

The Ages 41

Chapter 41 - Blazingly Fiery Birdie

Was Ying Huo just a high-tier six-star lifebound beast? Of course not, since the star orb couldn't recognise the blood of a Primordial Chaos Beasts. Ever since it became a lifebound beast, the potential within its blood was hidden, and the orb could only detect what was revealed. Everyone could see the six stars in its eyes, but who would have known that each star could be a starfield on its own?

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As Li Tianming and Mu Wan talked, most people in the stadium were restless as they still did not know who this mysterious youth was and where he came from.

"What is the species of this little chick?" Mu Wan asked. She considered herself to be quite knowledgeable for a chief mentor, but the six-star little chick was beyond her ken.

"The... the Blazingly Fiery Birdie...?" Li Tianming came up with a random name on the spot. Ying Huo, the Aeternal Infernal Phoenix, was clearly unsatisfied with this lame name, but before it could complain, Li Tianming shut it up by grabbing onto its beak.

At the same time, Chief Mentor Mu Wan announced, "Li Tianming, your lifebound beast is the Blazingly Fiery Birdie, a high-tier six-star lifebound beast at ninth level of the beast vein stage."

In actual fact, Li Tianming was still at the eighth level of Beast Vein stage. But when Mu Wan tested the little chick's beast ki, it was clearly stronger than that of a beast at ninth level. Since she could see that they had clearly not reached Spiritsource stage, she could only classify it under ninth level Beast Vein.

The announcement came as a shock, not because of the little chick's grade, since everyone witnessed the light from the star orb for themselves. What really caught people's attention was the name Li Tianming. Gossip rippled across the stadium, as those who knew of the scandal three years ago told it to those who didn't. Soon, the whole stadium would be aware of who he was, and it wouldn't take long before the entire institute and even the capital would hear of his return!

That was also part of Li Tianming's goals today. He was never afraid of making a scene, and in fact, his plans for revenge would eventually place him in the spotlight anyway. Since it was going to happen sooner or later, he might as well make use of this opportunity to declare his return, and spare himself from the same damn response every time someone realised he was back in Ignispolis.

"Li Tianming! He was the punk who drugged Lin Xiaoting's girlfriend three years ago and had his lifebound beast executed!" It didn't take long for the whole stadium to know the story. To add fuel to the fire, the other person involved in this story, Lin Xiaoting, was the number one genius in the institute, the idol of countless disciples here.

At that moment, Li Tianming could hear the myriad of insults thrown at him, as well as countless contemptuous looks directed his way. Yet, he stood as calm as the sea, as he had seen all these coming his way. Such was life, and the only way he could prove himself was to become even stronger, strong enough to overthrow those who had defamed him.

To be honest, he even enjoyed part of the attention, as he could certainly feel that there were people panicking because of him. Take the example of Chen Ding and Chen Ying queuing behind him. They had known Li Tianming's identity for quite some time, but when his six-star lifebound beast was revealed, they couldn't hide their horror. Especially not when the 'scum' they looked down on was better than not just themselves, but also the brother Yao they so admired.

It was interesting to watch their expressions, but it was still incomparable to that of Li Yanfeng and Liu Qing's. Having thought that the little chick was just a one-star wildbeast, they had long come to the conclusion that Li Tianming was a nitwit who could never climb out of the Beast Vein stage. This was also one of the key factors why Li Yanfeng gave up on this son of his. But now, with the result from the star orb showing them how wrong they were, the pair stared at each other awkwardly.

"No, no way that's true! The star orb is broken! I saw its eyes and there was definitely only one star!" Liu Qing exclaimed. A six-star lifebound beast would make a whole world of difference, and it wouldn't be surprising for Li Tianming to even surpass Li Yanfeng in the future. Had they known that earlier, Li Yanfeng probably wouldn't even give up on his son. But her frantic denials had ended when Mu Wan tested again with a second orb.

"Could it be that the little thing actually evolved with the manna? But there's no way a one-star beast could possibly absorb the manna's power..." Liu Qing mumbled on.

As for Li Yanfeng, his brows were knitted together as he watched the saga unfold. He had never had high hopes of Li Tianming, even when the boy managed to take the manna and the Flameyellow Order. That was because he knew better than anyone that Li Tianming would be useless, what with his lifebound beast dead and the replacement a piddling one-star wildbeast. But the tables had turned. Li Tianming's only weakness was gone, and he had returned as a talented young man with a bright future ahead.

As the father who made the decision of abandoning his son, Li Yanfeng sure was feeling nauseated right now. Thinking back, Li Tianming's request for Li Yanfeng to wish him a bright future and Wei Jing's composure when leaving Flamehaven all seemed to point at the fact that the mother and son would not falter right there.

"Yanfeng, just forget about him. There is no turning back, and no matter what Li Tianming does in the future, it has nothing to do with you anymore." Liu Qing saw through his thoughts instantly.

"I... I have underestimated him." Li Yanfeng ground his teeth.

"Don't worry. Of all people, Li Tianming chose to offend the Lightning Manor's 'little monster'. If anything, being stronger will only speed up his own doom, since he will eventually try to seek his revenge on Lin Xiaoting. As for us, I'd say that we just stay away from him, and watch as he ruins himself." Liu Qing hung on to his elbow. They were on the same ship now.

"What are you thinking? Of course I wouldn't regret my own decisions. I have chosen you and the Lightning Manor over him, and I would never regret cutting ties with that brat." Li Yanfeng shook off his uneasiness, knowing that Li Tianming had nothing to do with him anymore. "And as you said, he got into trouble with the wrong people. It won't end well for him."

"Thank you, Yanfeng, for valuing our family. One day, we will have our own child," Liu Qing said, her cheeks flushing bright red.

“Of course.” Li Yanfeng put his arm across her waist, a smile reappearing on his face. But no matter how much they tried to just ignore Li Tianming, the youth shone like a star inside the Flameyellow Stadium, his presence sticking out like a sore thumb.

In fact, they were not the only ones feeling that way. From within the private room, a certain Madam Xue Lan was sharing the same sentiments as them. As she was still receiving praises from the other ladies over how amazing Chen Yao was, a much brighter spark from the stadium had caught their attention.

“Who is that?” Many of them were curious.

“Must be a real talent to have the star orb shine so bright. Unfortunately, Chen Yao’s light is still stronger,” said one of the ladies. But that was an obvious lie, as anyone who wasn’t blind could see that this new radiance was way brighter.

Xue Lan was displeased that there were disciples who stole the attention away from her son. But then again, Sage Chen had already mentioned that the exam this year was going to be extremely competitive. The Vermilion Bird Clan, Lightning Manor, and even the Occult Athenaeum had brilliant youths participating this year. As such, it shouldn’t come as a surprise to see a spark stronger than her son’s.

She wasn’t too concerned at first, but the fervent discussion going on got her curious about the boy’s identity. She was in a good position, and could clearly see the boy’s appearance.

“Huh?” She was stunned for a moment, rubbing her eyes for a closer look. But when she realised that she did not see wrongly, she couldn’t help but shriek, “How could it be him!”

It was unlike her to lose her composure, especially when there were other ladies in the room as well. But she was just too shocked to even realise that.

“No, no... But his lifebound beast is dead, and with that pathetic wildbeast, he was supposed to be the joke of the institute! This shouldn’t be happening...” Xue Lan mumbled inaudibly to herself.

“Sister Lan, do you know who this person is?”

“Sister Lan even knows this kind of young talent we’ve never seen before, just how knowledgeable are you?” The rest of the ladies asked after seeing her reaction, and even then, they did not forget to flatter her.

That did nothing to cheer Xue Lan up. What was she going to say? That the person over there was Wei Jing’s child, who did better than her son? Hell no! She could only shake her head and reply, “No, I saw wrongly. I don’t know who this boy is.”

Of course, the ladies immediately realised that something was not quite right with Madam Xue Lan. It was obvious that troubles were weighing down on her mind, to the point that she was near-hysterical. In silent accord, the others decided to leave her alone — it looked like the best course of action for now. After all, trying to guess her thoughts might only get them into trouble with the mistress of Chen Chateau.

It was only when Chief Mentor Mu Wan announced Li Tianming’s name did one of them remember the scandal that spread in the entire Ignispolis three years ago. “It’s that boy. I heard from my kid that he

tried to drug a girl who turned out to be Lin Xiaoting's girlfriend, and he ended up having his lifebound beast executed."

"I can't believe it, he has such an obedient look too!"

"How disgusting of him, using dirty techniques to get girls that are way out of his league." The ladies said in disgust.

"Yes, I do wonder what kind of upbringing he had to become such a flop." It was only when Xue Lan said this, did she feel better about herself and her son.

The discussion in the room was just a snippet of what was happening in the stadium. From eyeing him with envy to gazing at him in despise, the crowd jeered his doings three years ago.

"Are you upset to hear all these?" Mu Wan asked him gently.

Li Tianming was grateful for his chief mentor, as she seemed to be the only one who trusted him. While he and Mu Qingqing's relationship was never made public, as their teacher, Mu Wan probably knew that they had been dating for a year. With that knowledge, it was evident that Li Tianming had no reason to drug her.

"Chief mentor, there is nothing that could upset me more than seeing them kill Midas right in front of my face." Li Tianming sounded composed. After everything that had happened, mere words would not hurt him.

"A changed man, huh." Mu Wan grinned. But that only lasted for a split second, before she continued with a straight face, "You have wasted enough time here. Move on to the next segment of your test."

"Yes, chief mentor. I'll aspire to be your disciple again this year," Li Tianming said.

"Don't be too confident, there's still one more test." Mu Wan's eyes flickered.

Just as Li Tianming turned around to leave the invigilator table, he could hear Mu Wan shout, "All of you shut up! We still have tests going on here, so bring your discussions elsewhere!"

Chapter 42 - Lin Xiaoxiao

Mu Wan's voice echoed through the stadium, and the boiling sea of insults and slander began to settle. The exam carried on as per normal, and Chen Ding was called up by Mu Wan since he was queuing right behind Li Tianming.

After Mu Wan's shout, the commotion had more or less died down. The only thing that Li Tianming noticed was that there seemed to be far less people around him right now. After all, no one wanted to associate themselves with a degenerate. Li Tianming was happy with being left alone too, since he got to relax in a corner on his own, while waiting for the second segment of the admission test to begin. The Hall of Phoenix had quite a lot of people still queuing, and it would probably take some time.

A while later, the test came to an end. The Hall of Phoenix alone had eliminated over six hundred people.

Throughout the test, Li Tianming had been keeping track of those with six-star lifebound beasts. It was true that the exam was particularly competitive this year, and eight beastmasters had appeared, each of them with high-tier six-star beasts comparable to the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion. They were from some of the most elite families and factions, like the Vermilion Bird Clan, the Occult Athenaeum, and many others.

Hmm, four years ago, Lin Xiaoting's lifebound beasts were high-tier six-star ones too. Are there no contestants from the Lightning Manor today? Li Tianming glanced around. The best from the Lightning Manor so far was a mid-tier six-star beast, and he was curious.

Just then, Li Tianming saw a familiar face from Lightning Manor. It was Liu Qianyang! The boy with his nose broken by Li Tianming had barely passed the test with his Lightning Bolt Cheetah.

"Where did he get his Flameyellow Order from? And does that mean...Li Yanfeng, Liu Qing, they're here too?" Li Tianming scanned the stadium. Alas, the stadium was too big for him to search properly. At the same time, he could hear a new topic being brought up by the crowd.

"It's that Lin Xiaoxiao from Lightning Manor, she's gonna be next."

"Four years ago, her brother got first place in the ranking test and made it straight to Heaven's Sanctum. This year I'd say it's her turn, do you want to know why?"

"Ahuh?"

"Apparently, she's a twin beastmaster just like her brother! Having two lifebound beasts naturally means that they're two times stronger than others."

"For real? That was Lin Xiaoting's trump card!"

"As if twin beastmasters aren't scary enough, the two beasts that he had were some of the best beasts around."

"You aren't wrong, a twin beastmaster would be nothing if both beasts were mere two or three star beasts."

"If that's the case, Lightning Manor probably has the best chance this year. That would give their family two consecutive prime disciples."

"Incredible. Even for the Vermilion Bird Clan, that's a rare event."

From what Li Tianming heard, this Lin Xiaoxiao was quite a sensation.

"He had a sister?" Li Tianming never knew that his archenemy had a sister. Not that it would affect his plans in any way, since Lin Xiaoxiao was just twelve years old three years ago; the incident had nothing to do with her. For now, he just treated her as one of his rivals for the upcoming ranking test, just like that Chen Yao.

It didn't take long for a girl to appear at the Hall of Manibeasts, catching everyone's attention. Even from where he was, Li Tianming could see the girl standing out from the crowd. Her fame helped, sure, but her elegance was the main reason.

Lin Xiaoxiao was dressed in a light orange dress, and her flawless jade-like skin had a peachy glow to it. Her eyes glittered with intelligence, the long curly eyelashes swaying gently with the breeze. She had lips like roses in the morning dew, tempting anyone that saw it. She wasn't dressed fancily, with the only accessory on her a pearl necklace that glowed faintly. She was young, about the age of fifteen, but it was already evident that she would grow up to be a beauty.

On top of her appearance, she seemed to be at ease even as the center of attention, hinting that her personality was incomparable to teens like Chen Ying. She was neither pompous nor nervous about the situation, which surprised Li Tianming, since it was unlike the usual style of Lightning Manor disciples.

"Chief mentor, may I begin the test?" She asked politely after stepping up to the invigilator's desk.

"Sure," The chief mentor replied with a smile, knowing that she had strength and backing that they couldn't ignore. It was said that she had both avian and terrestrial lifebound beasts, and the chief mentors of the Hall of Manibeasts were delighted to know that she chose them over the Hall of Phoenix.

After obtaining the go-ahead, Lin Xiaoxiao summoned her two lifebound beasts from her lifebound space, sparking a heated discussion in the stadium!

"That's the Tri-Coloured Darkthunder Bird and the Vajra Berserk Ape!"

"Both of them are lifebound beasts at the pinnacle of six-star!"

Li Tianming took a good look at the Tri-Coloured Darkthunder Bird first. It wasn't a large beast, but its well-balanced contours suggested that it was swift and deadly. Its feathers were split into three different colours: blue, green and red. As they rustled in the air, the feathers even created tri-coloured lightning bolts that flowed across its body. The lightning sizzled as the bird soared in the air, the sound alone making people's heads numb.

The Tri-Coloured Darkthunder Bird was no doubt an impressive lightning type avian beast, but Lin Xiaoxiao had more than that. While the bird circled around her, her Vajra Berserk Ape stood solemnly beside her like a guardian.

The giant ape was about three meters in height, with every inch of its skin covered in golden fur that resembled plate armour. Concealed beneath the fur was a burly physique, capable of crushing any foe.

Compared to the exquisite Tri-Coloured Darkthunder Bird, the Vajra Berserk Ape seemed way more brutal, its gaze filled with killing intent. Only when it looked towards Lin Xiaoxiao would its expression become more gentle.

"Vajra Berserk Ape? That's a dual-type lifebound beast." Li Tianming recalled reading about it in a book. Lifebound beasts were categorized by their species and types, and dual-type lifebound beasts were special creatures with, as their name implied, two different types. Theoretically, it meant that the beast would control two different kinds of power, making them more powerful.

For example, the Vajra Berserk Ape was a lightning-berserker terrestrial beast, where lightning was its main-type and berserker its sub-type. It was capable of generating lightning, as well as entering a berserk mode, which vastly improved its melee abilities.

Despite their individual prowess, the strongest member of the trio was actually the frail looking Lin Xiaoxiao. She could control the power of both beasts, meaning that she could also make use of berserker abilities. On top of that, her beast ki would be that of the two beasts combined.

The appearance of the two beasts was no doubt declaring Lightning Manor's ambition of securing the position of prime disciple again this year. Moments after the two droplets of blood dripped onto two separate star orbs, a brilliant blue light illuminated the stadium. The intensity of each orb was slightly brighter than the Hex-starred Clinquant Lion's, almost about to catch up with the little chick's. But of course, with the two star orbs combined, the little chick's performance was simply no match.

"Lin Xiaoxiao, third level Spiritsource stage, with the high-tier six-star Tri-Coloured Darkthunder Bird and the high-tier six-star Vajra Berserk Ape. To have such results at the mere age of fifteen is very impressive, even for a twin beastmaster," the chief mentor exclaimed, even praising her.

"Thank you, chief mentor." Once her test was over, Lin Xiaoxiao quickly kept her lifebound beasts and disappeared back into the crowd. She didn't seem to enjoy the amount of attention she was receiving.

All things considered, Lin Xiaoxiao's test was a nice finishing touch to the first segment of the test. The few remaining disciples after her were all pretty average, and less than an hour later, everyone was done with the first segment of the test. More than one third of the youths were eliminated, leaving them no choice but to pack up and leave. Having lost their only chance, they could kiss the institute and their dreams for a bright future goodbye.

That was just half of the test, with some rejoicing and others despairing. But the chief mentors cared for none of that, as they were busy preparing for the second segment.

"For this part of the test, each of you will take part in a battle that will be graded by us, the ten chief mentors. Winning is not the only important thing, and we will observe factors such as your potential, mindset or techniques. Of course, we will also account for factors such as age differences," one of the chief mentors explained.

"And once you have gotten our recognition, you may get the Disciple's Order from one of the chief mentors. If you manage to secure multiple Orders, then congratulations, you get to choose your own chief mentor. But if you did not manage to get the Disciple's Order, we will put you on hold, and if the results are still unsatisfactory you will be asked to leave the institute," the chief mentor added on.

The rules were the same as four years ago, so Li Tianming was pretty familiar with the flow. For example, if Chief Mentor Mu Wan recognised Li Tianming's talent, she would give him her disciple's order, and that was basically proof that he had passed the test.

There were still close to a thousand students over at the Hall of Phoenix. This meant that there were minimally five hundred battles that would take place, which would likely take a few days. Li Tianming wasn't willing to wait so long, since his mother was still waiting for good news back at the inn. With his abilities, the only disadvantage he had was his age, and he was sure that Chief Mentor Mu Wan would still pick him. Thus, he just wanted the battle to be over and done with, so that he could prepare for the more important ranking test.

“Li Tianming!” Just as Li Tianming was looking for an opponent to fight with, a gigantic figure called out to him from behind. He turned around to find none other than the Chen Ding that had jeered at him earlier on.

“What?”

“I’m four years younger than you, and I’m at the first level of the Spiritsource stage. Do you dare to fight with me for the test?” Chen Ding stared at him coldly. “Don’t worry, maybe one of the mentors will still pick you even after you lose to me.”

“But if they reject you because of your lack of ethics, then it’s a totally different story.” Chen Ying chipped in at one side. Of course, all these were just excuses — their real goal was just to beat Li Tianming up to vent their frustration.

“Too scared to accept my challenge?” Chen Ding growled.

“More like it’s too easy to beat a stupid musclehead like you.” Li Tianming was more than happy to accept the challenge. He was worried about having to find a stronger opponent so as to cover his age disadvantage, and Chen Ding was the perfect choice for him.

First level of the Spiritsource stage? Bring it on!

Chapter 43 - Magical Star Roc

“Sis Qin, your son Chen Ding is up!”

“What a bold young man! He immediately leapt up to fight first as soon as the practical test started!”

“He must have reached the Spiritsource stage already. My Ying’er is still stuck in the ninth level Beast Vein.”

“Don’t worry. Ying’er will definitely reach Spiritsource within half a month.”

“Those two kids have such a good relationship. How enviable. After they enter, they’ll be able to train and improve together inside.”

“Right, sis Qin. Still, who would dare fight Chen Ding?”

Xue Lan, who was in between them, raised an eyebrow as the conversation grew heated. “Just watch a little longer and we’ll find out, no?”

Her mood wasn’t good, perhaps because Li Tianming had turned out to be stronger than expected. Her one sentence immediately made the atmosphere awkward, leaving the ladies present reluctant to continue. They didn’t know what was the reason for her foul mood, and didn’t want to set her off.

A white-clothed, slender young man who looked intelligent appeared in front of Chen Ding, under the women’s rapt attention. He gave off a gentle and refined impression, and the calmness in his eyes seemed to imply a maturity unfitting his age. The slight smirk in the corner of his mouth was a window to his current emotions.

If something unusual about him had to be described, it would be his left arm that was covered in dense white cloth, as well as the gloved hand. It gave his manner of dress a slightly heretic feel.

“That’s Li Tianming!”

“He dares to challenge Chen Ding...I remember Chief Mentor Mu Wan declaring that he’s in the ninth level of the Beast Vein stage!”

“He’s older than Chen Ding by three or four years, but still lagging behind him in cultivation. He has nothing going for him other than a lifebound beast with high stars.”

“He’s not going to have any chance to show his abilities when Chen Ding crushes him.”

“Right. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s directly eliminated. He’s almost overage.”

“He’s asking for trouble.”

The women were all surprised at Li Tianming’s actions.

“Sisters, this is Ding’er’s first time participating in such an important battle. So, I’m not placing too much expectations on him.”

“Sis Qin, don’t be so humble! Everyone knows young master Chen Yao has been helping Ding’er and teaching him much.”

The women giggled. “Teaching an indecent rascal a lesson is a walk in the park.”

“Correct. Chen Ding can definitely do so.” Xue Lan, who had been quiet all this time, finally joined in with a smile, and the women around her finally relaxed.

While the ladies were chatting, the battle onstage had started.

Many people were spectating this fight, as anyone with the courage to go first was definitely full of confidence. After all, everyone was choosing their opponents cautiously to gain a chance to show off their talents and skills to the fullest. Of course, it was also to avoid a humiliating defeat.

The five halls had five stages, which meant five matches went on concurrently. The most eye-catching was Li Tianming and Chen Ding’s match.

Chen Ding’s beast had already shown itself. It was a high-tier five-star Magical Star Roc, which was a star-type avian beast. Its body was huge and its purple feathers started to glisten when it unfurled its wings. From behind, it did seem reminiscent of a starfield, bright and imposing.

In comparison, the little chick on Li Tianming’s shoulder just looked yellow and tender, like a delicacy.

No one would have believed it was a higher tier than the Magical Star Roc if it hadn’t been tested with the star orb.

Chen Ding was stretching his muscles and looking serious as he prepared to end Li Tianming with one hit, when the little chick asked pretentiously, “Serious question. Is your lifebound beast male or female?”

“What are you parroting? How does gender matter?” Chen Ding stepped forward, as his fist shot out, covered in starlight. The power contained within left the air shaking.

“Well, I’ll neuter it if it were a male. If it was female, mhm...” The little chick placed its wings on its hips, leering.

The roc was displeased to hear this, and let out a shrill shriek as it exploded with killing intent.

“Aiii, what a uncouth voice. Another male! Being born the wrong gender was your sin. Tianming, sic ’em!” Normally, it was the beastmaster that commanded the lifebound beast, and yet it was the other way round here...

“Weren’t you supposed to be my mount?” Li Tianming asked, amused.

“You nugget, YOU’RE the mount,” the little chick said coolly.

The way they were bantering lightheartedly in battle left Chen Ding furious. He used a basic source-ranked battle art, the Shooting Star Fist. The fist would become a shooting star, with power shocking to all! He was fully confident in sending Li Tianming flying in one punch. He would kill two birds with one stone, teach Li Tianming a lesson and enter the institute.

However, the moment his fist landed, Li Tianming’s figure simply shimmered, vanishing like a mirage. In his confusion, Chen Ding believed that he had literally obliterated Li Tianming for a moment or so.

“What kind of speed is that? Aren’t you embarrassed as a Spiritsource cultivator?” A voice rang out right next to his ear, and Chen Ding began to have some misgivings.

He instantly responded and punched out, but Li Tianming’s body simply vanished like a mirage again. That was when Chen Ding realised the entire stage was filled with flickering mirages, each of them lasting for quite a few moments before vanishing!

Speed was Chen Ding’s weakness, and he wasn’t able to make a snap judgement of Li Tianming’s position.

“This has to be an intermediate source-ranked battle art!” Chen Ding recalled how he had met Li Tianming buying four battle arts at the Chen & Xing Repository’s section for source-ranked battle arts. Could he have learnt it in just a few days? The thought brought a chill to Chen Ding’s heart.

He himself had spent a whole month to polish his Shooting Star Fist, but this wasn’t the time to be shocked. When he charged forward, Li Tianming and him brushed past each other. The next moment, Li Tianming was laying siege to the roc, together with his Blazingly Fiery Birdie!

“Take this! Netherfire Ghostclaw!” The Confounding Mirage Walk was very suited for the little chick given its small size relative to the Star Magic Roc, as that made Ying Huo even more elusive.

Li Tianming had focused on Nine Flying Bolts and Confounding Mirage Walk these few days, and had yet to touch the Netherfire Ghostclaw.

However, Ying Huo had reached a level of proficiency with the Confounding Mirage Walk and Netherfire Ghostclaw. As a Primordial Chaos Beast, the little chick was still leagues ahead in comprehension abilities compared to other lifebound beasts, even with bloodline shackles. Despite how unassuming its tiny claws were, even steel walls wouldn’t survive in their wake.

Using the Confounding Mirage Walk, it instantly moved to the Star Magic Roc's chest area, where it gouged out a chunk of meat from it!

The roc was strong — it was in Spiritsource after all. However, it was too big, which worked to its disadvantage as it couldn't catch the little chick. Worse still, Li Tianming had jumped over Chen Ding to target it too!

There was a saying that in the beast vein stage, beastmaster and lifebound beast were equals. However, the beast would surpass the master in the Spiritsource stage.

That was because Spiritsource stage lifebound beasts would gain access to their spiritsource ability. It was a kind of bloodline ability, separate from battle arts, and seized from wildbeasts.

If the roc was allowed to use it and they were hit, the battle would ramp up in difficulty. So, the duo had decided to focus it down first, using their advantage in speed and movement arts.

Li Tianming's right hand took out the Thunderfire Chain he had liberated from Liu Qianyang. Spirit fire and lightning crackled on its surface. At the same instant the little chick launched his Netherfire Ghostclaw attack, Li Tianming used the Nine Flying Bolt's first move to land a blow on the roc's back.

Although they were still eighth level Beast Vein, the Aeternal Infernal Beast Ki burned fiercely; both master and beast were able to execute their moves to their fullest potential. A few moments was enough for Li Tianming and the little chick to flay the Magical Star Roc alive, leaving it howling miserably.

"Li Tianming, you cur!" Chen Ding gnashed his teeth in fury when he turned to look at what had happened. He had never expected Li Tianming was fast enough to bypass him and gang up on the Magical Star Roc, reducing it to a bloody mess before two breaths had even passed.

After heavily injuring the roc, Li Tianming quickly turned around to block Chen Ding.

The little chick would take over for the roc. He would take on Chen Ding alone.

As the mirages continued to flicker, the Thunderfire Chain descended from the sky towards Chen Ding like a bolt of lightning!

Chapter 44 - Radiant Stargazer!

"I like this!" Li Tianming had favoured daggers in the past. He had tried sabres, spears, swords and halberds before, but they weren't his style either.

After he obtained the Thunderfire Chain, he found his true love. The explosiveness when attacking was definitely devastating. The Nine Flying Bolts also offered a repertoire of tricks he could play with the Thunderfire Chain.

Chen Ding was full of power, but he was incapable of approaching Li Tianming.

With over four metres of reach, Li Tianming's Thunderfire Chain was definitely a ranged weapon. Employing both the Confounding Mirage Walk and the first whip of Nine Flying Bolts together, he lashed at Chen Ding, who could only suffer a one-sided beatdown helplessly.

"LI TIANMING!"

POW!

Li Tianming found an opening, when Chen Ding screeched in fury. The chain snaked toward Chen Ding, striking him right on the cheek.

Chen Ding was sent flying, as three of his teeth arced through the air. Truly, this battle had been a superb display of skill by Chen Ding like no other.

“Mouthy, aren’t you?” Li Tianming sniggered.

“Li Tianming, you!” Chen Ding’s words were garbled after losing his teeth. His face was starting to swell up and resemble a pig’s.

“Take a good look in the mirror. There’s no difference between you and a pig now,” Li Tianming chortled.

For Chen Ding, this was an utter humiliation!

Honestly speaking, a brute force style beastmaster like Chen Ding was destined to be suppressed by Li Tianming. Li Tianming could wield the Thunderfire Chain as dexterously as his own arm. With his range advantage and the Confounding Mirage Walk, Chen Ding had no chance to approach him.

Li Tianming could feel a strange power suffusing the stage when he landed his blow on Chen Ding. He realised it was the Magical Star Roc going crazy after he turned his head around. Its eyes began to spit out piercingly bright starlight, which proceeded to stab at the little chick like swords!

“That’s its spiritsource ability! Radiant Stargazer!” Li Tianming heard such comments from the audience.

His actions before to suppress the roc were born from his worry of this ability. Now that it was heavily injured, however, the roc’s spiritsource ability was definitely weakened.

Fortunately, Li Tianming had defeated Chen Ding now. At the critical moment, Li Tianming’s Thunderfire Chain flew out again, smashing into the roc’s head.

In the next moment, its aim was thrown off and the starlight flew into the skies instead.

“Wow, so if I don’t shoot you, you think that makes it alright to shoot me?” The little chick was furious and turned into a blur using the Confounding Mirage Walk. Another chunk of meat was torn off the roc.

“That’s enough!” Li Tianming finally heard the stern announcement from the chief mentors.

Li Tianming wasn’t an idiot, and immediately stopped. However, the little chick was still in the midst of enjoying itself, and Li Tianming had to use his chain to physically restrain and drag it over.

“Whatcha doing! I wanna end that nugget!” Evidently, the little chick was still at the age where being hot-blooded came naturally.

“It’s over.” They couldn’t continue once the chief mentors had made their decision. This wasn’t a fight for the purpose of determining a winner or loser, but for the chief mentors to evaluate each person’s talents.

Mu Wan was the one who had declared the halt, and Li Tianming stopped out of respect.

However, Chen Ding was still furious. He endured his injuries to force himself to his feet. "I don't accept this, Li Tianming! One more round!" he snarled.

Li Tianming smiled gently. "Since when did losers have the right to demand things?"

Chen Ding wanted to rebut his words, but Chief Mentor Mu Wan cut in. "Come and take the Disciple's Order. There are still a thousand people queueing up."

While these words were said brusquely, Li Tianming liked them. He looked up to see her smiling at him.

The other nine chief mentors were all crossing their arms as they maintained their silence.

"Mu Wan, you're well aware of what he did three years ago. He's a stain on the institute's prestige, as well as an eyesore to Lin Xiaoting and Lightning Manor..." A male chief mentor at the side gave her a soft reminder.

"What does my choice have to do with you?" Mu Wan rolled her eyes, before tossing a Disciple's Order to Li Tianming.

The other battles hadn't reached their conclusion yet, which made Li Tianming the first to pass the entrance exam.

"I appreciate this very much. You definitely won't regret this." Li Tianming knew how difficult it had been for him to get the order again. However, he had finally succeeded. He was very grateful to Mu Wan for this, as it was likely no other chief mentor would dare to want him.

They could easily use age as an excuse to disqualify Li Tianming.

"Chen Ding. You're young and have peerless talent. You may have had a poor performance today, but that's only because Li Tianming was crafty. I'm willing to accept you as my disciple." Chief mentor Li Kui, who was the one who had spoken to Mu Wan just now, took out his Disciple's Order.

"I'm willing too. You may choose your chief mentor, Chen Ding."

"I third that." The other chief mentors followed suit, and in the end nine were willing to accept him.

In truth, Chen Ding was among the most outstanding participants given his talent and background. It wasn't anything strange for ten chief mentors to willingly give him their Disciple's Order.

However, his performance just now had been utterly disastrous. He hadn't been able to do anything to Li Tianming from start to finish, and the maturity he had shown had been lacking as well.

In the end, that performance had netted him nine Disciple's Orders, while Li Tianming was only offered Mu Wan's. The contrast was rather funny.

Still, Li Tianming only wanted Mu Wan's. As for the other stinking men, who wanted them?

"Prepare for the ranking test, Tianming." Mu Wan's words were a reminder for Li Tianming to ignore these interpersonal relationship matters and focus on what really mattered.

The institute's ranking test would be far grander than today's admission test. Even if they weren't first, ranking higher meant that disciples would gain better positions and resources.

Flameyellow Scions Institute also had some secret zones, where the time disciples could cultivate inside for was determined by the ranking tests.

The Hall of Phoenix still had at least five hundred matches. With an uncertain time for each of them, it would likely take days to resolve.

Then, the ranking test would begin.

For now, admitted disciples could first enter the institute to familiarise themselves with the environment. However, Li Tianming had spent one year there already, so he chose to go and tell his mother the good news instead.

After bidding farewell to Mu Wan, Chen Ding and him left the stage. Chen Ding's eyes were still bloodshot, and he still hadn't let go of his killing intent yet.

"Li Tianming." The Hall of Manibeast's Chen Yao met up with Chen Ding as he descended the stairs. That young master of Xing & Chen Merchantry hadn't taken part in the practical battle yet.

"Yes?" Li Tianming asked.

Truthfully, Li Tianming's performance, including both his lifebound beast's tier and how he beat Chen Ding, left Chen Yao very uncomfortable.

"Oh, it's nothing much. I just admit I did underestimate you. I didn't expect you to possess some modicum of luck and skill despite your horrendous reputation and dismal character."

"I'm sorry, was that a compliment?"

"Take it however you want. You're the very definition of a pathetic person becoming arrogant after some minor success now. Don't forget who you are, laughing stock of Flameyellow Scions Institute." Chen Yao's face was expressionless.

"What is it you want? Stop beating around the bush." Li Tianming's mouth twitched.

"I just wanted to let you know since you beat up my brother today, pray you don't meet me in the ranking battles. No one is there to say stop. If you meet me, I'll repay you with ten times the injuries Chen Ding suffered today."

Li Tianming chuckled coldly. "I see no need to pray. I dream of slapping you around, letting your face swell up and your teeth drop out. After that, I'll watch you go home and throw a tantrum, after which your mother will make your favourite herbal soup for you."

Chen Yao's eyes narrowed, before he turned and left.

"It seems you've gotten tired of living." Chen Yao's sinister tone was filled with killing intent. He had never expected that laughable joke to end up being able to arouse such killing intent in him.

Their mothers were once as close as sisters, and they should have turned out to be like a brother to each other.

However, that sisterhood had been lost when Xue Lan had tried to display her superiority in Chen Chateau that time. Xue Lan was now living in the lap of luxury, while Wei Jing had fallen into poverty.

Also, one's son had boundless prospects while the other was a joke. Although Xue Lan may not have done anything, her seemingly casual words that time had been the most incisive knife possible.

Perhaps Wei Jing didn't mind and only lamented the lost relationship, but Li Tianming did mind. Li Tianming would never forgive and forget such people.

"Let's just wait and see then." Today, he had revealed a six-star lifebound beast and beaten Chen Ding, which had shut the mouths of many who were laughing at him before.

Li Yanfeng and Liu Qing were two of them. They hadn't spoken a word since.

The women in the private room were another lot as well. When that particular madam saw her son get toyed with by Li Tianming, then soar through the air together with his teeth, she had gone pale and almost shattered her tea cup.

"What a piece of trash, that Chen Ding!" The women hadn't expected the angriest to be Xue Lan. She had stood up, flipped over the table in her fury before leaving.

The remaining women all exchanged bewildered looks. Why was Xue Lan even angrier than Chen Ding's own mother?

As long as they didn't know Li Tianming was the son of that graceful and elegant woman in Ignispolis twenty years ago, they would never guess the answer.

Chapter 45 - Spiritsource Ability

On the way back to the inn...

"You know, that Star Magical Roc's Radiant Stargazer was actually pretty powerful. Fortunately, I protected you in the nick of time, or your body would have a hole or two." Li Tianming was in a good mood.

The little chick rolled its eyes. "Yeah right, I totally didn't dodge that myself."

"Oh right, will you be able to gain a spiritsource ability through soul refinement? You aren't a normal lifebound beast, after all."

"How would I know? Heck, I don't even know what a spiritsource ability is!"

To understand what a spiritsource ability was, one had to first understand the secrets of the second stage of cultivation, the Spiritsource stage. Having reached the peak of the Beast Vein stage, the beast master and his partner would have a total of eighteen beast veins in their body. Once that was done, they could make use of each other's beast ki to form the spiritsource in their own body.

The position of the spiritsource was dependent on the lifebound beast. For example, in Midas' spiritsources were mainly located on its claws, feathers and beaks.

Compared to beast veins, spiritsources stored far more beast ki, making it one of the key reasons why Spiritsource beastmasters were so much stronger. The number of stars a lifebound beast had also played an important role here, since the number of stars would decide the number of spiritsources that were formed. For example, when a three-star lifebound beast entered Spiritsource, both master and

beast would form three spiritsources each. But for the case of six-star beasts, the pair would form a whopping six spiritsources each! They could all be at first level of the Spiritsource stage, but the difference between them would already be magnified.

Why use three-star beasts as an example? What about one-star and two-star beasts? Well, beasts from both ranks wouldn't even be able to enter Spiritsource in the first place.

As an example, Chen Yao had six spiritsources in total, each of them at level three. Therefore, if he was matched against an opponent of the same level but with a five-star beast, the advantage of having one more spiritsource will allow him to crush his opponent.

In line with the above, the little chick should be getting six spiritsources as well, making it way more powerful. On top of that, spiritsources had even more advanced uses, which was to channel spiritsource abilities!

Spiritsource abilities were more complicated to explain, since there were various ways to get those. To begin with, lifebound beasts were not born with these abilities, and these abilities came instead from wildbeasts.

Any wildbeast that were three-star and above would have awakened powerful innate abilities at birth. The Razor-Backed Colossal Crocodile, for example, had the water tornado as its innate ability. When killing these wildbeasts, beastmasters could obtain their beast souls using a special method known as soul refinement. They could then channel these beast souls into the spiritsources of their lifebound beasts, granting them these abilities.

In short, spiritsource abilities were obtainable from wildbeasts. That being said, soul refinement didn't have a hundred percent success rate, as it depended on whether the wildbeast's souls had capitulated. If a junior got his parents to kill and refine a wildbeast for him, the success rate would usually be very low, since the beast's soul would not recognize the junior as its rightful owner. The refinement could also fail if the type of the wildbeast didn't synergise with that of the lifebound beast.

The quality of the beast soul depended on the grade of the wildbeast, and it could only be channeled into the lifebound beast's spiritsources, not the beastmaster's. Generally, the number of spiritsources a lifebound beast had was equivalent to the number of spiritsource abilities it had. Beasts like the Hex-Starred Clinquant Lion would be able to channel six different wildbeasts' innate abilities, making it much stronger than other beasts.

When a lifebound beast gained the innate ability of a wildbeast, said ability would change due to the lifebound beast's bloodline. The beast soul of the wildbeast and the bloodline of the lifebound beast would converge together to give birth to an even stronger spiritsource ability.

These abilities were supposed to be unique to lifebound beasts, and were inaccessible to their masters. However, upon reaching the third major stage of cultivation, the Unity stage, beast masters could use the mystical 'unity field' to cast their beast's spiritsource abilities.

"I will have to reach Spiritsource first to know whether I have those innate abilities or not," Ying Huo had explained. His true identity was a Primordial Chaos Beast, which was more of a wildbeast than a lifebound beast. Even Ying Huo had no idea what its own future was like...

Right now, the only thing they knew was that manna could be used to unlock the hidden potentials in Ying Huo's blood, which was somewhat equivalent to an evolution for the little chick. As for the Aeternal Infernal Phoenix's Spiritsource stage, they were clueless to what it may bring the little chick. Li Tianming was rather hopeful about it, and he even hoped that the little chick's bloodline carried its own innate abilities.

Speaking of spiritsource abilities, Li Tianming thought about the Saintbeast War-Soul he had obtained in the Abyssal Battlefield years ago. In fact, the Saintbeast War-Soul in itself was a beast soul of the highest quality!

Only the mightiest of wildbeasts could be crowned as saint beasts, and such creatures only appeared in Vermilion Bird's legends. One could only imagine how terrifying their beast soul would be! Any Saintbeast War-Soul would be a little different from general beast souls. They were not refined from killed saint beasts, but were produced centuries after a saint beast died, through a transformation of its beast soul. Like normal beast souls, a Saintbeast War-Soul could also be channeled into spiritsources, and usually there wouldn't be much resentment since the beast has been dead for too long.

Once the soul refinement of the Saintbeast War-Soul was completed, the spiritsource ability that it granted would be simply phenomenal. However, it would also be quite unstable. It was precisely this instability that gave Lin Xiaoting the chance to snatch the Saintbeast War-Soul that Li Tianming had given his Midas!

Normally speaking, a spiritsource ability couldn't be seized from a lifebound beast that had already refined it. But in Li Tianming's case, he had only just found the Saintbeast War-Soul. Midas had barely refined the beast soul when they were betrayed by Mu Qingqing. It also explained why Lin Xiaoting plucked out every single one of its feathers, since the Saintbeast War-Soul was refined into the spiritsources on Midas's feathers.

"Because of the Saintbeast War-Soul's instability, it's unlikely that Lin Xiaoting could completely refine and master it even after three years. He took the beast soul and Midas from me, and one day, I will make sure to return him every bit of pain that he had caused me!" Li Tianming thought to himself. "Midas, just give me a bit more time..."

Li Tianming was back in the institute, the place where he had lost his hopes and dreams, and he was back to take his revenge. The next step would be to participate in the ranking test, and it wouldn't be long before he would slay Lin Xiaoting with this very pair of hands!

For his honour, but more importantly, for his brother, Midas!

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For a period of time, Li Tianming discussed the various aspects of the Spiritsource stage with Ying Huo, and it wasn't long before the pair had returned to the inn.

"What good news do you have for me?" Wei Jing smiled at her son's return.

Li Tianming pretended to sigh. "Nah, I got expelled by the school and performed horribly."

"For someone nearly twenty years old, your acting is really bad." Wei Jing shook her head lightly.

“Ha, probably inherited that from you too.” Li Tianming brushed it off with a grin. Knowing that it was about time, Li Tianming said, “Mother, let’s go, it’s about time we get you a bigger house.”

The money came from that man from the Chen Chateau, and Li Tianming couldn’t reveal his presence to Wei Jing.

“Where did you get that money from?” asked Wei Jing.

“Oh an idiot wanted to make a bet with me during the test today, so I made quite a bit of money from him just now,” Li Tianming lied, knowing that it was necessary for his mother’s peace of mind.

They shouldn’t continue staying in an inn like a wanderer, especially not when Ignispolis was her hometown. He would do whatever he could for his mother to live comfortably, even if he had to beg on the streets.

“Doesn’t have to be too big, just two rooms would suffice.” Wei Jing wanted him to save some gems for cultivation. But Li Tianming ignored her advice and found a nice serene courtyard close to the Flameyellow Scions Institute. It had five rooms, and a garden where she could plant anything she wanted. Her lifebound beast could also take a stroll in that garden.

The house cost Li Tianming a good hundred yellow patterned spirit gems, double the price of his Confounding Mirage Walk, but it was money well spent. He then took an entire day to purchase all kinds of daily essentials for his mother, and even recruited a friendly auntie to take care of mother’s daily needs.

By the time they had settled down, night had fallen. While it was a busy day, Li Tianming was content to see Wei Jing enjoying her rest in her lawn chair. Sometimes, it was the simple things in life.

“Ming’er, remember no matter how tough life is, always take some time to enjoy the simple things in life.” Wei Jing’s eyes were closed as she enjoyed the pleasant evening breeze.

“I know. People may say that life is filled with pain and suffering, but for me, as long as I can be with the people I treasure, that is more than enough,” Li Tianming replied.

“Ha, you sure know how to talk sweet and make your mother happy.” Wei Jing smiled.

“Don’t overthink it, what if the person I was referring to isn’t you?” Li Tianming grinned.

“Who could it be then?”

“Probably some pretty girl that I love so much that made me forget about my mother.” Li Tianming joked.

“Haha...” Wei Jing laughed heartily.

She was no doubt the most important person in Li Tianming’s heart, as he would lose his purpose in life if she died. But as he made the joke, he suddenly remembered that fairy-like girl he had met at Red Twill Mountain. She was here in Ignispolis too, and just thinking of her made Li Tianming miss her smile. When would they meet again...

“Ming’er, I want to go watch your ranking test.” It was already late into the night when Wei Jing suddenly said those words. She hadn’t gone to events like these tests for a very long time, and she had never even seen Li Tianming fight before. The ranking test would be the first major challenge for him, where he would meet opponents much stronger than those he had faced before.

Wei Jing wanted to be there for her son. She knew that many parents and seniors from reputable families would spectate the test and be there to cheer their children on. She knew she hadn’t done much for Li Tianming in the past years, but the least she could do was to be his moral support, to tell Li Tianming that he wasn’t facing that fight alone.

“Definitely.” Li Tianming nodded. He knew what his mother was thinking, and he too would show Wei Jing, that her son would be a true champion!

There was only so much time he could enjoy with his mother. From tomorrow onward, Li Tianming would return to the Flameyellow Scions Institute and prepare for the ranking test!

Chapter 46 - White Lotus?

Lightning Manor was one of the most reputable clans in Vermilion Bird, its history dating back to thousands of years ago when its ancestors founded the nation. Each and every generation from the manor had its own talents that became the backbone of the nation, and their influence could be found throughout the nation.

Vermilion Bird had a fearsome troop known as the Tempest Regiment, which was stationed on the nation’s border, protecting the people from harm. For millennia, the Tempest Regiment had doubled as Lightning Manor’s private corps, and the commander would always be the current Lightning Seigneur. Even so, the Lightning Manor had always known its place, which was as a loyal subordinate of the Vermilion Bird Clan. This was also the main reason why the manor managed to thrive for as long as the nation had.

The Lightning Manor itself was positioned in the southern district of Ignispolis, where various clans established their bases. It wasn’t as extravagant as Chen Chateau, but it was far more imposing. If one looked down at it from above, the manor seemed to be covered by purple glazed tiles, giving it an intimidating glow.

And right now, in the deepest part of the manor, Liu Qing and Li Yanfeng were standing side by side, facing a modest cottage. The cottage looked incongruent with the rest of the manor, but every member of the clan knew that this was a hallowed place, the meditation grounds of the Lightning Seigneur. It was out of bounds to most of them, and one could only enter if the Lightning Seigneur had personally summoned them.

Needless to say, Li Yanfeng and Liu Qing had been summoned to meet the seigneur. Even Liu Qing had never been here before, judging from her slightly nervous expression.

“Disciple Liu Qing, together with my spouse Li Yanfeng, greets the Lightning Seigneur.” She pulled Li Yanfeng’s sleeves as a signal, and the two knelt before the cottage. The doors remained shut, and without its owner’s permission, they wouldn’t dare to enter it.

“Hm.” A hoarse voice sounded from inside the cottage. The owner of the voice was old, but it had an undeniable solemnness to it, and could only belong to a true overlord. Even if Li Yanfeng had an entire city under his control, that voice alone had easily suppressed him.

“Li Yanfeng,” the Lightning Seigneur called from within his cottage.

Li Yanfeng lowered his head. “I’m here, sir.”

“I’ve heard stories about you, that you wish to be part of our clan, and you are very sincere about it. I recognise your talent, and will accept you into the manor.” The Lightning Seigneur’s voice was emotionless, but he pronounced every word firmly.

Li Yanfeng was excited to be accepted this easily. “Thank you, sir. I am willing to use my blood and my life to fight for Lightning Manor’s honor.”

“Don’t bother with expressing your loyalty in words, I only look at results,” said the seigneur. “Frankly, you are rather strong even by the manor’s standards. If you were born in a better family, you would be ten times more powerful than your current self right now.”

Li Yanfeng had his head lowered, as he listened to the seigneur’s instructions for him.

“Once you make a breakthrough in your current stage, you will probably be one of the top ten cultivators in the manor. I have important uses for people like you, and therefore I shall grant you our Lightning Manor’s heavenly will technique,” the seigneur continued.

When the couple heard that, they could barely hide their elation. A fortune was bestowed upon them without any warning, and all they could do was to kneel on the floor and thank the seigneur. “Thank you, sir. This technique is very important to me, and I will forever be in your debt.”

Li Yanfeng continued, his words packed with emotions, “Words are not enough to describe my gratitude. The seigneur may watch my contributions to the manor, and punish me should my performance be unsatisfactory.”

“No need for the theatrics. At your age, you should know what you should do, and what you shouldn’t. The Lightning Manor can give, and it too can take. You’re a clever man; don’t misplace my trust.” The Lightning Seigneur made it sound simple, but the threat from his tone was so obvious, even Liu Qing broke into cold sweat.

But with all that said and done, Li Yanfeng could never imagine that he had already gotten what he wished for, even before he had contributed anything to the manor. He had started everything from scratch, fought for his whole life without any support or backing, and only he himself knew how much pain he suffered because of that.

To add insult to injury, he was blessed with talent, but he had never made it into the top ranks of Vermilion Bird, as he didn’t have a heavenly will technique. But today, the Lightning Manor had given him the chance that he could only dream for.

Li Tianming always thought that his father got together with Liu Qing for the Flameyellow Order and the manna, but it turned out he had always underestimated Li Yanfeng. What Li Yanfeng wanted was a backing that could support him in climbing the ranks as the elites of the nation. On Liu Qing’s side, her

family's influence in the manor had been weakened due to her father's passing, and she desperately needed a man who could represent her family.

"You are new to the manor, and are probably unfamiliar with the Lightning Manor. Let me give you a simple task," the Lightning Seigneur said.

"Anything I can do for you, sir."

"My granddaughter, Xiaoxiao, will be taking part in the Flameyellow Scions Institute's ranking test. That kid likes to act independently, and I need someone who can protect her from the shadows. I have made plenty of enemies in my life, and there are quite some dangerous men," said the Lightning Seigneur.

"Be at ease, sir. I'll treasure her life more than my own." Li Yanfeng replied, knowing it was an easy job.

"Remember, do not show yourself unless she is in life-threatening danger. She needs to learn to face dangers on her own too. And besides, if she knew about your presence, with her temperament she will probably demand to be left alone."

"I understand!" Li Yanfeng nodded his head, with Liu Qing's hand in his. Their future seemed to be brighter than ever.

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At the age of fifteen, Lin Xiaoxiao left the Lightning Manor to begin her own life. But little did she know that her family had already found a bodyguard for her.

With the admission test cleared, she was now an official member of the institute, granting her unrestricted access in the institute. However, everyone knew that her position in the Hall of Manibeasts was but temporary. It wouldn't take long before she became a member of the prestigious Heaven's Sanctum.

It wasn't the first time she walked through the institute, and in fact, she had even lived in the sanctum for a period of time before. As she walked towards the entrance of Heaven's Sanctum, even the chief mentor guarding the gates let her in with a smile.

"Xiaoxiao, you should have no problem clearing the ranking test and entering the sanctum right?" the mentor asked.

"I will try my best." Lin Xiaoxiao was a very likable girl. Unlike most of her peers from the Lightning Manor, her manners were affable.

The sanctum was an unknown ground to most disciples, but Lin Xiaoxiao easily found her way around till she reached a courtyard. The doors were unlocked, and when she pushed open the gate, she was greeted by a sea of flowers, its fragrance filling her nostrils. A couple of birds were chirping on a tree nearby, and beneath the tree was a pleasant rock garden beside a pond. It was an utopia, there were no two ways around it.

All the plants and trees there were planted personally by the garden's owner, and it clearly took a lot of effort to create such a scenery. Lin Xiaoxiao strolled along a pebbled path, indulging herself with the floral scents.

Suddenly, music began to play. The sound of a zither flowed through the garden, its rhythm bringing the whole garden to life. The notes were mellow and the rhythms elegant, hinting at the musician's skills and grace.

In front of Lin Xiaoxiao was a pristine pond, where goldfishes frolicked in the water as if they were dancing to the music. Further ahead, a gloriette rested in the middle of a pond, where a girl in white was playing her zither. Her fingers seemed to have spirits of their own, as they waltzed across the instrument to create the melodic tune.

The girl was dressed in a white tulle skirt with pink borders, the hemline swaying to the wind. Her face was covered in a thin veil, the contour of her face showing her pert nose and her smiling, rosy lips. She had skin as fine as jade, and her brown hair dripped over her shoulders like honey. Her eyes were black with an almost unnoticeable tinge of blue, and they glinted with intelligence while she played her instrument. It was almost like a scene straight out of a painting, with a fairy gently stroking her zither, her figure embraced by mother nature.

Within the windswept garden, the girl looked like a pure and innocent white lotus in the middle of the pond.

"Xiaoxiao, you are here. How was the admission test?" The music stopped abruptly. The girl lifted her veil as she stood up to face Lin Xiaoxiao, her slender figure a feast for the eyes.

"I cleared it." With a broad grin, Lin Xiaoxiao hurried into the gloriette, "Big sis Qingqing's performance is as amazing as ever, how I envy my brother for having someone like you."

"You sure know how to make me happy." The girl smiled. "It's been half a year since we last met. Our Xiaoxiao is so pretty now, and you're just fifteen. You will definitely grow up to be a lovely lady."

"But being pretty does not benefit my cultivation in any ways, and I'd rather be known for my strength instead." Lin Xiaoxiao pouted.

"Yes, yes, Xiaoxiao will definitely be a master in the future, even stronger than your brother."

"Of course, my goal is to surpass Lin Xiaoting, and make him pay for bullying me when I was young, hehe." Lin Xiaoxiao giggled heartily, showing a side of her that was usually hidden from people.

"Definitely, I will support you when you get the chance to do that." The girl's face flushed red when she thought of him.

After a bit of casual chat, they talked about the entrance exam. The girl asked, "How well do you know your opponents? Confident?"

Lin Xiaoxiao had a determined look on her face, and it was clear that she desired to be the prime disciple of the ranking test, so that she could catch up to her brother.

"I believe in you. Soon we'll cultivate in Heaven's Sanctum together," the girl continued proudly, "The sanctum is much more peaceful than outside, and you can learn a lot of new things here too. Look at your brother — he recently entered seclusion, and he will probably make another breakthrough when you get to see him again."

“Brother is going to get even stronger!” Lin Xiaoxiao rolled her eyes. Speaking of her brother, she remembered about her main purpose here today.

“Big sis Qingqing, do you know that an evil man appeared during today’s admission test?” Lin Xiaoxiao said seriously.

“Evil? Which evil man?” The girl smiled as if Lin Xiaoxiao was still a child.

“Remember the evil person who tried to violate you three years ago? That Li Tianming, who had his lifebound beast executed by brother,” Lin Xiaoxiao asked.

Upon hearing the name, the girl seemed to freeze for a moment. A flurry of emotions went through her head, but in the end, she just bit her lips gently, as if she had let go of the past.

“I’m sure he returned home, so how did he return to the institute?” she asked with an unreadable smile.

“He managed to get the Flameyellow Order from his hometown again. Apparently, he had gotten himself a new lifebound beast with a blood pact, and cleared the admission test with it.” Lin Xiaoxiao’s expression was twisted with disgust when she spoke of that man. After all, she had heard about his doings from her sister Qingqing.

“Is that so? Then I must congratulate him.” The girl nodded, her smile still lingering on her face.

“Big sis Qingqing, are you not appalled by his return? After all, he nearly destroyed your future three years ago. Do you want me to teach him a lesson?” asked Lin Xiaoxiao.

“That’s not needed,” the girl said.

“But why?”

“Xiaoxiao, everyone makes mistakes, and he may have resorted to extreme measures because of his love for me,” the girl said gently.

“But...”

“He has paid his price, and your brother executed his lifebound beast. He may have sinned in the past, but we shall leave that behind us,” the girl said sincerely.

“You don’t want me to teach him a lesson?”

“Of course not, we used to be good friends too. I’m genuinely happy that he can step out of his past and make it back to the institute. If anything, I wish him all the best in the institute, and hope that his efforts will pay off.”

“Big sis Qingqing, you’re just too kind, even to those that had hurt you. My brother is really lucky to have found someone like you.” Lin Xiaoxiao looked at her with utmost respect.

The girl smiled. “Let’s not talk about all those past stories now. I learnt a new score recently, do you want to hear it?”

“Of course!”

A while later, the sound of a zither echoed in the courtyard again. It was only when night fell did Lin Xiaoxiao leave the place.

.....

Having sent Lin Xiaoxiao off, the girl returned to her room, the expression on her face a lot colder. She whipped out a piece of ink-black parchment stamped with a blood-red flower, and one could only wonder where she got such a peculiar item from.

Holding a quill pen in her hands, the girl dipped it in white ink and wrote on the parchment——

Wanted: Assassination by Bloodflower Chamber.

Target: Li Tianming, disciple of Flameyellow Scions Institute, first level of Spiritsource stage. Bounty: One thousand yellow-patterned spirit gems.

Bring me his head.

Chapter 47 - Can't Wait Ten Years

Flameyellow Scions Institute took up a lot of land, with the Hall of Phoenix being the largest hall. It was built around Mount Phoenix, with thousands of buildings and tens of thousands of pavilions.

The Hall of Phoenix had three classes. The elite class were located at the summit, while the journeyman class was halfway up and the apprentice class all the way down at the foot. Naturally, the elite class had the best area when it came to spiritual energy of heaven and earth.

Many disciples would drop out in their climb from the apprentice to the elite class. It was the norm for students to fail in keeping up with the pace; they would retain and then finally withdraw from the institute. Hence, simply graduating was already an accomplishment.

The Muwan class was still at the same old place next to the Soaring Spirits Lake. There were over a hundred buildings, and the fifty disciples of the Muwan class would spend their time cultivating here. Since her previous class had been promoted, the lake area had been cleared out.

Li Tianming was the first to join this new generation of disciples, but he had gone to visit his mother first after being admitted.

When he returned, Soaring Spirits Lake was already bustling with activity. The new disciples were currently full of excitement as they toured around.

“Li Tianming, come in.” Li Tianming heard Chief Mentor Mu Wan’s voice as soon as he arrived, and briefly wondered if she had eyes everywhere here. How else would she be able to catch him as soon as he showed up?

He was summoned to Mu Wan’s Mu’s Chamber. It was where she usually cultivated and taught her disciples.

Li Tianming knocked before entering, only to see Chief Mentor Mu Wan reclining lazily on a couch in the courtyard. She was covered in a mink fur blanket, her long and snow-white legs poking out of it. She happened to be stretching as Li Tianming entered, placing her charming curves on full display.

However, Li Tianming acted like an upright gentleman, keeping his expression honest and not letting his gaze stray. He was all too clear that too long a look would present an excuse for Mu Wan to find trouble with him.

“So, you’ve gotten smarter. I don’t even have the chance to find an excuse to beat you up now.” Mu Wan chuckled.

“Impossible. Chief mentor, you’re so graceful and kind! How could you ever beat anyone up?”

“Quiet. Come and help me massage my shoulders.” Mu Wan directed a charming smile, loaded with meaning, at Li Tianming.

However, if he took it to be an invitation, he would be in for a beating.

Li Tianming cleared his throat, feeling that was some trick afoot.

“You ungrateful little thing. Do you know how much heat your chief mentor had to take to accept you? Come and help me destress.” Mu Wan rolled her eyes.

She was telling the truth. Li Tianming did have to be grateful. The other nine chief mentors had all ignored Li Tianming’s performance.

Li Tianming went behind her back and started giving her a massage. To be honest, giving a pretty woman a shoulder massage wasn’t much of a hardship.

Li Tianming enjoyed the exercise, while Mu Wan also enjoyed his show of skill.

“Take out your lifebound beast for me to play with,” Mu Wan suddenly said.

Li Tianming thought that he shouldn’t suffer alone, so he immediately summoned it out. It was still snoring away as Mu Wan picked it up.

“What the heck-” The awoken little chick was just about to cuss out a storm when it opened its eyes to a beauty. Moreover, the beauty was putting it on her chest.

It quickly retracted its angry look and lay limply in Mu Wan’s hands as she played with it.

Li Tianming gaped in bewilderment. He didn’t expect Ying Huo to be that shameless.

“Your little chick’s quite fun to play with.” Mu Wan turned to look at him.

“Chief mentor, those words of yours are very misleading,” Li Tianming said bashfully.

“So, Li Tianming. You dare to tease even me now? I’m punishing you with one month of shoulder massages for me.”

He had fallen for it...

Still, that didn’t sound bad at all.

“As long as it makes the chief mentor happy, I’ll give you all the shoulder massages you want, even if I have to go through hell or high water,” Li Tianming said solemnly.

"Hmph. You've enjoyed yourself well enough so far, I hope. I called you over for official business today." Mu Wan turned serious. Li Tianming stopped his hands as he listened.

"Please, continue."

"So, there was a mighty coincidence three years ago I found rather interesting. Not ten days after your incident, information of Lin Xiaoting finding a Saintbeast War-Soul spread." Eyes glittering, Mu Wan looked at him squarely.

"Where are you going with this?" Li Tianming asked.

"I was just wondering if, by any chance, the Saintbeast War-Soul belonged to you? After you returned from Abyssal Battlefield, I found a sort of ancient aura about Midas's feathers, but I didn't overthink it." She continued to fix her eyes on him.

She was the first person to ask Li Tianming such a question in three years. For everyone else, no one would believe it even if Li Tianming said the truth.

Li Tianming didn't respond. Mu Wan lay back down and continued, "So, even though I'm an outsider, I came up with a story. Would you like to hear it?"

"Naturally. I love storytime." Li Tianming said.

"Once upon a time, there was a boy and a girl. They were together for a year. The boy was deeply in love with the girl, but the girl seemed to have other thoughts. One day, the boy found a great treasure. The girl was the only one he told, but he never expected her to use this information as a stepping stone to latch on to a powerful clan's young master. They colluded to snatch away the treasure from the boy, as well as defame and cripple him in the process."

An expression appeared on her face, both a smile and not a smile. "So, do you think that story sounds like fact or fiction?"

"Chief mentor, you do have a good imagination. But don't you think it sounds fake when you keep addressing them as 'boy' and 'girl'?"

She wasn't joking around.

"I may be a little selfish and like to tease people, but I do still have a bit of a sense of justice. If that young man from the story can somehow fight his way out of his predicament, I'll be inclined to give him a helping hand."

"That young man sure is lucky. Good people aren't that common these days," Li Tianming said.

"Still, I have to remind him not to rush his cultivation after he gets his new chance. And he definitely can't let revenge blind him and ruin his newfound chance. After all, the saying goes that a gentleman can wait ten years for their revenge. It's only been three years," Mu Wan said seriously without beating around the bush.

Li Tianming understood what she meant. These words were her purpose for finding him today. He was grateful that he could still meet a chief mentor like this during these chaotic times.

He sighed heavily. "Chief mentor. Perhaps he wants to say that he's been nursing his grudge for three years so that he can send his enemy to hell. He's not a gentleman who can wait ten years."

"Well, I can't stop him if that's what he thinks. Still, he has to remember not to attempt the impossible. The real tragedy is if he fails in his revenge and his enemy goes scot-free for another hundred years!"

"Still, what if it's the chief mentor who underestimated him?" Li Tianming asked.

Mu Wan pursed her lips wordlessly.

"His goal now is to enter Heaven's Sanctum. Succeed, and anything will be possible. Do not worry, chief mentor. He has willpower others don't have. No one knows just how much he's suffered in these three years. Such people cannot and do not lose!"

Li Tianming could feel blood rushing to his head. Li Tianming hadn't expected to lose his cool around Mu Wan and start to crazily vent like that. Like a wild beast, all he could see was red.

And within that redness, that unforgettable scene of Midas's feathers all being plucked off played again and again. The scene was filled with its tears and blood.

Save me, Tianming!

Even now, those three words continued to stab at his mind, the pain enough for anyone to lose their rationality.

Li Tianming could no longer even breath properly.

It had been three years. Was Midas happy in its next life? Did it hate him for avenging it yet?

Wait for ten whole years? Screw that!

He felt like his chest was filled with magma that kept increasing by the second, threatening to erupt at any moment now.

"Kiddo..." At this moment, he felt himself fall into a warm and gentle embrace. Such things intrinsically possessed the gift to calm people down.

Finally, the red in his eyes receded.

As she gently hugged him, Mu Wan gently stroked his head and back, calming the beast within him. This sort of hug was unforgettable.

"Hey, if I act like that more often, does that mean more hugs?" Li Tianming suddenly asked.

"Naughty boy!" However, she didn't let go. Perhaps, she found it satisfying to use warmth to cool down a volcano. Still, she did pinch Li Tianming's neck, which caused him to grimace in pain.

"Now you know the punishment for teasing me," Mu Wan gloated.

"Well, I still profited here." Although his neck still hurt somewhat, it was hard to forget that warmth and fragrance just now.

“Get lost.” Mu Wan realised she could no longer control him. Li Tianming had changed. Three years ago, he had been obedient and pure.

“Alright, time to split!” Li Tianming caught the little chick who was watching the show from the side and quickly fled.

After all, he had already enjoyed himself, and if he stayed on, he would probably need to pay a price..

However, when he breathed in a mouthful of air, he realised that the fire in him hadn’t been fully doused yet.

He raised up his head to look beyond Mount Phoenix, in the direction of Heaven’s Sanctum. It was possible that those two had heard about his return by now.

Chapter 48 - Whirlwind Zestful Crane

The admission test was still ongoing, and within the Flameyellow Stadium, there were still disciples battling. Once that was over and the Flameyellow Scions Institute reached its full intake capacity, it would take a few days to settle some administrative matters before the ranking test was conducted.

Li Tianming still had a small period of time to prepare for the test, and he was ready to spend all his time on cultivation once he left Mu Wan’s place. Disciples’ residential areas were allocated by the chief mentors, and all he needed to do was to collect his key. To his surprise, the one distributing the keys was his old classmate, Lin Qingyu.

“Where’s Fang Zhao?” asked Li Tianming.

“There’s still quite a lot happening back in the stadium, and I’m just here to help Chief Mentor Mu Wan first,” she replied.

“Find me a secluded place then,” Li Tianming requested.

“Sure.” Lin Qingyu handed him his key. His place was quite a distance away from everyone else’s.

“Qingyu, see you around.” Li Tianming took the keys from her and was about to leave. To be honest, Lin Qingyu had treated him fairly, and at least she didn’t bully him even given his current situation.

“Tianming.” Before he could leave, the girl called out.

“Yes?” Li Tianming turned back to look at his old classmate.

“Fang Zhao was really pissed at you because of what you said the other time. He said that he will ‘pay you a visit’ one of these days,” Lin Qingyu explained. “If he comes looking for trouble, just stay in your room, or report him to chief mentor.”

“What level is his cultivation at now?” Li Tianming was not surprised by his decisions. If Fang Zhao thought of himself as superior just because he had three years wrong, Li Tianming was about to prove him wrong.

“Second level Spiritsource, going third,” Liu Qianyang recalled.

“Ha, three years and he only managed to get to second level Spiritsource from ninth level Beast Vein. Tell him he’s welcome to find me anytime.” Li Tianming brushed it off. Even if Li Tianming was the one who helped him fend off bullies three years ago, just because of their altercation a few days back that hurt his ego as the ‘senior’, Fang Zhao threatened to beat Li Tianming up. Li Tianming couldn’t care less about this kind of person.

“Why must you seek trouble...” Lin Qingyu shook her head.

“And what makes you think he can definitely overcome me?”

“Fang Zhao’s talent may not be much in this institute, but remember, he is no longer just that fifteen year old boy.”

Li Tianming listened to her reminder, before leaving with a smile.

While they were talking, a small group of freshmen had gathered around them. But when Li Tianming walked towards their direction, the crowd dispersed automatically, as if Li Tianming was carrying some kind of plague. Ever since he returned to the institute, no one other than Chief Mentor Mu Wan was willing to even get close to him.

“Is he an idiot?”

“Senior Fang Zhao wants to teach him a lesson, and he still dares to talk back?”

“I don’t get it, why would Chief Mentor Mu Wan accept a delinquent like him? Shouldn’t have joined the Muwan class...”

“How stifling, to be in the same class as a loser who should have died three years ago.”

“Lin Xiaoting was still too kind, I would have executed him instead three years ago.”

“Forget it, I think Chief Mentor Mu Wan quite likes him...”

Such discussions were nothing new to Li Tianming, their accusations even lacking creativity to him. Ignoring the onlookers, Li Tianming found the house allocated to him.

Lin Qingyu had indeed given him a secluded place that hadn’t been occupied for a couple of years. The place was piled with weeds when Li Tianming arrived, and he took some time to burn them away before starting with his cultivation.

Important tasks awaited him. Not only did Li Tianming need to practice the four battle arts he had just learnt, he also needed to refine more beast ki with crimson gems in order to raise his level of cultivation. With only a few days to the ranking test, it was a race against time.

The Confounding Mirage Walk, Nine Flying Bolts and Netherfire Ghostclaw had all performed wonderfully during the admission test; those battle arts had suited him well. But with his current mastery of those battle arts, he couldn’t compare to the likes of Chen Yao or Lin Xiaoxiao, which meant that he wouldn’t qualify to enter Heaven’s Sanctum.

Thankfully, he still had time for some last minute effort before the crucial point. If he couldn't make it into the sanctum with this test, he would have to wait for the next opportunity. But Wei Jing couldn't wait. Even with a good supply of clear spirit grass, she may not be able to last that long.

From there on, Li Tianming spent every single second he had locked up in his room, focused on his cultivation. As for the little chick, it was absolutely delighted with being able to eat spirit gems to its heart's content. Everyday, it gobbled down crimson gems like peanuts, the powerful spiritual energy from the gems engulfing it in fire constantly. But Ying Huo was used to it, and when it really couldn't deal with the blaze, it would hop onto Li Tianming's shoulders and direct some of the flames to him.

With enough determination and a clear goal in mind, their cultivation was more effective than ever. Coupled with their superb talent and a comfortable supply of gems, Li Tianming and Ying Huo made incredible progress.

Finally, after downing three hundred crimson gems, they successfully made it to ninth level Beast Vein! It was the peak of the Beast Vein stage, signifying that all nine beast veins on their body were developed and pumped with beast ki.

They were done with the first big stage of cultivation! Next was the Spiritsource stage, where their cultivation began with first forming their spiritsources. Li Tianming had experience in that, but he was in no hurry to enter that stage. At their current state, they had sufficient Aeternal Infernal Beast Ki in their body already, and the more important thing was to stabilize their foundations, and to work on the four battle arts.

Regarding Spiritsource, Li Tianming had his past experience with Midas, while the little chick had its own methods. Upon reaching ninth level, Ying Huo claimed that the Aeternal Infernal Codex in its bloodline had revealed the cultivation methods for Spiritsource. All he needed to do was to gather the spiritsources and the little chick would guide him through on the details. Spiritsource would open a new gate of cultivation for him, and Li Tianming was filled with anticipation.

Just as they got familiar with their new power, a commotion had started outside their house — Fang Zhao had showed up on his doorstep to seek some trouble. But his appearance also implied that his job at the stadium was over, and that the admission test had officially concluded. The ranking test would begin in a few days, and Li Tianming felt the looming pressure redouble.

"Li Tianming, I brought some guests for you." Fang Zhao's voice sounded from outside the doors, and some people were apparently tagging along.

Li Tianming took some time to pack up, before heading outside. As he opened the gate, he saw around eight familiar faces. All of them used to be from the Muwan class and were now in the journeyman class. Back when they first entered the institute, they were all friends who played and cultivated together.

Lin Qingyu was among the group too, but she had a worried look on her face. After all, she knew what Fang Zhao was here for.

Li Tianming smiled. "Fang Zhao, Qingyu, Guanxiong, Zhao Ying, Chen Kun... What a group we have here. Good to see y'all again."

“Good, but it would have been better had you not shamed yourself three years ago. Then we would be together in the journeyman class now, instead of you playing with these apprentice kids,” Fang Zhao mocked.

“Li Tianming, you probably don’t know about this, but ever since your scandal, our whole class had been laughed at because of you.” Lu Guanxiong shook his head and continued, “And when you were finally forgotten, you just had to come back to stir up past shames.”

“And I thought we were here to talk about the good old times. Why does it sound to me that you all are here to denounce me?” Li Tianming smiled.

Aside from the group of seniors, quite a few freshmen had gathered due to the commotion as well. Most of them had gotten to know each other in the past days, with the exception of Li Tianming, who was isolated in his room.

“Li Tianming, are you scared now? Who was the one that taunted me a few days back and asked me to pay you a visit?” Fang Zhao licked his lip, his expressions menacing.

“Nah, I’m just saddened to have to beat up people whom I thought were friends,” Li Tianming replied, his boldness shocking the group. They had heard about how cheeky he was ever since his return, and it seemed that those rumors were justified.

“No point wasting time speaking to a fool. Fang Zhao, go beat some sense into him.”

“That’s right.”

“Show him that someone who had been crippled for three years can’t compare to us in the journeyman class.”

Under their persuasion, Fang Zhao gladly accepted the ‘honour’. He pointed at Li Tianming and declared, “Don’t blame me, I’m doing you a favour here. Next time you meet other seniors, you better remember to pay them the respect they deserve so you don’t get beaten up again.”

“So I’m supposed to thank you instead.” Li Tianming smirked, his nonchalant attitude making Fang Zhao even more annoyed.

“Whirlwind Zestful Crane!” Fang Zhao summoned his lifebound beast.

It was a snow-white, red-crowned crane, with only the tip of its tail black in color. The crane was noble and elegant, its wings magnificent when spread out. Like its beastmaster, it had a haughty look on its face.

The Whirlwind Zestful Crane was a low-tier five-star lifebound beast, the minimum benchmark for the institute, and it was a wind-type avian beast. While it may not look much, at second level Spiritsource, Fang Zhao and his beast were a powerful duo.

“Ying Huo, this crane is female, any thoughts?” Li Tianming said to the little chick on its shoulders.

“Too ugly, not my cup of tea,” the little chick spat.

Li Tianming had suspicions about its sense of beauty. “Huh? It’s a crane, how’s that not good enough for a chicken?”

“After personally experiencing the gentleness of Chief Mentor Mu Wan, all other chicks and birds just don’t cut it anymore.” The little chick grinned.

“What a pervert.” Li Tianming rolled his eyes, drawing out his Thunderfire Chain at the same time.

Fang Zhao was in second level Spiritsource and was also the same age as Li Tianming, making him a worthy opponent. Had Li Tianming not lost Midas, even without the Saintbeast War-Soul, he would be a disciple of the journeyman class too. It was likely that he would be even stronger than Fang Zhao. It was a good time to check whether he had caught up with the years he had lost!

Opposite Li Tianming, Fang Zhao had drawn out his third grade bestial weapon, the Wind Calling Rapier. It was well-sharpened, cutting through the wind as Fang Zhao dashed towards Li Tianming.

From what Li Tianming remembered, Fang Zhao prided himself for his skill in movement arts. Such an opponent was definitely more threatening than Chen Ding. Not only was his speed faster, but his Whirlwind Zestful Crane had its own spiritsource abilities too.

But that wasn’t going to stop Li Tianming from giving him a good beating!

Chapter 49 - Supernal Windblades

“Feng Ling, now!” Fang Zhao held the Wind Calling Rapier in his hands as he used his basic source-ranked battle art, the Whizzing Wind Steps. Within seconds, he was in front of Li Tianming, his rapier pointing directly at the latter’s forehead.

“Li Tianming, let me show you what I have achieved in the past three years!” Fang Zhao flourished his rapier, forming sword ki that enveloped Li Tianming completely. As for the little chick, he had ignored it completely.

“Welkin Cyclone Sword!” That move was an intermediate source-ranked battle art, one that was only taught to disciples in the journeyman class. It was an honor to be able to learn such battle arts; if Fang Zhao were to return to his hometown now, even the governor had to respect his power.

As Fang Zhao sealed Li Tianming’s moves with his rapier, the Whirlwind Zestful Crane had taken to the air, its huge wings stirring up an even stronger gust. The crane was no less threatening than its master, its beak and claws as dangerous as his rapier.

A beastmaster and beast duo’s combat style would evolve as their cultivation advances. At Beast Vein, the focus was on martial arts and bestial arts, while in Spiritsource the lifebound beast would develop spiritsource abilities and become the main focus of the battle. Once they reached Unity, the duo’s cooperation would reach a peak, and battle as one in their unity field.

As such, while Fang Zhao used the Welkin Cyclone Sword, the crane was using its feathers and claws to wield the bestial art portion of the move, the Welkin Cyclone Claw. Its claws were like the sharpest daggers, tearing through trees and branches in its way as it went straight for Li Tianming’s head.

For an old classmate, Fang Zhao sure wasn’t about to show any mercy.

“No longer a wimp now huh? You definitely changed a lot in the past three years.” Li Tianming found it funny. When they first entered the institute, Fang Zhao was cowardly and easily bullied. It seemed like the training at the institute had given him not only knowledge but courage as well.

“Li Tianming, the tables have turned, don’t think you can still push me around now!” Fang Zhao’s sword got even faster, as he got more enthusiastic.

Li Tianming was trying hard not to burst out laughing. Fang Zhao wasn’t wrong, except that Li Tianming was not part of the group that bullied him. In fact, Li Tianming was the one that stood up for him when others bullied him.

Under his opponent’s suppression, Li Tianming focused his newly-gained ninth level Aeternal Infernal Beast Ki. Fang Zhao might be fast, but Li Tianming wasn’t going to lose to him when it came to speed. Li Tianming gradually dialled up his speed, forming fiery mirages around him as if the atmosphere around him was burning. Ying Huo used the Confounding Mirage Walk too, its tiny figure even harder to track.

Fang Zhao and his Whirlwind Zestful Crane pressed on even harder, their strikes strong enough to break rocks.

“Are you done yet?” Li Tianming suddenly spun around to face Fang Zhao, the Thunderfire Chain shooting out of his hands like a spear. Entwined with bolts of lightning and sparks of flames, the chain pierced right through Fang Zhao’s attack!

At the same time, the Whirlwind Zestful Crane had prepared to flank Li Tianming, but was stopped by a sharp pain on its back. It turned its head to find a blazing little chick standing on its shoulder, digging into its flesh and pulling out its feathers.

“Whatchu lookin at, you ugly fowl?” Yinghuo flew off, scattering into fiery mirages.

An elegant crane getting disgraced by a mere chick? How could the egoistic crane take such a taunt? Consumed by its anger, the crane chased after the little chick, not realising that it was almost impossible for it to catch that little fireball.

Without his lifebound beast’s support, Fang Zhao was forced to step back to dodge Li Tianming’s chains. Ashamed that he had the lower hand, especially when he was still being watched by his friends, he struck out once more with his Wind Calling Rapier.

Alas, Li Tianming was too fast for him. The Thunderfire Chain was way too nimble for him, while Li Tianming’s movement art was faster than his. In that split second, the chain and the rapier had clashed a dozen times in mid-air, their clinking sound echoing through the courtyard.

Fang Zhao could feel the force of the chains travelling through his rapier each time their weapons clashed, its impact threatening to tear the rapier out of his hand!

“Impossible! A Beast Vein cultivator can’t be this strong!” Fang Zhao was not feeling so confident right now; in fact, he was even frightened by the predatory gleam in Li Tianming’s eyes. Fang Zhao was never someone with a strong will to begin with, and as Li Tianming doubled down on his assault, his moves began to falter.

At that instant, the Thunderfire Chain sped up once more, the metallic chains fully enveloped in flame like a blazing dragon. It was so fast that it even left afterimages behind, making use of Fang Zhao's hesitation to pierce his line of defence. With a few swift whirls, the chain had tied itself around Fang Zhao's waist.

It was the intermediate source-ranked battle art, the Skyfire Soulfinder! It was Li Tianming's first time using it in battle, and honestly, he could hardly say he had done the move justice. Luckily for him, Fang Zhao wasn't focused, allowing him to execute the move successfully.

With a swing of his wrist, the Thunderfire Chain had tangled itself onto Fang Zhao, binding and tying him up into a bundle. His Aeternal Infernal Beast Ki coursed through the chains, charring Fang Zhao's skin.

Of course that wasn't all that the source-ranked battle art could do. To the audience's horror, Li Tianming swung his arm, throwing Fang Zhao into the air. With a shriek, Fang Zhao spun several rounds in mid air before landing behind Li Tianming.

SPLAT!

Fang Zhao's body crashed onto the ground, the impact almost shattering his bones. In his pain, he could only let out an agonizing cry. "Feng Ling, SAVE ME!"

On the other side, the crane was still playing hide and sick with the little chick, not expecting its master to be trashed so easily. When it saw Fang Zhao slamming into earth with the Thunderfire Chain tied around him, it was instantly enraged!

Suddenly, all the feathers on the crane's body started glowing. With a terrifying burst, its feathers launched at Li Tianming like thousands of daggers. It was the crane's spiritsource ability, the Supernal Windblades!

Undoubtedly, it was a threatening move, and even with movement arts, it was hard to dodge the feathers completely. Sadly, the two had made the mistake of not using this trump card earlier. With another swing of his wrist, Li Tianming had dragged Fang Zhao back to him, before brandishing his newly acquired human shield.

"AHHH!" Knowing that the move could easily kill him, Fang Zhao let out a blood-curdling scream. With a sharp shudder, a puddle formed underneath his legs, accompanied by the sounds of water falling. Li Tianming rolled his eyes — Fang Zhao had not really changed in the past three years.

The crane did not expect such a play from Li Tianming, and it could only try to abort the attack and retract the feathers back to its body. But the crane had forgotten about the little chick, who suddenly emerged to slap its wings with the Netherfire Ghostclaw. Unprotected by its feathers, the slap shattered the crane's wing, sending the bloodied crane to the ground.

Having dissolved the crane's attack, Li Tianming flung the still-peeing Fang Zhao to his classmates.

"Take him away from me. Oh and remind him to change his pants." Li Tianming kept his Thunderfire Chain, an unruffled smile on his face.

The group hurriedly scattered, causing Fang Zhao to crash into the ground yet again. After all, no one wanted to catch someone who'd just peed his pants!

“LI TIANMING! I will make sure to return all these humiliation to you ten times stronger!” Rage pulsed through Fang Zhao’s veins, as he trembled to crawl back up and stared at Li Tianming with bloodshot eyes.

“Change your pants first before talking about making a comeback...” Li Tianming said. Fang Zhao looked too pathetic right now, and the audience were trying hard to contain their laughter.

“What are you all waiting for?” Fang Zhao stared at Lu Guanxiong and the others in disbelief.

They briefly exchanged a few looks with each other, before coming to a quick conclusion. They had arrived together with Fang Zhao, and if they were to just leave with Fang Zhao being crushed so easily, they would surely become a joke amongst the journeyman disciples.

Then again, they were shocked to see Li Tianming’s triumph too. They had expected to be able to easily crush Li Tianming, given their three years advantage in cultivation. But Li Tianming’s victory was plain shocking, to the point that Fang Zhao had even pissed in his pants. Their attitudes towards Li Tianming had taken a drastic change, and at least they no longer treated him as that fool who returned to the institute to be shamed.

That being said, they weren’t afraid either. They would suppress Li Tianming together to tell him that he had messed with the wrong people.

“Li Tianming, for someone who just returned to the institute, you seem to have forgotten the rules here. From what we see, you probably need a good beating to remember who are the seniors here,” Lu Guanxiong said, as the group of them closed in on Li Tianming with burning eyes.

Fang Zhao was but the weakest amongst them. Lu Guanxiong, for example, was in third level Spiritsource, and should they team up against Li Tianming, there was nothing he could do.

“Kudos to you for having the face to say such things.” Li Tianming was speechless at their utter lack of shame. Must they go to such an extent to just flex their sense of superiority?

“Who gave you the courage to talk back to us?” They were already within reach of Li Tianming.

All of a sudden, Li Tianming started grinning after a peek over their shoulders, and said, “Are you all going to gang up on a fresh disciple in the Muwan class? For someone who only just graduated from her class, you might want to show her a little more respect.”

“Cut your bullshit,” Lu Guanxiong sneered. He knew that Li Tianming was trying to use Chief Mentor Mu Wan’s name to scare them off.

“And who’s bullshitting?” Just then a sinister female voice sounded from behind Fang Zhao’s group. The voice was like a bolt of thunder, causing them to jump in shock, as they slowly turned behind. And when they saw the owner of the voice, their faces were flushed of all colors.

“Chief mentor, please avenge Fang Zhao! Li Tianming shamed and injured him, and we were just trying to help him seek justice...” Lu Guanxiong tried to salvage the situation.

“Excuses, excuses. Coming back here to act cocky just days after graduating to journeyman class, and you still want to blame others when you get defeated? You all better hope you don’t need medical attention after I’m done with you all.”

Fang Zhao's group could only tremble in despair when Chief Mentor Mu Wan announced their sentence. For the next ten minutes or so, each of them received a good beating from Mu Wan before they could crawl out from the courtyard crying. Even the already injured Fang Zhao wasn't spared, and the only one that got out of the hook was Lin Qingyu, who wasn't one of those threatening Li Tianming.

"Next time you all want to try this again, better come prepared for what I can do to you all." Mu Wan smiled menacingly. That caused the group to scatter off even faster, and poor Fang Zhao nearly peed in his pants a second time.

"Scram." With a fierce stare, the watching freshmen hurried off as well, having seen how intimidating their chief mentor could get.

One thing they knew for sure was that no matter what the rest of the world thought of Li Tianming, Chief Mentor Mu Wan seemed to take particular interest in him. Some were angry with Mu Wan, while others jealous of Li Tianming, but there was nothing they could do. After all, Li Tianming had just defeated their senior from the journeyman class, a feat hard to imagine from an apprentice disciple.

Soon, only Li Tianming and Mu Wan was left in the courtyard. But a moment later, a middle-aged man appeared behind Chief Mentor Mu Wan. He wore a golden robe, his long hair combed neatly behind his back. The man had a clean-shaven face, and golden sparks seemed to shoot out from his eyes.

The man had an aura of a real expert, even making Mu Wan look tame when he stood beside her. He was no doubt one of the titans of the institute.

Chapter 50 - Li Tianming's Reverse Scale!

"Disciple Li Tianming greets the hall overseer." Li Tianming recognised this man, and hurriedly paid his respects. This man was one of Flameyellow Scions Institute's five hall overseers, specifically the Hall of Phoenix, Wei Zikun.

In the institute, only the chancellor and several personages from Heaven's Sanctum held higher positions than the five hall overseers. To command the Hall of Phoenix, Wei Zikun had to be young and promising. Despite being slightly younger than Li Yanfeng, he was already at the peak of Vermilion Bird.

When Li Tianming had been studying at the institute for a year in the past, he had never really met this overseer before. Yet, he unexpectedly appeared here today.

Naturally, it wasn't for him. The overseer gave Li Tianming a once-over. "Mu Wan, this is your new disciple?"

"Yes, hall overseer." Mu Wan's words were respectful and serious, a far cry from her usual personality.

"The ranking battles are in three days. Although you're on the older side, your strength is still passable. Get a good rank, and bring glory to our Hall of Phoenix. After all, they don't care about your age there."

The admission test would consider the participant's age and deduct the appropriate marks.

However, the ranking battle wanted a standardised system. Furthermore, there was only so much difference to the ages in the apprentice class, so age wasn't considered. Hence, Li Tianming's age would be an advantage and not a disadvantage.

Mu Wan glanced at him. "Why are you still acting so stunned?"

"I'll do my best, hall overseer," Li Tianming said seriously.

"The overseers shall be attending the ranking battles. I'll be watching your performance." Once he was done speaking, he smiled at Mu Wan, "Are you ready? The Lantern Festival is about to begin."

"Yes, hall overseer." Mu Wan nodded.

"When we're out to relax, there's no need to be so formal. Brother Kun will do fine."

"Yes, brother Kun."

"Please."

The two must have made an appointment to go and see the Lantern Festival together.

The overseer had been waiting for Mu Wan for a while, when they heard the commotion and came over. Now that Fang Zhao had been driven away, they were naturally going to leave. As they were leaving, Mu Wan gave Li Tianming a glare, a warning for him not to cause any trouble.

Now, only Li Tianming and Ying Huo were left.

"Heartbroken? That old man is chasing your Chief Mentor Mu Wan," the little chick gloated.

"It seems you can't tell. Look at how respectful she was, she obviously doesn't like him. I heard long ago that the hall overseer was interested in her, just that she's always rejected him," Li Tianming said indifferently.

In truth, Mu Wan definitely had some kind of background to always be able to reject the advances of someone with Wei Zikun's status. In the Hall of Phoenix, Wei Zikun's words were law, and the Hall was itself practically one fifth of the whole Institute.

To be honest, all of these weren't very important to him. What was important were the ranking battles in three days from now.

It was definitely going to be ten times more bustling than the admission test.

Not only would the five hall overseers attend, but so would some important figures of Ignispolis. In fact, this also included people from the Vermilion Bird royal clan, Lightning Manor, Occult Athenaeum and Xing & Chen Merchantry. After all, they had juniors participating in battles to decide their prospects and reputation.

How the apprentice class was ranked and who became the prime disciple were matters the entire Vermilion Bird paid attention to. These juniors were the future, and the medium through which the clans' legacies passed down.

A clan needed to spawn droves of geniuses if it wanted to stand the test of time. And how could it be determined if they had these geniuses? Simple, through the Flameyellow Scions Institute ranking battles!

The geniuses of Heaven's Sanctum like Lin Xiaoting and Mu Qingqing might also be spectating from some private room.

Li Tianming continued his training.

He was especially hardworking. Although he could let the little chick do the work and relax on the side, he chose not to do so. He was making progress steadily, so that he would have more to work with during battle.

Two days passed in a whirl. Tomorrow was the day of the ranking battles.

Li Tianming naturally hadn't forgotten the promise he had made with his mother. She wanted to personally witness his fight. There would be no time the next day, so he planned to pick her up that night.

This was very important to Li Tianming. This might be his only chance to enter Heaven's Sanctum, which was key to curing his mother. He hoped his mother could watch him. Because then, he could unleash 200% of his potential!

Li Tianming hadn't seen Wei Jing for several days as he was busy cultivating. "I wonder if she's gotten used to living to living in Ignispolis yet."

He had hired an auntie to reside there and provide for her meals. Wei Jing should be living comfortably apart from her illness. In the dark night, he threaded through the dark alleyways to return to the newly bought house. It wasn't far from the institute, so it would take him about seven minutes to reach it. The Lantern Festival was celebrated for days in Ignispolis. All the roads were jam-packed with people carousing, a picturesque scene of happiness. The hustle and bustle of Ignispolis was one Flamehaven would never have.

When Li Tianming reached his home, he saw from afar that all of the lamps had been doused and the place was pitch-black. "Mother went to sleep so early?"

Li Tianming stealthily opened the door so that he wouldn't wake up. He walked to the east wing of the house, which was the largest room and also Wei Jing's bedroom.

However, what greeted Li Tianming wasn't even breathing, but pained gasps!

Wei Jing was definitely inside. Moreover, something had clearly happened! Whether it was her illness or other reasons, Li Tianming would only know after going in.

In the dark night, Li Tianming's two eyes couldn't see clearly, but the eye in his left palm had night vision; to him, the dark night was like daytime to him. Without any hesitation, Li Tianming directly opened the door and entered.

"Please don't let there be anything wrong," Li Tianming prayed.

Wei Jing was very weak now, which left Li Tianming's heart pounding.

When he entered, Li Tianming saw Wei Jing lying down on the bed, covered in a blanket. While it seemed to be normal sleep, she was tossing and turning, her breathing feeble and laboured.

“What’s going on?!” Li Tianming felt his heart clench. Seeing Wei Jing in pain was what he couldn’t stand the most. He sped to his mother’s side, and ripped off the blanket. The next moment, his eyes turned bloodshot when he found dozens of worms, blood-coloured and thumb-sized, crawling all over her body.

The worms were all nausea inducing. They possessed rings of sharp teeth that they were currently using to gnaw on Wei Jing’s flesh and suck her blood!

Li Tianming felt his heart being ripped apart by the sight.

“Bloodhell Worms!” Li Tianming immediately recognised them, much to his horror. Bloodhell Worms were a type of leech that fed on human blood.

Wei Jing didn’t have any ability to resist. Her lifebound beast was suffering from Lifesbane as well and was currently sprawled in a corner of the room. Its body was covered with even more Bloodhell Worms than Wei Jing.

But, who put them on Wei Jing, a defenceless and sick person?

Beast ki began to leak out from Li Tianming. If he had gotten back just a bit later, Wei Jing might have been a desiccated husk.

If that happened, he would be left guilty for the rest of his life.

He didn’t need to be told that there was someone else in the room with him, the very culprit for this.

“Flameyellow Scions Institute disciple Li Tianming, you’ve kept me waiting.” A sorrowful voice drifted towards Li Tianming from behind.

When Li Tianming turned around, he only saw a man dressed in skintight black clothes lurking within the shadows. His face was covered in a black veil that revealed only his eyes. The most eye-catching thing was the beautiful blood-coloured flower on his chest.

“Bloodflower Chamber.” Li Tianming made the obvious conclusion from that dead giveaway. In Vermilion Bird, Bloodflower Chamber was a name that could make people jump in fright just with its name. They were an underground organisation that handled contract killing. While they demanded high prices, their success rate was high, which afforded them a high reputation in the world of killers.

However, Li Tianming had never expected them to come after him. It was obvious Wei Jing wasn’t the target, or else Wei Jing would have died long ago.

Li Tianming didn’t bother asking who had called the hit on him. It was a basic tenet of the opponent’s job not to share details of their employer. In fact, it was likely he didn’t even know. The assassins would never meet the employer.

For the opponent to be sent to kill him, it meant they were certain of his strength and had sent someone who was guaranteed to kill him.

Now, Wei Jing and Li Tianming were in a crisis, one they were likely to perish in.

Contract killers were cruel and merciless, and would never pity their prey. It was a completely different sort of opponent from anyone Li Tianming had faced before. Previously, Li Tianming could still casually joke around, but now, he felt the very real possibility of death was pressed against his throat.

As the man spoke, Li Tianming saw a giant worm as thick as a thigh wriggling about on the ground. Both its head and tail had an opening.

The head's opening was filled with rows of sharp teeth, while the thumb-sized Bloodhell Worms continued to pour out of its tail opening in the thousands. The Bloodhell Worms had already filled everywhere, from the roof, floor to the walls.

This giant worm was definitely a Bloodhell Broodmother!

This was a fierce lifebound beast that wasn't exactly a beast. Bloodhell Broodmothers were a doubly special lifebound beast, special in both species and type.

Their species was a leech, a kind of annelid lifebound beast. Its type was a broodmother-type, which could spawn large numbers of offspring to use for attacks. Some ant and bee queen lifebound beasts would belong to this type. Hence, this Bloodhell Broodmother was a broodmother-type annelid lifebound beast!

Li Tianming was furious. Wei Jing was his reverse scale! For tormenting her so, Li Tianming would definitely rip this man to pieces.