride to Heaven's Sanctum. Those that ranked well would also be allocated more resources.

However, Li Tianming had barely passed four years ago. His ranking had also been towards the tail-end, so he hadn't had much resources in the institute. As for Lin Xiaoting, he had clinched first and joined the Sanctum.

Li Tianming's current power would easily let him be admitted. However, the ranking test would be difficult. "I'll make a trip first to Xing & Chen Repository. They'll have some good battle arts. When the admission tests start in three days, I'll need good battle arts to showcase myself." Li Tianming immediately made a decision.

Xing & Chen Repository was the trade and commerce hub Xing & Chen Merchantry had set up in Ignispolis, the largest in the country. The land it took up, a third of Flamehaven, was enough to fit a small city. It was called a 'repository' as it supposedly held anything and everything inside. Li Tianming would find what he needed as long as he had the money.

As it was late, he and Ying Huo simply ate the crimson jades to cultivate. The senior likely hadn't expected they had such an abnormal way of training.

The little chick had been peckish for quite a while. They made smooth progress towards the eighth level, enough that Li Tianming had the feeling they would reach it within the three days.

The next day, he prepared breakfast for his mother before making his way to Xing & Chen Repository.

"I originally thought I was going to sell the Thunderfire Chain. However, if I find a suitable battle art for this grade three weapon, it's going to be much stronger than the Crimson Blood Dagger."

The two quickly reached their destination!

Chapter 36 - Netherfire Ghostclaw

With a thousand crimson gems on him, Li Tianming was bursting with confidence. Since he was young, this was the first time he was so filthy rich!

"I borrowed money today to resolve my current difficulties. But I will uphold my promise of paying it back ten times within one year." Li Tianming etched that into his heart. In life, there were times you needed to be flexible. Being old-fashioned and obstinate was sometimes a kind of stupidity.

He had suffered a lot three years ago. So, now that he was Mr Moneybags, he wasn't going to be mistreating himself! At the Xing & Chen Repository, he would take whatever he wanted, whatever battle art that would enhance the pair's talent to the fullest potential!

"Bloody Soul Hunt is a supreme beast-ranked art. Perhaps I can crush my opponents in the admission test, but the ranking test will be a struggle. There'll be many spirit-source geniuses in the ranking tests. They'll all have trained some source-ranked battle arts."

Source-ranked battle arts were obviously stronger than beast-ranked ones. Mastery of them required aptitude, good fundamentals, as well as sufficient beast ki.

Li Tianming reached the repository. Due to its size, it had dozens of entrances, each one servicing an endless stream of customers. Business was especially booming in the lead-up to the Flameyellow Scions Institute entrance exams.

However, not many were here for battle arts. The exams were the day after, and there was a limit to how last minute one could be.

The seven-storey Many-Battles Pagoda were a small portion of the repository.

The pagoda had a wide base, and the floors got narrower the higher you went. The first floor had beast-ranked battle arts for sale, while the second sold source-ranked ones. And the third floor onwards, the even stronger unity-ranked and heavenly-ranked arts were made available.

Those weren't things Li Tianming could handle at his current level. For someone his age, it was likely that only existences like Lin Xiaoting could touch those battle arts from the third floor and above.

Someone came to assist Li Tianming as soon as he entered the third floor. The staff of Xing & Tian Repository had undergone professional training and would never judge a customer by their appearance. Ignispolis was a place full of crouching tigers and hidden dragons, and anyone, even ordinary-looking people, could be an expert in disguise.

Li Tianming chose to search for battle arts on his own as he wanted to do it at his leisure.

Currently, he was satisfied with his Thunderfire Chain. It could be used as a whip or to entangle the opponent. Li Tianming could just imagine how dashing he'll look in battle with the chain wrapped around his right arm and his black left arm.

He was still looking for his own personal weapon, so he was thinking of making an attempt at using a chain.

Li Tianming got a rough sensing of the prices after one loop around the premises. "For source-ranked battle arts, the basic level goes for fifty yellow-marked jades, while the intermediate arts goes for two hundred. It's really pricey."

He had thought the thousand yellow-marked jades he brought were more than enough, but it turned out he would likely only be able to buy a few battle arts. "And the advanced ones are even more expensive. I'm still in the Beast Vein stage, so I better not bite off more than I can chew."

His worry wasn't the inability to master it, but rather insufficient beast ki. It wouldn't matter how strong the battle art was then. Intermediate source-ranked battle arts was probably his limit for now. Historically, it was the rough ceiling for those who had ranked in the top ten for the entrance exams.

Li Tianming had gone through the exam before, so he chose to pick a movement art first. Movement arts were among the cheaper options and the one he picked was worth fifty yellow-marked jades.

"Confounding Mirage Walk. Intermediate source-ranked battle art. Creates illusionary clones that can confound opponents. Masks the user's presence, blurring the boundary between truth and falsehood."

This movement art was split into both a martial and bestial art, so the duo could both train in it. It was much better than Li Tianming's Ghost Steps.

Li Tianming continued on. Before he found a good battle art for his chain, he found a claw art. His left hand was now like a beast's claw that was sharper than even bestial weapons. Hence, he wanted to follow that path of development a little. It would also be useful for the little chick's tiny but fearsome claws.

"Netherfire Ghostclaw. Intermediate source-ranked battle art. Cultivate Netherfire within the claw. The Netherfire is venomous whilst the Ghostclaw is incisive. Claw-type bestial weapons are necessary for usage. The complementing bestial art can be used by the majority of lifebound beasts, especially avian species. Once wounded, Netherfire will burn ceaselessly until nothing is left!"

Li Tianming had seen a senior in the institute use this before. While the description was vague, it was definitely very strong.

For this particular battle art, it was a case of the bestial art being superior to the martial art, making it good for the little chick.

"This is pretty expensive. It's a hundred and fifty!" It was thrice the Confounding Mirage Walk's price despite being the same rank! Still, its offensive power was amongst the best of intermediate source-ranked battle arts.

Ten yellow-marked jades were enough to last an ordinary person a lifetime. So this Netherfire Ghostclaw could last fifteen lifetimes! If not for that mysterious man's help, Li Tianming wouldn't have been able to purchase it even if he sold himself.

"I'll take it." Now that he had dough, he had to be willing to spend it no matter how much it hurt, so that he could join Heaven's Sanctum.

The Many-Battles Pagoda had all sorts of battle arts, from sabres to spears, swords and halberds. However, chains and whips were a more unique weapon. Other stores might not even stock the related battle arts, and the Pagoda didn't have the greatest variety either. Still, he managed to find two suitable ones after some comparison.

"Skyfire Soulbinder. Intermediate source-ranked battle art. Hundred yellow-ranked jades. Suitable for whip and chain-type bestial weapons. The weapon dances like Skyfire, capable of locking down an opponent. Once caught, extricating themselves is a difficult task."

This battle art wasn't an offensive art, but Li Tianming valued its ability for crowd control. Its price was also representative of its power. However, Li Tianming placed even more value on the other art.

"Nine Flying Bolts. Intermediate source-ranked battle art. Hundred and seventy yellow-ranked jades. Composed of nine consecutive whip strikes, each fiercer than the last. Striking like a rain of lightning, this art is unblockable and matchless in power amongst intermediate source-ranked battle arts!"

It was even more expensive than the Netherfire Ghostclaw and was close in price to some advanced source-ranked battle arts, a testament to its power.

Although the four battle arts Li Tianming had his eyes on were pricey, he had long since decided to go for broke.

"Four hundred and seventy yellow-marked jade! You actually spent half of what you just borrowed a day ago. What a wastrel," Ying Huo said, feeling pained. The more Li Tianming spent, the less it could eat.

"If you prattle on some more, I'll be having you for dinner."

Confounding Mirage Walk, Netherfire Ghostclaw, Skyfire Soulfinder and the Nine Flying Bolts!

Li Tianming had bought a movement art, a crowd control art and two attack arts for the black arm and Thunderfire Chain. This was the best selection he could make.

The Confounding Mirage Walk and Netherfire Ghostclaw were enough for the little chick, while it wasn't able to train in Skyfire Soulfinder and Nine Flying Bolts.

"What a waste, buying stuff I can't use!" Ying Huo jabbered.

"Hey, don't blame me if your whip is too short. You could train in the Nine Flying Bolts if you were the Lightning Bolt Cheetah's size." Li Tianming teased.

"Are you mocking me?!" The little chick continued its racket in the lifebound beast space.

"Hey, be careful! Don't step on your siblings!" Li Tianming chuckled. He examined them briefly. That one egg had increased in activity recently, but it still hadn't hatched. He was getting impatient.

"Will I become a twin beastmaster when it hatches?" Li Tianming was feeling rather expectant. A twin beastmaster referred to those who were gifted with two lifebound beasts when they were born. It didn't just provide a quantity increase, but a fundamental change to the symbiotic system.

A twin beastmaster would receive the benefits of two beasts cultivating. Hence, they would be much stronger than their peers in the same level. For example, in ninth level Beast Vein, a twin beastmaster would have a total of twenty-seven beasts veins, as compared to an ordinary beastmaster's eighteen.

Nine beasts veins allowed storing more beasts ki. The beastmaster's beast veins would also have received two remouldings from their beasts, making it stronger again.

And most of all, a twin beastmaster against a normal beastmaster would always be a three versus two.

Chapter 37 - Twin Beastmaster

In fact, all the twin beastmasters were well-known experts, and they often lived their whole life under the spotlight. Anyone would envy a twin beastmaster, and Li Tianming was no different. But he never imagined that he could become one himself one day. Not just that, he still had nine eggs that were unhatched, which marked him as an up-and-coming decuplet beastmaster. Just the thought of having ten lifebound beasts was overwhelming.

In Vermilion Bird's history existed sagas of triplet beastmasters, and even then, those were just myths with no concrete evidence. Having ten lifebound beasts was out of anyone's imagination. The only thing Li Tianming knew for sure was that his body would be completely modified by the bloodline of his ten beasts, and his strength would also be the sum of the ten. Such were the benefits of symbiotic cultivation, where the numbers and grade of the lifebound beasts determined the talent of their masters.

As for why Li Tianming knew so much about twin beastmasters, it was because he personally knew one of them. That person was none other than his foe Lin Xiaoting, famous for commanding two lifebound beasts!

"This is just the first step of my revenge." Li Tianming looked at the four battle arts in his hands. It was only going to get tougher from here on, but he was ready for the challenge.

Mu Qingqing was in this city too. Four years ago, they arrived at Ignispolis together, helping each other out and clearing the entrance exam together. Li Tianming thought those were the happiest days of his life. But he could never expect that the woman he trusted the most betrayed him for wealth and power, stabbing him in the back together with Lin Xiaoting.

He hated Lin Xiaoting, and of course he hated Mu Qingqing. He was no saint, and would not hide his yearning to kill them both. There was no room for negotiation around that, as that was the only way he could honor his brother, Midas, who had fought alongside him for more than a decade. The goldroc was never as lively or as talented as the little chick, but Li Tianming knew that he owed it its life. Every feather that was torn out from Midas on that stormy night was like a dagger that stabbed straight into Li Tianming's heart. If only he had not trusted the wrong person, if only he was strong enough...

Li Tianming stood still in the Xing & Chen Repository as the waves of flashbacks and memories hit him. It has been three years, and he had finally returned to this city. He was nearing them, and they might even meet during the entrance exam two days later!

"Li Tianming?" While he was still deep in thought, Li Tianming heard someone mention his name. He quickly set his memories aside and was surprised to see some familiar faces.

Standing behind him was a brilliant-looking boy surrounded by a group of youths of the same age, all of them studying Li Tianming. He was none other than the young master of this Xing & Chen Repository, Sage Chen's youngest son Chen Yao. They had just met at Chen Chateau yesterday.

"You know my name?" Li Tianming recalled that he didn't introduce himself during yesterday's meeting.

"Of course, you have quite the reputation around here." Chen Yao replied with a grin, causing the group to snicker.

“Most people around here know your stories, although if you hadn’t returned, they would have forgotten about you by now,” said one of the girls beside Chen Yao.

“Ying’er, don’t be so rude to brother Tianming. It’s not easy for scum like him to muster the courage to come back and make a fool of himself.” A hulking boy about the height of two meters laughed. The group of them were all younger than Li Tianming, perhaps around Liu Qianyang’s age.

Li Tianming didn’t expect his name to be so well-known. It seemed that Lin Xiaoting had put in a lot of effort to defame him.

“Chen Ying, Chen Ding, don’t mock him. If he ever decides to take his own life in shame, you are all accountable.” Chen Yao smiled.

“Brother Yao must have underestimated him. His face was thick enough for him to not die of shame three years ago after the atrocities he committed,” Chen Ying muttered, causing the group to chuckle again. It was sad to see kids from reputable families being brought up like this, Li Tianming thought.

Chen Yao walked towards Li Tianming, and spoke in a threatening tone, “Was that granny yesterday your mother? What a hideous sight, don’t you ever bring her near my mother again. Not only do you dirty Chen Chateau, you are also besmirching our reputations.”

Li Tianming could never tolerate anyone speaking bad of his mother. While he initially held no hostility towards this young master, he had changed his mind after these words. Then again, the both of them wanted to compete for the slot to Heaven’s Sanctum, making the two of them rivals during the entrance exam.

“Chen Yao, remember that there are some things that should never be said. You never know when you will be regretting them,” said Li Tianming.

“What, you mean that I’ll regret looking down on you and your dying mother?” Chen Yao was cracking up. As for the group behind him, they were already rolling around in laughter, as if Li Tianming was some kind of clown.

“Think what you want, but you will see for yourself what I mean soon.” Li Tianming said, unaffected by the taunts. After all the things he had gone through, he was no longer affected by insults like these. Li Tianming knew better than anyone, that the best way to retaliate was to trounce them when the right opportunity arrived. What was the fun in beating them now, when he could do so during the entrance exam in front of thousands of audience, and crush his hope of entering Heaven’s Sanctum?

“Is this a challenge?” Chen Yao looked at Li Tianming as if he was some kind of an idiot.

“What a poor thing. It looks like the accident three years ago had permanently damaged his brain.” Chen Ying said.

“Brother Yao, what do you think this fool is doing in the repository? Look at the four battle arts in his hand, do you reckon he might be here to steal?”

“You’re right, this is the source-ranked battle art area, each of these is worth a fortune! There’s no way he can afford all four of those!” The youths were not joking when they said that, and it would have been true if it wasn’t for the mysterious man’s help.

“Don’t let him take them, someone, chase this thief out of the repository!” Chen Ying urged.

“Just chasing him away is enough? We better teach him a lesson,” Chen Ding commented.

They thought they were acting clever, and it was true that they had the backing to. But in Li Tianming’s eyes, such arrogance and insolence would never get them anywhere in life.

At the young master’s words, a bunch of guards closed in on Li Tianming, ready to pounce on him anytime.

“Thief?” Li Tianming snorted at their imagination. He couldn’t be bothered with these immature kids, especially not when he was in their territory. His main goal for the day was to select battle arts for himself. There were ample opportunities to shut those brats up after he mastered them.

Li Tianming walked towards the counter. Naturally, the cashiers had witnessed the happenings too, and were watching him closely. While the exit may be right beside the counter, Li Tianming would be naive if he thought he could make a run for it. The Xing & Chen Repository was filled with trained experts who could take down Li Tianming within seconds.

At the center of everyone’s attention, Li Tianming handed the battle arts to the cashier. “That’s all, please pack it up.”

The cashiers were probably thinking of the same things as the youths, and one of them said, “Sir, do you know what’s the consequences of messing with Xing & Chen Repository?”

“Huh, is this how you treat your customers. How eye-opening.” As he spoke, Li Tianming drew out his pouch, emptying its contents onto the counter. The yellow patterned crimson gems splattered across the table, and Li Tianming only stopped pouring after he counted four hundred and seven gems.

Li Tianming smiled. “I pay for what I want, no? If this is considered as ‘messing around’, then the repository will have quite a lot of people to deal with.”

The moment Li Tianming started pouring out the crimson gems, the cashiers were already bemused. That applied to Chen Yao’s group as well, who were ready to see Li Tianming make a fool out of himself, but now, they were just standing there stupidly.

Li Tianming was amused. Of course he would not tell Chen Yao that the money in his pouch right now all came from Chen Yao’s father.

“Pack it up and stop wasting my time,” Li Tianming reemphasized.

“Yes, please give us a moment.” The Xing & Chen Repository had strict regulations, and even the young master couldn’t stop Li Tianming as long as the latter followed all the rules. In fact, Chen Yao himself would have to pay for what he wanted in full sum, as the Xing & Chen Merchantry wasn’t Sage Chen’s personal business, but instead a union run by a varied group of people.

Chen Yao and friends could only watch as Li Tianming walked past them with the four battle arts that he paid for.

“These are at least intermediate source-ranked arts, what use do you have for them, to fuel your stove?” Chen Yao had heard from his mother that Li Tianming was only seventh level Beast Vein.

Li Tianming turned around with a smile and said, "Of course, please drop by and try my cooking once I'm done. Better not piss yourself after trying it." Before the rest could react, he had already left the building.

"Gosh, why would he dare taunt brother again, just what is he thinking..." Chen Ying found it unbelievable.

"Forget it, we shouldn't lower ourselves to his standard." Chen Yao shook his head. In hindsight, some of the things he said today weren't that appropriate, and reflected poorly of him. After all, why should a lion bother himself with a mere cripple?

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It was already noon when Li Tianming returned to the inn. He wasted no time and started cultivating immediately, chewing on crimson gems while the little chick guided their cultivation. Li Tianming himself made use of this time to study the battle arts as well, since he was running on a very tight schedule.

After using over a hundred yellow patterned crimson gems, Li Tianming and the chick had finally made it to the eighth level of the beast vein stage. As for their small loan, only four hundred gems remained. Cultivation was costly business indeed, but at least they were putting the money to good use.

Before long, the day of the entrance exam had arrived, and it was time to put their skills to test.

Chapter 38 - Flameyellow Stadium

The Flameyellow Scions Institute was the most reputable school for beastmasters in the entire Vermilion Bird, with a history even richer than the nation itself. It wasn't just a place for learning and cultivation, but a symbol of strength and talent. To Li Tianming's knowledge, even powerhouses like the Lightning Manor, the Xing & Chen Merchantry, and even the Vermilion Bird Clan, the royal family, had to pay their respects to the institute.

Throughout the nation's history, countless princes and princesses of the nation had spent their youth in the institute. Word on the streets was that the institute had such influence because it had backing beyond anyone's imagination. And at the center of the institute, it was rumored that Heaven's Sanctum was its true ruler.

Needless to say, the institute had nurtured endless generations of beastmasters in Vermilion Bird. It occupied almost half of the northern district of the capital, its dimensions even greater than that of the imperial palace.

Today was the day of the quadrennial entrance exam, and Li Tianming had arrived at the break of dawn. Even then, the place was already packed to the brim.

"It's just the admission test and not the ranking test, and there's already so many people here. This is way more crowded than four years ago." It wasn't just the owners of Flameyellow Orders that were waiting here, but many more parents and servants as well. The sheer number of cultivators present there was a mark of Ignispolis's robustness and prosperity.

The gate of the institute was not as magnificent as people would expect it to be. The simple design, with only stone slabs used in its construction, gave the gate a timeworn vibe. As simple as it may be, the gate was a reflection of the institute's rich heritage, the goal for any and all beastmasters in the nation.

Four years ago, Li Tianming arrived before this gate, eager to study as a disciple of the institute. And today, he stood at the exact same spot, but with a completely different emotion. He knew that the two people who destroyed his life three years ago were crowned as the best disciples of the institute. They would never imagine that Li Tianming was back to haunt them.

The admission test should be quite simple for Li Tianming. All he needed to do was to join the queue and display his Flameyellow Order, and after registering his name with the counter he could enter the compound to prepare for the test.

There were a total of five registration counters outside of the institute, each of them with a long queue of people. Li Tianming took a look around, and found most people in the queue to be teenagers about the age of fifteen, eager about their future as a disciple of the institute.

Li Tianming was lucky that his birthday was next month. Had the exam been held a month later, he would be disqualified for being over the age of twenty.

Out of the five counters, Li Tianming picked the counter for the Hall of Phoenix. Other than the exclusive Heaven's Sanctum, the Flameyellow Scions Institute was split into five different halls, the five being the Hall of Manibeasts, Hall of Phoenix, Hall of Deepblue, Hall of Rudiment and the Hall of Uniquities. They recruited disciples with terrestrial, avian, fish, bug and unique lifebound beasts respectively.

The phoenix was crowned the king of all avian beasts, and that was where the Hall of Phoenix got its name from. Together with the Hall of Manibeasts, the two halls had the richest heritage and also the largest intakes of disciples.

The Hall of Phoenix recruited exactly five hundred disciples each time but there were more than one thousand five hundred youths aiming to register under the hall this year. That means only less than a third of the youths could get in.

As the queue shortened and it was soon to be Li Tianming's turn, he was pleasantly surprised to see that the people manning the counter was none other than his old classmates from four years ago. After losing his lifebound beast, Li Tianming was no longer able to cultivate and therefore he left the campus. As for his old classmates, they should have made it into the journeyman class by now.

Every four years, the institute would take in a new batch of disciples and the previous batch would graduate into their next class after clearing certain requirements. There were three different levels of classes, the apprentice class, journeyman class and elite class, each of them lasting for four years. After twelve years of study, the students could either choose to graduate or to apply to be a teacher of the institute should they qualify. Being a teacher in the institute was a prestigious position that most disciples of the elite class sought after.

During these three years that Li Tianming was away, the classmates in his batch had cultivated hard and probably made it to the journeyman class with Spiritsource stage already. Those who haven't cleared the requirements would be retained in the apprentice class.

In the institute, being retained was an extremely disgraceful thing. Not only would you waste another four years of precious youth, you would also be a laughing stock to people around you. The institute also ruled that students could only retain once, and those who failed to clear the requirements a second time would be expelled from the institute.

The two students manning the counter right now had both cultivated alongside Li Tianming for a year. But they had moved onto the journeyman class and were Li Tianming's seniors now, tasked with the role of registering thousands of youths with the Flameyellow Order.

Li Tianming still remembered their names, but wasn't so sure whether they still remembered his own. The boy was called Fang Zhao, and the girl Lin Qingyu.

After approximately two hours of queuing, it was finally Li Tianming's turn. He handed over his Flameyellow Order, and filled his name on the form. Both Fang Zhao and Lin Qingyu were focused on the paperwork and did not notice Li Tianming at first.

"Next, Li Tianming of Flamehaven." Fang Zhao read off the name list, and was visibly confused for a moment. And when he finally looked up and saw Li Tianming's face, a perplexed look crept up his face.

"Li Tianming, it's you?" Lin Qingyu was dressed in an orange robe, beads of sweat flowing down her head from the burning heat.

Back then, everyone were newbies from faraway cities, and they helped each other as much as they could. Li Tianming could still remember when Fang Zhao was bullied by others because of his timid personality, and he was the one that helped Fang Zhao fight back. But there was no joy of reunion on the two's faces right now, only shock.

"Tianming, are you serious?" Lin Qianyu must have thought of the scandal three years ago as she questioned.

Li Tianming smiled. "Why not? I'm still qualified for the exam, and I did manage to get the Flameyellow Order from Flamehaven again. The school didn't regulate that I can't take the entrance exam a second time."

"But your lifebound beast is dead!" Fang Zhao looked up, a deep frown on his face. "It's been three years. Did you know how much our class got laughed at because of you during these three years? If you are still going to mess around here we will have no choice but to chase you away."

"For what reason? I am qualified, just register my name already." Li Tianming was as calm as ever. After all the things that have happened, he was used to being treated like this.

"How can I let someone without a lifebound beast in? Li Tianming, three years have passed and we are already in journeyman class now. If you still want to screw around, don't expect us to show mercy just because we used to be classmates." Fang Zhao threatened.

"Oh, so a senior from journeyman class now, how terrific." Li Tianming raised his thumb.

"Last chance, are you leaving or not?" Fang Zhao didn't want to entertain his old classmate any further.

"Qingyu, do you think the same way?" Li Tianming turned to the girl.

Lin Qingyu bit her lips, and said after a while, “Never mind, I have no reason to reject you. You have the Flameyellow Order and I have information here that yours is valid, so you may enter.”

“Qingyu, why are letting this joker in.....” Fang Zhao was clearly not happy about it.

“And what does that have to do with you?” Li Tianming chipped in.

“Li Tianming how dare you! Don’t forget the difference between us now!” Fang Zhao shot up from his seat. After three years of cultivation, he was way stronger than what he used to be.

“Awesome, please do show me our ‘differences’ when I’m free next time.” Li Tianming was not going to waste his time on Fang Zhao, as he cleared the registration and walked into the institute.

“If it wasn’t for my task here, I would have shown you what three years of cultivation looks like, you perverted scum!” Fang Zhao couldn’t leave his post as there were still hundreds of people queuing in front of his table, so he could only curse behind Li Tianming’s back.

Li Tianming wasn’t going to react to that. Such people would remain as wimps, no matter what their cultivation level was, and Li Tianming had nothing to fear. He could only lament the time they used to study as a class, and wonder whether the rest of his class would treat him the same way as Fang Zhao did.

Li Tianming followed the crowd into the gates, where the first thing that entered his sight was the landmark of the institute: the Flameyellow Stadium! Not only was it the place where disciples honed their battling skills, it also staged all kinds of major events, one of them being the famous ranking test.

Inside of the stadium, hundreds of stone arenas were placed beside each other, every single one covered with damage from prior battles. The stadium was enclosed by a cyclic stand with hundreds of thousands of seats meant for spectators. All of the institute’s trials were open to the public, and it was quite a common hobby for the rich and famous of Ignispolis to spectate a battle here. Of course, regular citizens could also purchase a ticket and witness the glories of the disciples here.

Other than the open-aired seats, the stadium had hundreds of private rooms meant for the elites of the nation. These rooms had a better angle than regular seats and could see all the arenas clearly.

Throughout Flameyellow Scions Institute’s history, countless heroes had their tale begin in this very stadium, and simply standing in this stadium could make any disciple’s blood boil. Today’s admission test, as well as the ranking test to be held soon, were all to be conducted here.

As Li Tianming entered the stadium, he could see plenty of people seated in the stand already, most of them being parents or seniors of those taking the test. He expected some private rooms to be occupied by big shots as well. That being said, the admission test wasn’t as big an event as the ranking test, so the stadium would only be more busy during the ranking test.

However, Li Tianming would never imagine that there were two very familiar faces sitting in the spectator stands right now. They were a couple, a stately middle-aged man with a gorgeous woman by his side. The woman was especially eye-catching, her seductive figure drawing the attention of those sitting around them.

Had Li Tianming noticed them, he would recognize them at once. They were none other than Li Yanfeng and Liu Qing.

Chapter 39 - Chief Mentor Mu Wan

“Yanfeng, don’t worry about it, I’m sure Qianyang can clear the entrance exam easily. It may be difficult for him to make it to Heaven’s Sanctum, but at his level he definitely outshines most others here.” Liu Qing said with Li Yanfeng’s hands in hers.

“Then all is well. Qianyang sure is a good kid.” Li Yanfeng nodded.

“He couldn’t have reached this step without you. Your connections that let him take the slot for Zirrihaven’s Flameyellow Order this time really saved him.” Liu Qing hugged him even closer to her.

“Don’t mention it.” Li Yanfeng screwed up his eyes, trying to find Liu Qianyang amongst the crowd.

“Yanfeng, ever since my father passed away from an accident, my family lost our footing in the Lightning Manor. Now that you are part of the family too, our whole family will have to depend on you.” Liu Qing said tenderly.

“Of course. You are my wife and this is the least I can do for you.” Li Yanfeng smiled as he ran his hand through her hair. The pair was drawing plenty of attention from others, especially the envious looks targeted at Li Yanfeng. That made Li Yanfeng even more reassured about his past decisions. He had gained a beautiful wife and also power in Ignispolis, and things could only get better from there on.

“Oh, that Li Tianming will definitely be here right? How will he react when he realises that for this year’s test, they will be testing the lifebound beast’s grade first?” Liu Qing frowned when she thought of that youth that gave them so much trouble.

“What a waste of a Flameyellow Order. A one-star lifebound beast appearing on the Flameyellow Stadium will only make him a bigger joke than he already is.” Li Yanfeng said with a straight face.

“Thankfully you have already cut all ties with that brute, or he would have spoiled your reputation as well.”

“Hm.” Li Yanfeng nodded in agreement. Coincidentally, he spotted Li Tianming in the crowds at the same time.

“Yanfeng, what are you looking at ?” Liu Qing asked curiously when she saw Li Yanfeng squinting his eyes.

“Look there.” Li Yanfeng pointed Li Tianming out.

“So he really is here. Looks like we can anticipate a good show with his one-star lifebound beast.” Liu Qianyang snickered sinisterly.

Li Yanfeng did not react. Even after cutting ties with Li Tianming, he was still worried that his own reputation would be harmed if Li Tianming made a fool of himself.

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The Flameyellow Stadium was split into five different sections, for the five different halls to do their respective tests. A brief look told Li Tianming that the Hall of Phoenix and Hall of Manibeasts had the most people.

He had received the pamphlet specifying the rules of the admission test. The test was split into two segments, the first being a test of the lifebound beast's grade and cultivation level. The beast's cultivation level was bound to its master's, and was tested by measuring the beast ki of the beast.

Out of the one thousand six hundred students reporting under Hall of Phoenix, only a thousand of them could make it into the next segment, the practical test. The practical test was conducted by pitting a pair of disciples against each other, and the teachers of Hall of Phoenix would then grade the disciples accordingly. Winning wasn't necessary to clear this segment, as the teachers considered factors such as age, talent and resilience when grading. This made sure that all decisions made were unbiased and justified when they picked the final five hundred people who could make it into the hall.

Out of these two segments, each would eliminate around five hundred students, meaning that holding a Flameyellow Order did not guarantee a place in the institute. The rules were about the same in the four other halls, the only part differing being the final intake. The Hall of Manibeasts recruited five hundred, the Hall of Deepblue three hundred, and the other two halls recruited only two hundred disciples each.

Only when disciples cleared the two segments of the test would they be an official member of the institute, marking them as the most exceptional youths of the nation in the past four years. Considering that there were more than two thousand cities the size of Flamehaven in Vermilion Bird, it was an honor for a city to produce just one Flameyellow disciple.

For Li Tianming, both segments were no kick, and he just wished for his turn to be done and over with.

"My only demerit is my age, and that can lose me quite a lot of marks. After all, if I'm fighting someone of the same level but five years younger than me, the teachers may still fail me." Li Tianming thought to himself.

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A short while later, the five halls have moved on with the first segment of the test. At the corner allotted to the Hall of Phoenix, the invigilators for the test were ten 'chief mentors'. The chief mentors had more power and experience than the regular teachers of the institute, and each of them was in charge of an entire class. For example, in the Hall of Phoenix, the five hundred new students would be split into ten different apprentice classes under the ten respective chief mentors. Each chief mentor would then assign regular teachers or senior students to teach them the various aspects of cultivation.

Four years ago, Li Tianming joined one of the ten apprentice classes, the Muwan class, named after their chief mentor, Mu Wan. Both Fang Zhao and Lin Qingyu used to be part of the Muwan class with him.

Li Tianming wasn't surprised to see her as one of the invigilators today. Chief Mentor Mu Wan was a dream date for many in the institute, her figure tall and alluring. It was said that her strength was inestimable, and she would only get more suitors if it wasn't for her strict personality and her icy expressions.

It had been four years and the Muwan class had entered the journeyman class, which was why she would be recruiting new disciples today. Chief mentor was one of the most prestigious positions in the institute, and there were only thirty of them in the Hall of Phoenix. Rumors had it that all the chief mentors, Mu Wan herself included, were graduates from the exclusive Heaven's Sanctum.

Li Tianming always had a good impression of Chief Mentor Mu Wan, who had helped him greatly during his cultivation. During the incident three years ago, she didn't despise Li Tianming like most other people did, but instead asked him if he needed any help. She was also the one who suggested he leave the institute voluntarily, and helped him settle the paperwork. Without her, he would be expelled from the institute instead, which would have banned him from the institute for the rest of his life.

"Every single disciple will have to go through the admission test and join one of the apprentice classes. The ranking test only happens after that, so I better join the Muwan class first before thinking about joining the sanctum." Li Tianming had come to a decision.

Then again, Chief Mentor Mu Wan was the most popular among the boys. Even as she seated cross-legged at the invigilator's table, her face as expressionless as usual, her fair and slim legs were enough to make the boys drool.

"Oh Li Tianming, your lust is leading you astray." The little chick and him knew what each other was thinking about, even if it was still in his lifebound space.

"Screw off, I'm being grateful for everything she did for me." Li Tianming was keeping a poker face.

"Ha, then why are you looking at her legs?"

"Well, everyone's looking at it, so why can't I?" Li Tianming claimed righteously.

As he was chatting with the little chick, Li Tianming could suddenly sense two people glaring at him. He turned around to find a bulky teenager with a girl much smaller than his size.

"Li Tianming, what are you doing here?" Chen Ding scoffed, with Chen Ying standing beside him. Li Tianming knew them from the encounter at the Xing & Chen Repository, but didn't expect to see these two here. Since they were both queuing for Hall of Phoenix, it implied that their lifebound beasts were avians as well.

Li Tianming shrugged. "What, am I not welcome here?"

"Isn't your lifebound beast dead? Don't tell me you used a blood pact to get yourself a rubbish wildbeast."

"Kudos for getting it right on the first guess." Li Tianming gave him a thumbs up.

"Do you really know no shame? How dare you bring a filthy beast obtained using a blood pact into the Flameyellow Scions Institute?" Chen Ying chimed in at one side.

"And aren't you overaged?" Chen Ding's expressions turned even fiercer.

"Stop sticking your nose into other people's business. My presence here means I'm qualified and that's all you need to know, so just shut up and leave me alone." Li Tianming had enough of these two rude brats.

“Are you looking for a fight?!” That was enough to enrage Chen Ding.

“If you attack me here, it’s you that’ll get thrown out of the institute by the chief mentors.” Li Tianming sneered.

“I will deal with you Li Tianming, mark my words. Brother Yao may not bother himself with trash like you, but I’m a lot less forgiving. I can crush you the moment you step out of the campus.” Chen Ding growled like an infuriated beast.

“How brainless of you to provoke the Chen family,” said Chen Ying.

“Sorry, what did you say? My ears automatically filter out the voices of clowns.” Li Tianming laughed. In terms of trash-talking, Li Tianming was just way better. If it wasn’t for Chen Ying stopping him, Chen Ding would really have attacked Li Tianming by now, which will likely result in his own expulsion.

“Not happy with being called a clown? How about you take a good look in the mirror?” Li Tianming added.

“What about yourself, a pervert who tried to drug others? Have you no shame at all?” Chen Ying scolded while still held on to Chen Ding.

“So you do remember my hobbies! Then you’d better watch out, because young ladies like you are my preference.” Li Tianming leered at Chen Ying, causing her to shriek in terror. Chen Ding’s vessels were close to bursting, but there was nothing he could do.

“Don’t worry. With your looks, it’ll be a waste of my drugs anyway.” Li Tianming shrugged, before walking off in a much better mood after teasing those two brats, leaving the two cursing and swearing behind.

Li Tianming was more concerned about the test, as it was about to be his turn soon. The procedures were rather simple. Each chief mentor had a special spirit ore known as the ‘star orb’, which was capable of detecting the grade of lifebound beasts. While this could have been done by just looking at the number of stars in their eyes, the star orb was much more precise.

When their blood dripped onto the star orb, the orb would change its color to reflect the lifebound beast’s grade. There were a total of seven different colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, corresponding to lifebound beasts from one-star to seven-stars. It would also split each grade into three different tiers. For example, a lighter shade of blue would represent a low-tier five-star beast while a darker blue would represent a high-tier five-star beast. This wouldn’t be possible from just looking at the number of stars in their eyes.

After that, the chief mentor would also test the stage and level of cultivation the beasts were at by personally inspecting the beast. From what Li Tianming could see, any lifebound beast below five-stars had been rejected, no matter their level of cultivation. It was a new rule added this year that made the selection even more stringent.

Just then, a commotion sparked in the stadium, coming from the Hall of Manibeasts. Even from where he was, Li Tianming could see the dark blue light shining from that direction.

“Chen Yao, your lifebound beast is the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion, a high-tier six-star lifebound beast at third level of the Spiritsource stage!” That statement sent the crowd exclaiming in envy. So far, he had the highest level of cultivation as well as the highest grade lifebound beast.

Chen Yao stood at the center of attention, an undisturbed smile on his face. It was as if he had anticipated the reaction as one of the most talented youths in the nation.

“How amazing!”

“Like father, like son. Sage Chen must be proud of him.”

The Chen siblings caught up with Li Tianming moments later, and Chen Ying laughed, “Do you see that Li Tianming? Look at the difference, and big brother is just sixteen!”

But Li Tianming couldn’t be bothered with her, because he was the next in line at Chief Mentor Mu Wan’s table.

Chapter 40 - A Dazzling Radiance!

Few people paid attention when Li Tianming first approached Chief Mentor Mu Wan. For example, in one of the private rooms, the ladies of the Chen Chateau were still absorbed in their boasting. This group were made up of gorgeous, distinguished women, led by none other than Sage Chen’s wife, Madam Xue Lan. All of their husbands were big-shots from Xing & Chen Merchantry, making them some of the most affluent women in Ignispolis.

“Sister Lan is such a natural with kids. Both your sons are so talented and handsome — if only my son could take a leaf out of their book.”

“Chen Hao and Chen Yao must have charmed so many girls in Ignispolis.”

As usual, Xue Lan was enjoying all the flattery foisted upon her, her smug posture suggesting that this was the exact lifestyle she had sought after.

“You all may envy me, but you have no idea how much I have sacrificed for the family, taking care of the boys and a busy husband.” Xue Lan said with a smile.

“Of course, every successful man has a woman standing behind him!”

“I just wish Yao’er can do his best and perform up to standards. Then when he gets first place for the ranking test, he can enter Heaven’s Sanctum and cultivate together with Hao’er.” Xue Lan was looking into the stadium, and her eyes were filled with hope for her children.

“Sister Lan has nothing to worry about, with Yao’er’s talent he can definitely get first place.” The ladies’ praises boosted her ego even further.

Xue Lan suddenly thought of Wei Jing, and that overaged child of hers who would also be attending the entrance exam.

“At his age, that kid is only at seventh level Beast Vein, there is no way he can make it pass the test. Not to mention that his beast is just a wildbeast.” Xue Lan thought to herself, her smile fading just by thinking of them. “I offered you a place to live when you came begging for my help, but you chose to

ignore me instead. Now that your kid is gonna fail the test miserably and you are just one step away from your deathbed, I'll see how you preserve your 'dignity'."

Naturally, she did not voice her vicious thoughts, and the ladies around were still prattling on about how wonderful her kids were. Little did she know that it was about to be Li Tianming's turn to have his lifebound beast tested!

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While he found it slightly awkward to approach Chief Mentor Mu Wan again after three years, Li Tianming still worked up enough courage in the end. She was seated behind the table, her body-hugging dress bringing out charming contours.

Li Tianming walked up in a few swift steps and announced his presence, "Chief Mentor Mu Wan, it's me, Tianming."

She was observing the star orb, and did not notice the young man at first. Only when she heard his voice did she see that ex-student of hers, and her emotionless eyes instantly fixed onto Li Tianming.

After a moment of observation, she finally said, "What went into your head? Back to just humiliate yourself?"

"No, I'm here to make a comeback," Li Tianming replied.

"With?" She had her doubts, but she didn't dismiss Li Tianming instantly. At her level, a brief look could tell her that he had not lost all his beast ki even after losing his lifebound beast.

"Chief mentor, please have a look at this." Li Tianming summoned the little chick from his lifebound space, marking the first time it made its appearance in the institute.

"How filial of you, I'm definitely in the mood for a chicken dinner." Mu Wan frowned. There wasn't anything he could make a comeback with, so was Li Tianming here just to fool around with her?

"Quit joking, chief mentor, this chick here is my new lifebound beast." Li Tianming justified.

Mu Wan's eyes shifted between the little chick and Li Tianming. She could tell that he was being dead serious.

"Alright, let me see what you have for me." She was no longer frowning, and instead rested her chins on her hands in a relaxed manner.

"Please do." Li Tianming brought Ying Huo to the star orb.

In fact, the moment Li Tianming summoned his peculiar lifebound beast, he had already drawn quite a lot of attention. For example, Chen Ying and Chen Ding were chuckling at one side, given that this was the first time they saw Li Tianming's beast.

"Is he some kind of a comedian?" Most of the audience simply shook their heads. Just what kind of students were the institute recruiting?

Chief Mentor Mu Wan was the only one who observed Li Tianming with more interest than disapproval. From what she remembered, Li Tianming had always been a hardworking and righteous child aside from

that incident. She did not expect him to be back after three years, especially not with a composure that belied his youth.

As such, under the witness of teachers and students of the institute, Li Tianming cut open the legs of the little chick and dripped its blood onto the star orb. As the orb infused with the blood, it started to glow red.

“Red, so it’s a one-star beast?”

“Is this the biggest joke in the institute’s history?”

But before the audience could react, the orb suddenly turned orange in color, and the radiance was also brighter. Generally, a star orb would display the color reflecting the beast’s grade directly, and such a transition of color was a rare case. In these cases, the latter color suggested the real grade of the beast.

A two-star lifebound beast was still a laughingstock, but seconds later the star orb had changed its color yet again to yellow.

“Wait...”

What followed next was beyond the audience’s comprehension. The color of the star orb continued to change, its radiance continuing to intensify. Soon, it was already green, suggesting that the little chick was a four-star lifebound beast.

But at the next instant, the orb turned a bright blue, one that was much deeper than most of the teenagers around him. Most holders of the Flameyellow Order had five-star lifebound beasts, out of which high-tier ones were already considered the leading beasts in the institute. With that bright blue color, there was no doubt the little chick was a high-tier five-star beast!

Just as people thought it was over, the star orb turned light indigo! Indigo was a sign of six-star lifebound beasts, just like the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion that Chen Yao had. Out of the thousands of people the institute tested so far, only a dozen of them were six-star beasts, with most of them being low-tier and only Chen Yao’s lion being high-tier. Most of the six-star beasts were magnificent creatures, and it was hard to imagine the cute little chick being a six-star beast.

Still, that wasn’t the end. The onlookers gasped as the star orb’s light shade of indigo turned darker and darker, almost nearing violet! That could only mean that the little chick was a high-tier six-star beast, same level as the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion. Perhaps the chick was even better, as people could clearly see the color from the orb was even brighter and deeper than the lion’s!

Just like Chen Yao’s case, the bright glow had turned the entire stadium’s attention towards Li Tianming and Ying Huo. The color eventually settled at dark blue. Had the star orb continued changing color, the crowd could only assume that the star orb was spoiled. After all, seven-star lifebound beasts required top quality manna to evolve into, and were almost impossible to be born naturally.

“Is the star orb spoiled?” Most of the audience stared at Li Tianming and the little chick curiously, as it was hard to believe that such a cute tiny thing was a six-star beast.

“Get me another star orb, now.” Even Chief Mentor Mu Wan was startled by the result. With a new star orb and everyone scrutinising the process intensely, Li Tianming dripped another drop of the little chick’s blood onto the new orb.

The result was the same, a dark blue even brighter than that of Chen Yao’s! Star orbs going faulty was rare, least to say two of them malfunctioning together. That was enough evidence to prove that Ying Huo was a high-tier six-star lifebound beast. As an extra precaution, Mu Wan had even confirmed the six stars in the little chick’s eyes as well.

Within seconds, discussions about Li Tianming rippled across the stadium, as most people there didn’t know who the young man was.

“Tianming, you lucked out? It’s very, very rare to find the youngling of a six-star wildbeast, and I’m pretty sure blood pacts have quite a low success rate.” Mu Wan stared into Li Tianming’s eyes, her expression totally different from just now.

“Chief mentor, folks say that handsome people tend to be quite lucky, and I’d say that they are right.” Li Tianming cracked a joke.

“Not bad, you seem to have matured. Seems like I’ll have to talk to you in private sometime.” Mu Wan batted her eyes, her charm enough to make any man’s thoughts stray.

“Just the two of us? Might reflect badly on us, and I’m scared of being beaten up by your suitors,” Li Tianming replied with a smile.

“I’m impressed you still have the mood to joke around. Do you think that things will get easier just because you have a six-star beast?” Mu Wan didn’t understand where his confidence was coming from. She, of all people, knew how much impact the incident three years ago had, and once his name was announced he would be thrown right into the middle of a storm.

“Of course not, but I’ve been preparing for three years.” Li Tianming stopped smiling at these words, gazing at Mu Wan with a determined look.

That got Mu Wan even more interested in the young man; she couldn’t fathom how a person could change so much in three years. What exactly happened in that period?

“Well, I hope you put up a good show.” Mu Wan was confident that she wouldn’t put her faith in the wrong person. She could only hope that Li Tianming had plans that even she wouldn’t expect.