

Chapter 37- Hope for the family

Li Yuan watched the rotund prince's flying sword disappear into the horizon. Only when the last trace of that disgusting presence vanished did the tightness in his chest finally loosen.

'Fat bastard.' He thought with a quiet, seething hatred. The man had been like an ugly caricature from his old world's internet. An amalgamation of every vile, smug, and arrogant NTR fat bastard stereotype he'd ever seen. They type who strutted around stealing other men's wives while laughing in their faces.

The memory of what he'd seen in that vision almost made his blood boil all over again. To think that bastard would go for his own mother. It was a good thing that Zi Mo had been present in that vision, and had intervened, or his fury at the fat prince would've been infinitely greater.

In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the fat prince had firmly put him off from the idea of relying on the Empire's 'grace' every again.

It also made him lose any bit of respect he might've had for the Empire. After all, his family helped them greatly by handing over that Hundred Year Lifespan Gu, and the Empire returns that help with *this*?

He exhaled slowly through his nose, forcing the anger back down into quiet depths. Once again, his halo had saved him. And to think he'd thought himself strong enough to deal with most of the opposition he might face. And the world threw this at him to humble him.

'I've become too arrogant.' He thought, wondering on what could've happened had Zi Mo not been present. If he did not have his Halo. Try as he might, he couldn't help but think of the worst case scenario, and that made him clench his fists hard enough that they bled.

He slowly unclenched his fists and looked up at the empty sky.

"I'm still too weak." He thought.

After all, if he had been strong enough to face and defeat a Golden Core Cultivator, then that fat bastard and his bodyguard would have to act cautiously around him and his family, and not the other way around.

At least the disaster had passed. So, despite the anger still shimmering in his chest, he felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

“You need to work more on controlling your anger.” Zi Mo’s voice drifted from behind as soft arms wrapped around his waist. Her sensual body pressed against his back, as her cheek calm to rest upon his shoulder.



He leaned back to the embrace, enjoying the feeling of relief that came from her presence. Maybe it was a bit shameful for a man to

rely on his woman's strength. But for now, he did not mind borrowing her strength to protect her family.

“Why do you say that?” He asked.

“I could feel your killing intent leaking out several times,” she said, her tone calm but reproachful. “The bodyguard certainly noticed it. If I had not been present, he might have acted already.”

Li Yuan let out a quiet breath and turned within her embrace to meet her gaze.

Zi Mo looked up at him with those deep, star-bright eyes of hers. And without thinking, he reached forward and kissed her gently on the forehead.

“Then I suppose I owe you my thanks,” he said quietly.

Whatever her motives might be, and he had no doubt she possessed several, there was no denying how much she had done for him and the clan these past days.

“This whole situation would've been far worse without you.” He said and pulled her into his arms. “Thank you, Zi Mo. For everything.”

Zi Mo let out a soft, pleased hum and leaned fully into the embrace, pressing her face into his chest. For a moment she simply stood there quietly, breathing in his scent while her arms tightened around his back.

They remained like that for a while, the quiet courtyard settling around them. Then, Li Yuan's thoughts gradually drifted elsewhere.

If he wanted to ensure something like this never happened again... then the answer was obvious.

Strength.

His clan needed more of it.

Fortunately, the rotund bastard, disgusting as he was, had at least honoured the empire's official business before leaving. The reward from the Ninth Prince had been delivered in full.

Along with the Ten Foundation Establishment Pills, his family now had enough spirit stones to upgrade five of the clan's Low-grade Spirit Lakes to Mid-grade ones. And they had also been conferred with the title of an 8th Grade family, with all the privileges such a thing entailed.

With that said, the family currently had no plans to use those Spirit Stones just yet.

After all, with the fall of the Qin family, the Li family had absorbed much of their territory and resources. That alone had given them two Mid-grade Spirit Lakes and numerous additional Low-grade ones. Not to mention the mines, prominent shops, and what else.

There was also the wealth he had taken from the Qin family's treasury, which in itself was enough to upgrade one or two of the Low-grade Spirit lakes into a Mid-grade one.

The sudden influx of wealth was enormous. And the clan would need time to digest it properly.

Only after stabilising those gains would they be able to begin expanding toward the Ashen Ridge Mountains. A territory that was far richer in spiritual resources, and no doubt that a multitude of Mid-grade Spirit Lakes of its own.

“What are you thinking?” Zi Mo asked, her voice muffled against his chest.

He looked down to see her gazing up at him curiously. “Just thinking on how to make my clan stronger,” he answered honestly.

“And?” she asked, tilting her head slightly. “Have you come up with anything?”

Li Yuan paused for a moment, his hand drifting up to brush lightly against her cheek as he admired her face.

“The first step is obvious. We use the ten Foundation Establishment Pills,” he said. “Right now we have seven cultivators at Peak Qi Condensation who qualify to attempt a breakthrough. If all seven succeed, which they likely will thanks to the Heavy Spirit water, that’ll give us seven more Foundation Establishment experts.”

He counted quietly in his head.

“Add the eleven Foundation Establishment combatants we already have, and that makes eighteen.” He said. “Add Qin Ling who’ll soon marry into the family, and that becomes nineteen.”

“Twenty, if they add you.” Zi Mo said calmly, making him blink in surprise. “Did you truly forget to add your own self to you clan’s strength. Your Qi Condensation realm does not show your true strength. In fact, I have no doubt that you alone are strong enough to defeat all 19 of them on your own.”

Li Yuan gave a wry chuckle. “That’s not exactly comforting when talking about the strength of my clan.”

After all, the reason he had not added himself to his clan's strength was because he would soon return back to the Nine Peak Sect. And who knows how long it'll take before he would be able to return.

“Because it shouldn't be,” Zi Mo replied bluntly, her expression turned serious. “In the grand scheme of things, an Eighth-grade family like yours is insignificant. If a Ninth-grade family is an ant... then an Eighth-grade family is a worm. Slightly larger, yes. But still something that a truly powerful cultivator could crush without effort. No, you're looking at this the wrong way?”

Li Yuan tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

Zi Mo stepped closer, her gaze locking firmly onto his. “Listen, and listen well, Li Yuan. Your clan's strength does not lie in its nineteen cultivators. Nor in its wealth, its spirit lakes, or its mines.” She said, as her voice quietened into a bare whisper. “It lies in you.”

“If not for you, the Li clan would be nothing right now,” she continued calmly. “You destroyed the Qin family. You brought wealth and resources beyond what this clan has ever seen.” She raised a finger and pressed it gently against his chest. “If you rise... your clan will rise. And if you fall... your clan will fall with you.”

She held his gaze firmly. “Remember that before you ever risk your life recklessly.”

Li Yuan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It didn't take a genius to see the truth in her words. The Nine Peak Sect wasn't powerful because of its many Golden Core cultivators. It was powerful because of its three Nascent Soul Ancestors. Those three alone accounted for the overwhelming majority of the sect's power.

In a cultivation world, the strength of the top few in any group account for 90% of that group's total strength. Keeping that in mind, if he wanted his clan to grow stronger... then the fastest path forward was obvious.

Make himself stronger.

“It still feels... a bit selfish,” he admitted quietly. “Focusing on myself like that.”

Zi Mo raised an unimpressed eyebrow at his words. “You're still too naive. If you doubt my word, then go and ask your family members,” she said. “I have no doubt they would tell you exactly the same thing I just did.”

Her hand rested gently over his heart and she looked into his eyes. “Especially once they learn that you will soon enter Snow Peak... and become the personal disciple of a Nascent Soul elder.”

Li Yuan nodded slowly, and for a moment neither of them spoke. He simply looked down into her eyes, losing himself in their deep starlight glow.

Then he leaned forward and captured her lips in a soft kiss.

When they parted slightly, he rested his head against hers and whispered quietly. “What would I do without you?”

Zi Mo didn't answer. She simply pulled him closer... and kissed him again.



Li Yuan closed the door to his room, activated the 2nd Tier Privacy Formation and sat cross-legged upon the cultivation mat.

The events of the past few days still lingered at the edge of his thoughts, but he pushed them aside and focused inward for the task at hand.

With a thought, the Stele surfaced into the world, and lines of information unfolded before his eyes.

NAME: Li Yuan

AGE: 14

CULTIVATION: 7th Stage Qi Condensation

SKILLS

Heavenly Star Refining Sutra — 3/4000 (Major Accomplishment)

Mountain-Splitting Stillness Sword – 600/600 (Complete Perfection)

Shadow-Cloud Steps – 800/800 (Complete Perfection)

Veil of Borrowed Heaven – 2400/2400 (Complete Perfection)

Spirit Residue Following Technique – 1000/1000(Complete Perfection)

2nd-Tier Formation Breaking — 7/1600 (Perfection)

2nd-Tier Formation Crafting — 12/400 (Moderate Accomplishment)

2nd-Tier Spirit Herb Cultivation – 8/400 (Moderate Accomplishment)

Infinite Micro Slash Domain Art — 6000/6000 (Compete Perfection)

CURRENT POINTS: 6,372

His gaze went straight to the bottom of the Stele, toward the number he cared about most right now.

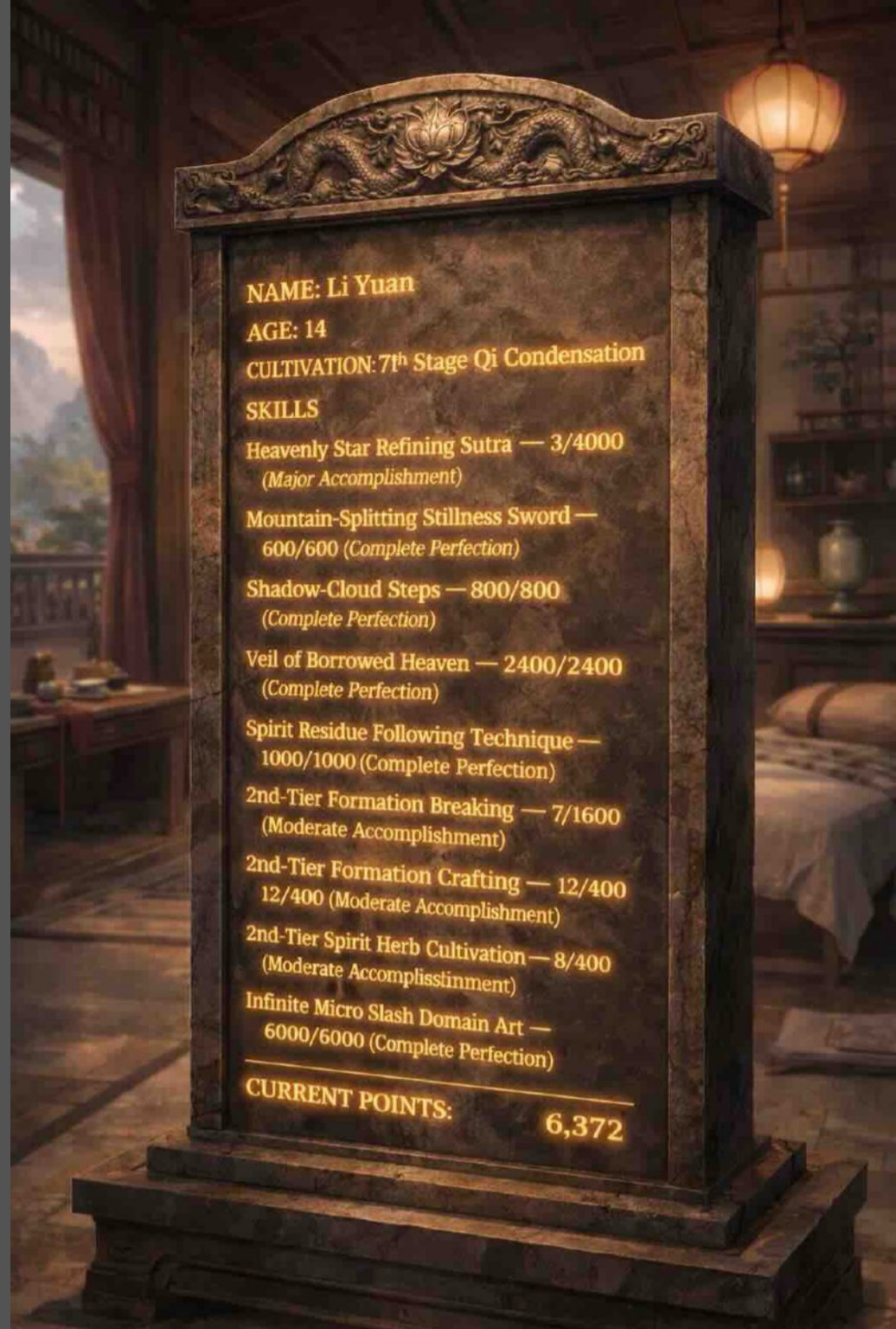
6372 points.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. After the battle, he had not wasted any time and collected the corpse of all the cultivators scattered across the Qin family estate.

Five Foundation Establishment cultivators (four of which had been at mid-stage, and one at Late-stage), and over two dozen Late of Peak Stage Qi Condensation, most of whom had died at Zi Mo's hands by being frozen solid.

Not of their corpses had been wasted, and all of them ended going into his Stele, which resulted in the large number currently in front of him.

Li Yuan exhaled slowly and controlled his excitement before he reached into his storage ring. A heavy alchemical cauldron appeared



before him with a dull thud against the floor. After that came several bundles of herbs, each carefully wrapped and labeled beforehand.

Finally, he opened the jade slip containing the pill formula of the Qi Harmonising Pellet. A beginner's pill recipe used to teach Alchemy to Early Qi Condensation disciples.

For him, who had already reached 7th Stage of Qi Condensation, and had a much higher level of Qi sense and Qi control than even some

Foundation Establishment cultivators, learning this pill recipe should be simple.

Simple, however, did not mean easy, as despite all his advantages, he didn't know anything about pill crafting. So, expecting a few failure, Li Yuan begin.

The first attempt failed almost immediately. The spiritual flame burned slightly too hot, and some of the herbs had turned to ash before he could even really do anything.



Li Yuan frowned slightly, and adjusted the heat before he continued. He had prepared over a dozen sets of pill ingredient with this exact problem in mind and wasn't worried.

The second attempt lasted longer. He regulated the temperature carefully this time, guiding the herb essences together step by step. The cauldron hummed faintly with spiritual energy as the essence of all the herbs came together, the mixture nearly stabilising before the balance suddenly shifted by a slight margin... and the mixture destabilised near instantly.

Another failure.

Li Yuan sat still for a moment, reviewing the process in his mind. After making several small corrections, he started again.

The third attempt lasted much longer. But when the cauldron finally stopped trembling and he opened the lid, his eyes widened at the faint fragrance that rose from within. Inside the cauldron rested three Qi Harmonising Pellets.

Considering that a single batch of ingredients could at most, produce thirteen, and all three of those pills were of low quality, this alchemy session would still be considered a failure as the price of the pills would not match the price of the ingredients.

But Li Yuan cared about none of that as his gaze went directly to the bottom of his Stele. And sure enough, a new line had appeared at the bottom of his Status Panel.

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AGE: 14

CULTIVATION: 7th Stage Qi Condensation

SKILLS

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Spirit Residue Following Technique – 1000/1000(Complete Perfection)

2nd-Tier Formation Breaking — 7/1600 (Perfection)

2nd-Tier Formation Crafting — 12/400 (Moderate Accomplishment)

2nd-Tier Spirit Herb Cultivation – 8/400 (Moderate Accomplishment)

Infinite Micro Slash Domain Art — 6000/6000 (Compete Perfection)

1st-tier Alchemy — 1/100 (Minor Accomplishment)

CURRENT POINTS: 1872

Li Yuan leaned back slightly and let out a small breath. Then, without hesitation, he began investing points.

100 points vanished from the Stele. And he a deluge of memories entered his mind, taking his Alchemy skill to another level as if he'd practiced it continuously for years. And he advanced from Minor Accomplishment to Moderate Accomplishment in an instant.

Then, he invested 200 and 400 more points, and his Alchemy skill jumped across Moderate and Major Accomplishment, finally reaching the Realm of Perfection.

800 more points, and he reached Complete Perfection before crossing over to 2nd-tier Alchemy. Starting with 1/400 (Moderate Accomplishment).

He did not stop there and continued pouring more and more points into the skill. After all this was the kind of investment that would pay great dividends into the future. He had no doubt about that.

400 more points. Then 800 more. And finally... 1599 more points were invested into the skill, until...

2nd-tier Alchemy — 1600/1600 (Complete Perfection)

A flood of understanding poured into his mind. Techniques, heat control methods, herb compatibilities, alchemy ingredients, and

alchemical theory that normally required decades of study suddenly became instinctive knowledge.

Then, just because he still had more than enough points left over and he wanted to be completely sure of making the next pill, he decided to invest a few more points into the skill. Except, a problem revealed itself.

The Stele refused to accept any more points on the Alchemy skill. He tried again, but the results remained the same.

He realised that it was some type of inborn restriction within the Stele itself. Likely, the Stele would only allow a skill to advance one major tier beyond his own Cultivation Realm.

Since he currently remained in Qi Condensation realm, the highest skill level he could reach was 2nd-tier Mastery. And if he wished to reach 3rd-tier Alchemy, then he would first need to step into Foundation Establishment realm.

Li Yuan leaned back and gave a thoughtful look to the Stele. This was really not something he was worried about. While he wouldn't mind reaching 3rd-tier of Alchemy, for what he intended, this level should be more than enough.

He then reached into his storage ring again and produced another jade scroll.

Ten-Thousand Vitality Reversion Pill Formula.

One by one, the ingredients appeared before him. Starting with the three vitality-type 2nd-Tier beast cores followed by their Heart Blood and Bone Marrow Essence. After that came out Heavenroot Lingzhi. A herb that, just by consuming it alone, could improve the vitality and lifespan of a low level cultivator.

Finally, came out several Secondary herb ingredients required to stabilise, mix and improve the medicinal essence of the pill. And all the ingredients were arranged neatly beside the cauldron.

Before beginning, Li Yuan activated a communication talisman and sent a message to the clan.

“I will be in seclusion for the next week. Unless the sky itself is falling, do not disturb me.”

Once the message was sent, he sent another, more private message to Zi Mo before he sealed the room completely with a defensive formation and began to work.

Seven days passed.

When the door finally creaked open again, Li Yuan stepped outside looking like a completely different person.

His face had turned pale and gaunt, dark circles surrounded his eyes as if he had not slept for days, and his aura felt so weak that it seemed a strong breeze might knock him over.

A servant girl waiting outside froze when she saw him.

“Young master!” Her voice trembled with alarm as she rose up. “I’ll go inform the clan—”

Li Yuan raised a weak hand. “No.” He said hoarsely and the girl stopped immediately. “Help me to my grandfather’s courtyard.”

The girl hesitated for only a moment before moving to support him. He leaned partially against her shoulder as they walked across the hallway. Before leaving the courtyard, Li Yuan activated the **Veil of Borrowed Heaven**, cloaking both of them with it and concealing their presence from his family members.

After all, he was one of the main pillars of the clan and couldn’t afford to let any rumours spread about him being weakened like this.

They eventually arrived at the door of his grandfather's study. And Li Yuan dismissed the servant girl, ordering her to keep news of his emergence to herself before knocking.

“Enter,” came the voice from inside.

He pushed the door open and stepped in.

His grandfather sat behind a wooden desk reviewing documents. When the old man looked up and saw him, his expression changed instantly.

“Yuan'er!” The chair scraped loudly as the old man stood and hurried over. In a few quick steps he reached Li Yuan, grabbing his arm to steady him.

“What happened?” he demanded urgently. “Did your breakthrough fail?”

Li Yuan shook his head slowly and allowed himself to be guided into a chair. “I wasn't attempting a breakthrough.” He said.

The old man frowned in confusion. “Then what were you doing?”

Li Yuan reached into his storage ring and produced a small jade pill box. “I was crafting a pill.”

His grandfather stared at him in disbelief.

“...Since when do you know alchemy?”

“I’ll explain later.” Li Yuan said weakly. “First, come with me. Do not resist.”

His grandfather nodded and the next moment, they arrived within his Ancient Spatial ring. Standing atop one of the mountains.

His grandfather looked around the island in curiosity, raising a slight eyebrow when he saw a mountain in the distance with its cliff cut off smoothly. Finally, his grandfather turned to him and asked. “Why have you brought me here, Yuan’er?”

Instead of replying, he placed the jade box in his grandfather’s hands. “Open it.”

The old man hesitated before lifting the lid. Inside lay a single pill radiating a faint golden glow.

Even a single sniff of it let Li Yuan regain some of the strength he'd lost from the past seven days of non-stop work. He could only imagine its effects were someone to consume it.

“This pill will extend your lifespan by at least fifteen years.” He explained. “Likely more as it's a very high quality pill.”

The only reason the pill had not reached the highest quality was that the three 2nd Grade Cores he'd obtained were only of the Low and Mid-stage Spirit beasts.

His grandfather heard his words and fell silent. For several seconds, he said nothing. Then, the old man slowly closed the box and pushed it back. “No.” He said, closing his eyes in sadness.

Li Yuan frowned. “Grandfather—”

“I won't take it,” the old man said firmly. “Who knows what kind of life defying situation you must've put yourself into to acquire the ingredients for a pill like this. You should save it for yourself instead of giving it to an old relic like me.”

“Grandfather, that's not how it is.” He said and they argued for several minutes before Li Yuan finally managed to persuade his grandfather to accept the pill.

The old man sat down cross-legged and swallowed the pill. And Li Yuan followed suit, sitting down nearby as he took out several dishes from his spatial ring made from Spirit beasts. He started consuming them rapidly to regain his strength.

Yes, a single health restoring pill would've probably done the job, and done it much more effectively than the spirit beast dishes, but unless it's a dire emergency, he would keep to his unwritten rule of never consuming any pill lest he destroy his own future potential.

Then, he waited.

An entire day and night passed before the pill's energy fully stabilised. And when his grandfather finally opened his eyes, a powerful surge of Qi burst outward.

Li Yuan's eyes widened as he almost fell over from the burst of Qi.

The frailty that had plagued the old man had now vanished. His posture straightened, his breathing grew stronger, and even his hair regained a faint trace of black.

Most importantly—

His cultivation had leapt from 6th Stage Foundation Establishment to 9th Stage in one enormous jump.

Li Yuan had not even known that the pill had the side-effect of improving cultivation. But then again, a 2nd Tier beast core is one of the primary ingredients of the Foundation Establishment pill. And a single batch could result in the creation of as many as 10 Foundation Establishment Pills, should the Alchemy Master be capable enough.

That went to show just how much energy there was within a single Beast Core. And his grandfather just consumed a pill made from three of them.

Li Yuan immediately stood. “Congratulations, Grandfather, on your breakthrough.” He said as he cupped his hands and was about bow in respect.

But before he could complete the gesture, his grandfather blurred from his position and arrived before him in an instant, moving faster than Li Yuan had ever seen before as he stopped him from bowing.

“Never bow to me again.” His grandfather said, his voice trembling as he pulled Li Yuan into a tight embrace.

They stood there for a moment before finally separating.

“Well... now that you’ve recovered, what next, grandfather?” He asked, and his grandfather’s eyes narrowed as he replied quickly

“No one can know about this.” His grandfather said sternly. “News about my declining lifespan has already spread across the Redleaf Prefecture. If I suddenly reappear in public, healthy and far stronger than before, questions will inevitably follow. Dangerous questions.”

“Then what should we do?” He asked.

The old man was silent for a moment before he replied. “Let the world believe I have died. Go as far as to hold a public funeral for me. That way, I could move in the shadows, and protect our family by quietly eliminate threats before they ever reached them.”

Li Yuan contemplated those words before nodding. “That is a good idea, but I have a better one.”

His grandfather raised an eyebrow and waited for him to continue.

“Grandfather... try to reach the Peak of Foundation Establishment.”

His grandfather’s eyes widened at those words and his entire body trembled. “Yuan’er, you can’t mean?”

“I do.” He said firmly, feeling an ember of excitement in his own heart. “No one else knows this yet, but after I return from this trip, I would likely become a disciple of the Nascent Soul Elder Wu Yuechan. At that point, arranging a Golden Core pill, or even a few treasures aiding in your breakthrough would not be impossible.”

The old man looked completely stunned at his words. After all, reaching Golden Core was something that he had likely never even dared to imagine in his lifetime. Except, now, there was a great chance that it might happen.

Li Yuan reached into his storage ring and produced several bottles. “A dozen bottles of **Heavy Spirit Water**,” he said, handing them over. “The Heavy Spirit Water is a treasure that forms in a similar manner to Spirit Stones. Because of that, it does not lose its efficacy despite continuous usage. So just consuming these and slowly absorbing their effects of the next few years should be more than enough to help you reach the peak of Foundation Establishment.”

The old man’s hands trembled slightly as he accepted the bottles. Then, unexpectedly, he bowed deeply to Li Yuan.

“Our family has truly been blessed,” he said hoarsely. “To have raised such a filial grandson.”

Li Yuan quickly raised him up from the bow.

“If you want to show gratitude, grandfather” he said firmly, “then reach Peak Foundation Establishment and then breakthrough to Golden Core. Doing that would be more than enough to repay me.”

The old man nodded firmly, choking up a bit. “I will, Yuan’er. I will.”

Li Yuan nodded and finally allowed himself to relax. If this worked... then even without his presence, the Li family would finally have someone strong enough to protect it.

And with that, he could finally focus on his own growth without feeling selfish.

Chapter 38- Relationships

Li Yuan stood quietly at the edge of the river bank, watching the funeral pyre burn.

The flames had already begun to weaken, crackled softly beneath the charred remains of the burnt out wood as thick smoke rose into the blue sky and drifted away with the wind.

His grandfather was dead. Or at least... that was what the world now believed.

Li Yuan kept his expression solemn, his posture straight and composed, as befitted the grandson of the deceased patriarch. Anyone looking at him would see only a young man grieving quietly for the loss of his elder.

Inside, however, he was a bit bored. His grandfather was alive and well, currently cultivation in secrecy within his Ancient Spatial



Ring. The funeral was nothing more than a sham, and he felt annoyed at having to attend the entire affair, even if he understood the need for it.

Only after the funeral pyre had mostly been burnt away did he finally broke his gaze and swept it across the crowd.

Nearly the entire Redleaf Prefecture had gathered to pay their respects fall the late previous head of Li family.

Clan elders, minor sect representatives, wealthy merchants, even the Magistrate and members of the 8th grade Bai clan had come to pay their respects.

But Li Yuan knew that very few of them had truly come to mourn. In truth, they had come to measure the strength of the Li clan. And the Li clan had made sure they would see it clearly.

Eighteen Foundation Establishment level combatants stood around the funeral grounds like silent pillars.

His uncle and his granduncle stood closest to the pyre, their auras calm yet heavy as mountains. His mother and father stood slightly behind them with grave expressions as they silently received the condolences of the visiting families.

Behind his parents, two massive shapes lounged on the ground, a faint mist flowing around them with each breath. The Mistfang Direwolves. Even while resting, the beasts radiated the unmistakable pressure of second-grade spirit beasts. More than one woman had fainted in fright when they first looked at those two beasts.

Beside them hovered two similarly large, if not larger shapes. The Serpant and Scorpion Gu that he'd taken from the Gu Mistress of the Qin family. The two combat Gu now having been refined by his parents after some help from Zi Mo.

Further behind them stood two tall, unmoving figures wrapped in dark robes. The 2nd Grade Corpse Puppets. Each of them bonded to his uncle and his grand uncle.

He'd considered giving them to his parents as well, but after some deliberation, felt that doing that would give them too much power in the family and fill others with jealousy toward them. Hence, his final decision to distribute them like this.

Displaying corpse puppets would normally raise suspicion... but the Li clan had no reason to hide them. After all, they had not been the ones to create them. Those puppets had belonged to the Qin family. And now served as trophy taken from fallen enemies.

There was Qin Ling herself.

Now dressed in the robes of the Li clan, she stood beside Li Ming with quiet dignity. Having had an actual marriage a few days after the Royal member had left.

For now, her loyalty was likely still with the Qin family. But he believed that it would change as soon as she bore some children. After all, a mother cared for her children's wellbeing first and foremost. And everything else came second.

Finally, scattered among the older elders stood seven freshly advanced Foundation Establishment cultivators. Before his arrival, the Li family had only five such combatants. And now, they possessed nearly twenty.

The effect on the visiting families was obvious. And Li Yuan could see the awe and envy in their eyes. There was plenty of fear as well. Especially among the families that were once hostile to their families.

He had no doubt that his family would be receiving grand gifts and marriage offers from them in the near future. After all, at this point, even an alliance between the rest of the 9th Grade family in Redleaf Prefecture would not be enough to match Li family's strength.

He let out a breath and channeled some Qi into his ears, wanting to listen in on the hushed whispers in the crowd.

“The old Li may have died... but he must have died satisfied seeing his family grow like this.”

“Damn. If only family had an ancestor like this. This Li clan is truly blessed.”

“With this many Foundation Establishment cultivators, the rise of the Li clan is beyond doubt. We should do our utmost to hold onto the good impression they have of us.”

“Even Bai clan’s rise was not nearly this fast. Given enough time, they might become the strongest family in Redleaf Prefecture.”

“Hah! What does this strength matter? Did you hear what that royal member did when he arrived at the Li clan?”

“Shush! Don’t talk such foolishness here. If you want to die, then die alone. Why drag me into it?”

The two men immediately fell silent, glancing nervously toward the Li clan elders as if afraid their words might somehow carry across the courtyard.

Li Yuan almost smiled. It seems that while the matter of that Royal member’s actions had indeed leaked out, none wanted to talk about it for fear of reprisal from his family.

The funeral pyre cracked loudly as one of the charred beams collapsed inward, sending another plume of smoke curling into the sky.

Li Yuan let his gaze wander further across the gathering. And among the visiting families, one group immediately caught his attention. The Bai clan. The only other Eighth Grade family within this region.

Three representatives stood away from the rest of the crowd, wearing pale jade robes embroidered with white cloud patterns. They were talking with the Magister in hushed whisper, and there was a faint tension in their eyes that did not escape Li Yuan's notice.

And he knew why this was. After all, above each of them hung a Dark Grey or Pitch Black Halo. He had noticed it as soon as they arrived at the funeral, and had already taken a look at the vision.

The vision had been of a dark cavern hidden deep in hilly mountains north of the Redleaf Prefecture. An area filled with Spirit Beasts left behind in the last beast tide.

Veins of radiant ores glowed faintly within the stone walls, each fragment shimmer with condensed spiritual energy far purer than can be found even in Top-grade Spirit Stones.

He had realised what this place was as soon as he saw it in the vision.

An Aurora Spirit Stone mine.

An Aurora Spirit stone was a rare crystal capable of storing spiritual energy at nearly hundred times the density of Top-grade spirit stones. When refined properly, they turned into breakthrough treasures that increased a cultivator's chances of stepping into the Golden Core realm by nearly 20%.

Of course, a treasure of this magnitude did not lay unguarded. As at the heart of the cavern rested a massive spirit lake. And within that lake, lay a colossal serpent. Strong enough that its mere breath caused the cavern walls to tremble faintly.



An early-stage 3rd-grade spirit beast.

Li Yuan had no doubt that the Bai clan intended to mine those Aurora Spirit Stones in order refine a breakthrough treasure that could be used by their Peak Foundation Establishment cultivator to try and breakthrough to Golden Core realm.

Except, not only would they fail in that gambit, but they would also lose many of their Foundation Establishment cultivators to the 3rd Grade spirit beast. Plummeting directly from an 8th Grade family to a 9th grade family in the aftermath. Hence the dark grey or pitch black halos above their heads.

In truth, unlike the news that had been spread out to the world, the Bai clan was facing no internal succession disputes and had instead been frantically looking for ways to distract or draw out the 3rd Grade beast.

Judging by the Pitch Black halo that had now appeared over the Magistrate and showed him dying to that same Spirit Beast, he could only assume that the Bai clan also realised how dangerous this was and intended to use others as guinea pigs while they themselves harvested the Aurora Spirit stones.

Judging by their abrupt arrival at Li family, he could only assume they judged the Li family to be strong enough to serve as decent

enough cannon fodders and would soon approach his family with a similar deal they just gave to the Magistrate.

His eyes narrowed and he subtly sent a thread of Qi to his uncle along with a voice message.

“Refuse the Bai family any meeting. Make up some excuse about the family being busy. They’ve come with dark intentions. Don’t let anyone else from the family mingle with them either.”

His uncle’s eyes widened as he heard those words before he quickly regained his composure and looked in his general direction before giving a small nod.

He then turned back to look at the Bai family, and his eyes narrowed.

The Bai family had claimed earlier that they were unable to assist the Li family in clearing spirit beasts from the Ashen Ridge Mountains due to a succession crisis in their family.

He now knew that to be a lie, as they were clearly focused on the matter of the Aurora Spirit Stones and didn’t want to bother with anything else.

He did not mind this lie. After all, every family would care about their own matters first and foremost. But if the Bai family has truly come here with the intention of using his Li family as cannon fodders... then maybe it was time to remove them from their seat as the top force in the Redleaf Prefecture.

He would not even have to do anything. Just sit back and watch the Bai family destroy itself. Maybe he could even act as the fisherman to their snipe and clam. Taking those Aurora Stone mines for himself while they were busy distracting and fighting the 3rd Grade Spirit beast.

Or... he could just ask Zi Mo to take care of the Early stage 3rd Grade beast, and secure the entire mine for his clan.

With Zi Mo now having reached the Mid-stage of Golden Core. Dealing with an Early Stage 3rd Grade beast would not be impossible or even all that difficult. And should something go wrong, he would be able to use his Halo to learn about it in advance and stop the fight altogether.

Maybe he could let Zi Mo take half, or even more of the Aurora Spirit stones in exchange for her aid. After all, while she herself had no need of it, he had no doubt that there were more than a few cultivators in the Snow Peak and the entire Nine Peak Sect who would pay handsomely for that breakthrough treasure.

His attention slowly drifted away from the Bai clan and back toward the Li family elders. Now he would just have to ensure that none of them were stupid enough to fall for the Bai clan's trap.

After all, he very much doubted that the Bai clan would give up after before refused once. And they might go after the individual Foundation Establishment members of his family.

If the Bai clan members continued to try again and again, then he decided that he would step in and kick them out of the Li family himself. Maybe even use his grandfather to cause some troubles for the Bai family in the dark.

With that decision made, he leaned back in his seat and smiled. Once they'd secured this Aurora Spirit Mine, his grandfather would have +20% chance of breaking through. Add a few more treasures, and even without the Golden Core pill, his grandfather should not have a problem in breaking through.

Truly, things had been going well for him lately. The clan had grown stronger. Enemies had been eliminated, or will eliminate themselves. Not only has his grandfather's life been extended but he's also grown far more powerful than before. And his relationship with Zi Mo was progressing quite well.

If there was one thing that was not going well...

His gaze shifted to the side.

Rou Lin stood beside him, dressed in mourning robes like the rest of the clan. Her posture was straight, her face calm and composed as she watched the funeral rites in the distance. But she had not looked at him even once since the ceremony had begun.

Li Yuan suppressed a quiet sigh. They had barely spoken since he started his relationship with Zi Mo. Instead, a faint tension had become grow in between them that he didn't know how to solve.

Deciding that he couldn't let the matter wait any longer, he finally turned toward her. "Rou Lin," he said.

At the sound of his voice, she finally looked over and their eyes met.

"Hey... um... how have you been?" Li Yuan asked.

The words came out far more awkwardly than he intended. For someone who had faced life-and-death battles without flinching, speaking casually with Rou Lin suddenly felt far more difficult.

Rou Lin looked at him for a moment before answering. "I'm fine," she said, her tone polite but distant.

“Have I done something to upset you?” he asked.

Rou Lin held his gaze for a few seconds, her expression unreadable. Then finally, she spoke again.

“Did you seduce Elder Zi Mo because she’s a Golden Core cultivator?” She asked and Li Yuan blinked.

What? Where the heck did that accusation come from? For a moment he wondered if he had misheard her. “...What?”

“You heard me,” Rou Lin said quietly. “Everyone in the clan can see the way she looks at you. The way she stays close to you. It’s obvious something is happening between you two. So tell me. Did you seduce her because she’s a Golden Core cultivator?”

The accusation landed harder than Li Yuan expected. And he studied her face for a moment before realisation slowly dawned on him.

“I see. You think I seduced her... to make use of her strength.”

Rou Lin simply stared at him, not denying it. And that hurt him more than he thought it would.

Li Yuan let out a quiet breath, trying to keep himself calm and not let anger take hold of him.

“No,” he said calmly. “You’ve got that backwards.”

Rou Lin frowned. “What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t me who seduced her,” Li Yuan said. “It was the other way around.”

Rou Lin stared at him incredulously . “...You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth,” he replied with a shrug.

Her brows drew together. “Why would Elder Zi Mo stoop so low as to seduce a Qi Condensation outer sect disciple?”

The words were spoken without much thought. But the moment they left her mouth, Li Yuan felt something tighten in his chest.

He knew she hadn't meant it as an insult. But hearing it framed that way still left a faint sting. Especially when both of them knew very well that he was far more than that.

Once again, Li Yuan chose to be the bigger person and not let his anger get the best of him.

"Honestly? I don't know why she did it either." he said after a moment. "But I think it might be because of my sword intent."

Rou Lin's expression shifted slightly and Li Yuan continued.

"After all, it all started on the same day when I comprehended sword intent. That's when her attitude toward me truly changed."

Rou Lin's eyes widened. "...You're serious?"

Li Yuan simply shrugged. "That's the only explanation that makes sense to me."

Rou Lin fell silent and for several seconds she said nothing, her gaze drifting away as she processed his words.

Being someone from the Nine Peak Sect, she also must've known the rarity and value of Sword Intent. Just how high someone with a

sword intent could rise. Which is why her expression slowly changed as the suspicion in her eyes got replaced by guilt.

“...I see,” she said, and her shoulders slumped. “It seems I misjudged you, brother Yuan.”

Li Yuan said nothing even though he felt very tempted to lay it out on her. To shout and scream at her for doubting his character when without him, she would be dead by now.

But then he reminded himself that the girl was still a teenager. And teenagers have never been known for their emotional maturity. And as someone who's much older than her mentally, he decided to swallow his anger once again.

Still, some of his feelings must've leaked through his expression because Rou Lin could no longer meet his eyes and lowered her gaze.

“I'm sorry, I thought so low of you, brother Yuan. As you already know, my own experiences with men haven't exactly been pleasant.” She said, “My own father almost sold me for a few Foundation Establishment pills, while my senior brother almost... well, you know what he did. I...”

She choked up and tears started to gather in her eyes and he did his best to not feel any sympathy for her. If his long experience as a

man has taught him anything, then it's to be wary of the crocodile tears of women.

They could cry at any moment, on any occasion, if they believe it would give them an upper advantage in a social situation, or let them get out of something they'd done without facing any repercussions. Like right now.

So he held back on the urge to pull her in a hug and simply crossed his arms, watching her sob silently without any expression on his own face.

“After things like that... I suppose I started assuming the worst in men,” Rou Lin said quietly, sniffing as her eyes lifted to meet his again. “And when I saw Elder Zi Mo getting close to you... I assumed you were doing the same thing they would have done.”

She bowed her head slightly. “I'm sorry, brother Yuan. Please forgive me.”

Well, at least her apology seemed sincere. Though you couldn't truly tell with women.

Li Yuan studied her for a moment. Then he sighed as he reached out and lightly ruffled her hair, drawing a surprised look from her.

“Very well. I forgive you. But this would be the last time” he said. “The next time you doubt my character like this, I’ll break any relations with you, and we’ll go our separate ways. Understood?”

Rou Lin stared at him for a moment, then gave a small nod. “I understand, brother Yuan. I promise, there won’t be a next time.”

He nodded and for a while, neither of them spoke. But the earlier tension between them had been erased and now, Rou Lin did not maintain any distance from him, standing close enough that they almost touched.

The sounds of the funeral drifted around them as more and more of the guests came forward to murmur their condolences.

Finally, Rou Lin finally broke the silence. “...So.” She hesitated slightly, then continued. “Are you and Senior Sister Zi Mo... together now? As in, together-together?”

Li Yuan didn’t see any reason to lie and simply nodded. “Yes.”

Rou Lin nodded slowly. “I see.”

Another pause followed. Then she said something that made Li Yuan raise an eyebrow. “You know... powerful cultivators often take more than one wife.”

“That’s true.” He said, waiting for her to continue.

Rou Lin opened her mouth slightly. “I...” She paused and then closed it again, her gaze shifting away. For several seconds she seemed to struggle with something, opening and closing her mouth multiple times.

Li Yuan said nothing and simply watched her quietly.

Finally Rou Lin exhaled softly. “...Never mind.” She gave him a faint smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I should return to my cultivation.”

Li Yuan studied her for a moment, then nodded. “Alright.”

If Rou Lin wanted to be in a relationship with him, especially after the shit she just pulled, then she would have to approach him herself as he himself wasn’t in a generous mood right now.

Rou Lin turned and began walking away. Then, she paused. After a moment, she turned and came back, her fists clenched on her side, her eyes filled with resolution.

She reached him and leaned forward to place a soft kiss on his lips. When they separated, her cheeks had turned bright red and he raised an eyebrow, wondering if she'd forgotten that they were at a funeral.

“Thank you for, forgiving me, brother Yuan.” She said, a bright smile lighting up her face before she turned and left, her form quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Once she had left, he touched his lips and remembered the sensation he'd just felt.

‘I need to talk to Zi Mo about this.’ He thought and left the funeral as well.

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Li Yuan arrived at the central courtyard and noticed the servants at work cleaning the place, speaking in hushed tones about Li family's rise, the guests, and even his own unambiguous relationships with the Golden Core cultivator from the Nine Peak Sect.

But Li Yuan wasn't paying attention to any of that as he searched for Zi Mo. A Golden Core cultivator wasn't exactly easy to miss, yet no matter where he looked, he couldn't find even a trace of her presence.

He eventually stopped one of the servants passing by. “Have you seen Elder Zi Mo?”

The young servant bowed nervously and stammered. “No, Young Master. I have not.”

Li Yuan asked a few others but none of them knew where she’d gone either. That was strange as Zi Mo usually spent all the time she wasn’t out with him in this courtyard. Cultivating.

After a few more minutes of fruitless searching, Li Yuan finally exhaled softly. ‘Maybe she went out.’ He thought, and decided that he would simply speak with her tomorrow.

With that thought, he returned to his own courtyard. But the moment he opened the door to his room, he stopped. For the person he’d been looking for was here all along.

Zi Mo was sitting on his bed. Her arms were crossed tightly beneath her massive breasts, and she was glaring at him with



narrowed eyes.

The air in the room felt several degrees colder.

“Did you enjoy Rou Lin kissing you?” she asked flatly.

Li Yuan blinked. Then he walked forward as if nothing was wrong. “Yeah,” he said casually. “It was pretty nice.”

He stopped when he was close enough that he could see the faint tension in her expression. Looking down into her eyes, he asked softly, “Are you upset?”

Zi Mo held his gaze for a long moment, eyes face going through several emotions before she finally sighed.

“I... am,” she admitted quietly. “Even though I shouldn’t be.”

Li Yuan raised an eyebrow at those words. “What do you mean?”

Zi Mo leaned back slightly in his bed, her expression complicated.

“Rou Lin met you before I did,” she said slowly. “And I knew she was interested in you. But I seduced you anyway.” Her lips tightened

slightly. “As her senior sister, that was wrong of me. So I promised myself something.”

She paused, and Li Yuan silently waited for her continue.

“I promised myself that if she wanted to pursue you as well... I wouldn't oppose it,” Zi Mo continued. “I would support it, even.”

Li Yuan blinked and then a soft smile curled on his lips. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” she muttered. Then her brows furrowed again. “Except when I actually saw her kiss you... I felt... jealous.” For a moment she looked almost annoyed with herself. “I suppose I'm just not as generous as I thought I was.”

Li Yuan considered words for a moment. Then he asked calmly. “So what do you want to do?”

Zi Mo frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“If you don't want to see me with Rou Lin,” Li Yuan said simply, “then I'll refuse her. And that will be the end of it.”

Zi Mo stared at him. “You would do that? Truly?” She asked.

“Yes.” He said as he leaned down slightly and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “Having one happy wife is better than having several women who hate each other.”

Zi Mo looked up at him with an unreadable expression. “You’re too wise for your age,” she murmured. “Has anyone told you that?”

Li Yuan chuckled softly.

If only she knew.

But then Zi Mo’s expression slowly shifted again. Her gaze lowered slightly and a hesitant look took over her face, as if she unsure whether she should speak or not.

“What is it?” he asked, gently cupping her cheek.

Zi Mo hesitated, then she exhaled slowly. “I think... it’s time I was honest with you.”

Li Yuan watched her quietly, waiting for her to continue.

“By now you must suspect that I had an ulterior motive when I seduced you.”

“Yes,” he said simply.

Zi Mo nodded faintly. “I thought so.” She said and then paused. For a moment she seemed unsure how to begin. Then she took a deep breath and spoke up. “My master... Peak Mistress Wu Yuechan... didn’t send me on this outing without reason.”

“Oh?”

Zi Mo looked down at her hands. “The truth is, I possess something called the Stellar Yin Physique.”

Li Yuan’s eyebrows rose slightly though he wasn’t truly surprised by this news. “What does it do?” He asked curiously.

“It gives me a strong affinity with the stars. By studying their movements... I can glimpse fragments of a person’s fate, potential, future. Call it what you will.”

“And what did you see in me?” He asked, even more curious now.

“A golden dragon. Large enough that it stretched from horizon to horizon, with no end in sight.” Zi Mo said quietly. “I have... never seen anything like this before. In the entire Nin Peak Sect, and even in the other major sects, none have potential reaching even close to yours.”

The room grew quiet as he nodded, not really surprised by any of this. Though the fact that her fate reading skill worked on him was worrying. Because it meant that others with a similar power could also read his fate or fortune. And that would be troublesome, as not all who does so would be beautiful waifus whom he could seduce into his bed.

“That’s why I approached you,” Zi Mo admitted quietly. “That’s why I seduced you. I wanted to bind my future to yours.”

After saying that, Zi Mo lowered her gaze, fiddling with her fingers nervously. “If knowing that makes you uncomfortable... I understand.” She said, looking almost calm and accepting despite the bobbing of her throat saying otherwise. “If you no longer want me... I’ll accept it.”

Li Yuan was silent for a few seconds. Then he sighed softly. “Mah. You’re worry too much for no reason. I’m not an idiot, or an impulsive person. I knew you had motives from the start.” He said. “So when I decided to get together with you, I made a promise to myself.”

Zi Mo blinked slightly and he continued.

“I promised myself that as long as those motives weren’t something ridiculous, like sacrificing me to gain my power, I wouldn’t hold your motives against you.”

Zi Mo looked up, her eyes lighting up in hope and Li Yuan smiled faintly. “Because let’s be honest with each other. It’s not like I’ve been without my own motives.” He said. “If you weren’t so beautiful, or as powerful as you are... I would have rejected you the moment you started seducing me.”

Zi Mo’s eyes widened slightly and Li Yuan chuckled. “Poets love talking about pure love and all that crap. But in reality, relationships are transactions. If the exchange is unfair to one side... the relationship eventually collapses.” He gently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “So don’t feel guilty. The way I see it, you did nothing wrong. Well, aside from using your Yin Qi to seduce me that first time around.”

Zi Mo stared at him for a moment. Then she slowly shook her head and chuckled. “I never thought of it that way. But... I think you’re right.”

A small smile appeared on her lips as she stood. Before Li Yuan could react, she stepped forward and kissed him. Before she could respond, she had already pulled away, and there was a new light in her eyes.

“You’re right,” she said softly. “I didn’t do anything wrong. But, it’s also a fact that I have been unfair to you.” Her fingers lightly traced the front of his robe, a brief hesitation crossing her face before she firmed up her will. “And I want to make up for it.”

Li Yuan tilted his head slightly. “How?”

Zi Mo hesitated for only a moment. Then she spoke quietly “Most Yin Physiques have a unique property. If the woman sleeps with a man... part or all of that physique can be transferred to him.”

Li Yuan nodded, already aware of this. Though the fact that she was bringing this up now could only mean not thing.

His eyes narrowed slightly. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes.” She said, her voice steady now. “My Stellar Yin Physique. I want you to take it.”



Without another word, Zi Mo loosened the ties of her robe. The fabric slipped from her shoulders and fell softly to the floor, leaving her completely naked in front of him

His eyes widened as all his blood rushed south, turning him steel hard. His head felt light as he took in the beauty in front of him, and it took all his willpower to not jump at her right then and there.

Zi Mo stepped closer until their bodies nearly touched. She took his hand in her own and lifted it before pressing it against her soft, heavy breasts, making his thumb trace her perky nipple.

Then, Zi Mo she looked up into his eyes and whispered softly.
“Take me, Li Yuan.”

And the dam of his self-restraint finally broke.