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Chapter 143: The Path of Solitude

The cave was silent, save for the rhythmic dripping of water echoing off ancient stone walls.

Clark sat cross-legged, his breathing steady, his eyes closed. Three days had passed since the battle with the ancient bear. Three days since he had nearly died.

His body was still healing. Half his bones had been shattered. His left lung had been pierced. Three ribs had broken inward, nearly shredding his heart. Any ordinary cultivator would have been dead. Any ordinary cultivator would have begged for mercy, cried for help, or simply given up.

But Clark was not ordinary.

He never had been.

He opened his eyes. In the darkness of the cave, they glowed with a faint, eerie light—the mark of someone who had touched the Soul Path, who had brushed against death and come back changed.

- "Mao Hua."

Silence.

- "I know you're there. Stop pretending. You've been watching me for hours. Your energy flickers every time I breathe. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

A shimmer in the corner of his mind. The fairy appeared, her small dragon horns catching an imaginary light, her white hair flowing like snowmelt down a mountain spring. Her pink cheeks held a faint blush—whether from embarrassment at being caught or something else, Clark couldn't tell.

- "You called?"

Clark ignored her sarcasm. He always ignored her sarcasm. It was easier that way.

- "That bear. It wasn't just a beast."

Mao Hua's expression shifted slightly. The playfulness drained away, replaced by something older, sadder.

- "No. It wasn't."

- "It had memories. I saw them when our souls touched. For just a moment, when the blue sword linked us, I was inside its mind. I felt what it felt. I saw what it saw."

Mao Hua was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was different. Softer. The voice of someone who remembered things they wished they could forget.

- "What did you see?"

Clark stared at the cave wall, but his eyes saw something else. A forest bathed in golden light. A child laughing. A man with power that made the heavens tremble.

- "A forest. Green everywhere—trees so tall they touched the clouds, flowers that glowed with their own light. Birds singing songs I've never heard. And a child, no more than five or six, running through the grass."

He paused.

- "His father was watching him. A tall man, handsome, with eyes that held entire universes. The Spectral King Venerable. I recognized his aura immediately. There's no mistaking that kind of power."

Mao Hua's form flickered like a candle in the wind.

- "That's impossible. The Spectral King Venerable had no heirs. History records—"

- "History lies."

Clark stood, wincing slightly as his injuries protested. His left shoulder blade ground against itself. He ignored the pain. Pain was just information.

- "The bear wasn't always a beast. It was transformed. Forced into that form by the very man who claimed to love it."

Mao Hua's eyes widened. For the first time since Clark had known her, she looked genuinely afraid.

- "The Transformation Path... The Spectral King experimented on his own son? But that's—that's monstrous. Even by demonic standards. Even by his standards."

- "Was it?"

Clark walked to the cave entrance, looking out at the gray sky beyond. Rain was falling again. It always seemed to be raining in this part of the immortal world.

- "Think about it. The Spectral King was the most powerful being of his era. He had mastered the Soul Path to a degree no one before or since has achieved. He could see

the flaws in everything—including his own bloodline. And he saw that his son was weak."

- "So he turned him into a beast?!"
- "He tried to make him strong. In his own twisted way, he loved that child. Everything he did, he did because he believed it would make his son worthy of standing beside him."

Mao Hua was silent. When she spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

- "That's why the bear fought with such desperation. It wasn't just survival instinct. It was... pain. Loneliness. The endless agony of remembering what it had lost while being trapped in a body that couldn't express it."

Clark nodded slowly.

- "At the end, before the killing blow, it remembered. For one moment, it was that child again. Playing in the forest. Feeling the sun on its face. Believing its father loved it."
- "And then you killed it."
- "And then I killed it."

Mao Hua's form trembled violently, as if she might dissolve entirely.

- "Clark..."
- "I know what you're going to say."
- "Do you? Do you really? That could be you someday. Pushing everyone away, trusting no one, believing only in the Path. You could end up like that bear. Alone. Transformed. Forgotten. Dying with nothing but memories of a love you threw away."

Clark turned to face her. His expression was unreadable—a mask carved from stone and hardened by centuries of pain.

- "Maybe."
- "Maybe?! That's all you have to say? After everything I just told you? After seeing what happened to that innocent child?"

He walked past her, back into the cave's depths. His footsteps echoed off the ancient stone.

- "The Spectral King's son had someone who loved him. A father who, in his own twisted way, tried to make him stronger. Someone who cared whether he lived or died. And where did that love get him? Trapped in a beast's body for millennia. Fighting until his last breath against enemies who saw him only as a monster. Remembered by no one. Mourned by no one. His name lost to history."

He sat down again, cross-legged, assuming the meditation posture.

- "I have no one. And that is my strength."

Mao Hua's voice rose, cracking with emotion.

- "You have me!"

Clark looked at her. Really looked at her. For the first time, he saw past the fairy's arrogance, past her pride, past her constant needling. He saw fear. Loneliness. The same loneliness that haunted him.

- "Do I?"

His voice was quiet. Dangerously quiet.

- "You're a remnant, Mao Hua. A fragment of someone who died long ago. You're in my mind because of circumstance, not choice. When I found you, you were barely more than a whisper. A ghost clinging to existence through sheer stubbornness."

- "That's not—"

- "When I find the Spectral King's true inheritance, when I master the Soul Path to its fullest extent, what will happen to you then? Will you remain? Will you fade? Will I absorb you the way the bear absorbed those weaker souls?"

Mao Hua's form flickered violently, sparks of light breaking off and dissolving into nothing.

- "I... I don't know."

- "Neither do I. But I know this: attachment is weakness. Love is a chain. The Path requires sacrifice. And I have already sacrificed everything. My first life. My second life. My family. My home. My name. Everything."

Silence stretched between them, thick and heavy as burial cloth.

Finally, Mao Hua spoke, her voice small—the voice of a child lost in the dark.

- "The bear... at the end. When it remembered being a child, playing in that forest. Do you think it regretted its life?"

Clark considered this. For a long moment, he didn't speak. When he did, his words were measured, deliberate, each one chosen with care.

- "I think it regretted nothing. I think it felt, for one brief moment, what it had lost. The warmth of the sun. The sound of its father's voice. The simple joy of being alive without the weight of millennia pressing down on its soul. And then it died."

- "Is that what you want? To feel nothing at the end?"

- "I want to reach the peak. I want to understand the true nature of the Dao. I want to break the chains that bind all cultivators—the chains of mortality, of limitation, of heaven itself. What I feel or don't feel along the way is irrelevant. The destination is all that matters."

Mao Hua watched him for a long time. The rain outside intensified, drumming against the cave entrance like a thousand tiny fists.

- "You're lying."

His eyes opened. In the darkness, they burned.

- "Excuse me?"

- "You say you feel nothing. You say emotion is irrelevant. You say the destination is all that matters. But I'm in your mind, Clark. I've been in your mind since the beginning. I see what you try to hide. I feel what you try to suppress."

She drifted closer, her ethereal form casting no shadow.

- "When you fought for the nymphs—when you threw yourself in front of that immortal formation without a second thought—that wasn't calculation. That wasn't strategy. That wasn't the Path of Theft or the Path of Judgment or any other path you pretend to walk."

Clark's jaw tightened. A muscle twitched beneath his eye.

- "That was strategy. They're useful. Keeping them alive serves my purposes."

- "Useful?! You threw yourself in front of an attack that could have killed you instantly for 'useful' beings you barely know? Beings who had done nothing for you? Beings who, by your own logic, were expendable?"

- "They had information I needed."

- "What information? What could those nymphs possibly know that justified risking your life? Your precious 'destination'?"

Clark opened his mouth. Closed it. For once, he had no answer.

Mao Hua pressed her advantage.

- "You're afraid, Clark. Not of dying. Not of losing. You've died twice already. You've lost everything. There's nothing left for you to fear in those directions."

She drifted even closer, until her face was inches from his.

- "You're afraid of admitting that some part of you still cares. Still hopes. Still believes that maybe—just maybe—you don't have to be alone."

- "Enough."

- "You're afraid that if you let yourself feel anything, you'll remember what it was like before. Before the first death. Before the betrayals. Before the Path became your only companion."

- "I said enough."

Bam!

Clark's fist slammed into the cave wall. The impact echoed like thunder. Cracks spiderwebbed outward, racing across the ancient stone. Dust and debris showered down.

- "I said ENOUGH!"

His voice echoed off the walls, bouncing back and forth until it became a meaningless roar.

Mao Hua fell silent.

But her eyes said everything.

Clark stood there, breathing hard, his fist still pressed against the cracked stone. Blood trickled from his knuckles—not from the impact, but from wounds reopened by the violence of the movement. He didn't notice. Or didn't care.

The cave dripped.

The rain fell.

The silence stretched, infinite and unforgiving.

And somewhere, deep in the darkness of his own mind, Clark heard a whisper he refused to acknowledge.

A child playing in a forest. Sunlight through the leaves. A father's hand on his shoulder. Love, before the transformation. Love, before the pain. Love, before everything became ash.

- "...Leave me, Mao Hua."

His voice was flat. Empty. The voice of a man who had learned, long ago, that wanting things only led to losing them.

Mao Hua faded without another word. Her form dissolved into motes of light, each one winking out like a dying star, until nothing remained but the echo of her presence.

Clark stood alone in the darkness.

The cave was silent now. Even the dripping water seemed to have stopped, as if the world itself was holding its breath.

He looked at his hands. The hands that had killed the bear. The hands that had felt, for just one moment, the fading warmth of a child's memory.

- "Attachment is weakness."

He said it aloud, as if hearing the words would make them true.

- "Love is a chain."

The cave offered no.

- "The Path is all that matters."

He sat down again. Cross-legged. Eyes closed. Breathing steady.

The meditation posture.

But sleep didn't come.

And for the first time in three lifetimes, Clark sat in the darkness and wondered if the path he walked was truly his own—or if he was just another bear, trapped in a form not of his choosing, dreaming of a forest he could never return to.
