

Interlude – Viper VI

The great heat of advancement washed over him, burning through his conduits, cleansing his core, improving and expanding it. His Qi almost sang to him as it became something more. And then, the transformation was done, and he had reached a new Realm. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. The choice of the perk filled his eyes, but he didn't dwell on it too long. He already knew what he wanted to choose. He made his choice and felt additional changes take place in his body.

Once that was done, he allowed himself a moment to gather his bearings. The room he was sitting in was covered with formations, and illuminated only on its edges, where the cages hung from the ceiling. The light was trapped there, and so the area he was sitting in was completely devoid of it. It made for a strange effect, almost as if the light was barred from him, yet he could still see it. The formations that created the effect were beyond his understanding, but their purpose was clear. The middle of the room was to be kept from the influence of as much of other Essences as possible.

The great Vipers coiled in their slumber, the formations keeping them asleep as they siphoned Essence from them and funneled it into the middle of the room where he sat. He still couldn't believe his luck, once, just seeing this place, cycling in it for a day, would've been beyond his wildest dreams. Now, he had spent so much of his time inside of it, that the room haunted his dreams. It had been so long since he started on this journey, since he made his decision and turned away from everything that he knew. Finally, he had achieved what he set out to do, he had proven everyone wrong. Yet, the victory tasted like ash in his mouth, because his father was dead. He would never know, never see that he had been wrong.

He heard the doors behind him open, and someone step inside.

“Well done, my boy,” the man said.

He stood up, and turned around then walked out of the center of the room and into the light to stand before the man. He bowed deeply to him. “Gratitude, great-uncle, none of this would've been possible without your guidance.”

His great-uncle laughed. “None of that Eari, my boy. It is your own talent that had brought you this far, I only helped a little.”

Eari Ji Van straightened and met his great-uncle’s eyes. He had nothing but respect and gratitude for him. He had taken Eari in, when he had been nothing but a lowly Monarch that had thrown himself at his feet and asked for scraps. It had taken all the courage for Eari to do so, to ask for help from someone else. But he had been too impassioned to do anything else. He wanted to show his father that his insistence on slowing him down was just his own failing, that Eari could be so much greater than he was, if only he had been given the chance.

He remembered their last argument, the way that it spiraled out of control and how Eari had lost his temper. He had said hurtful things to his father, and his father had said the same in return. They had not parted on the best of terms. Eari had needed to get away, and so he went to his grandparents, a pretense, even then he had known what he wanted to do. He sent messages back to his father, tried to fix with letters what he couldn’t with words. In the end they never quite made things right. And now they never would.

His father had died, at the hands of the Emberhorn, a servant to the sect that conquered his. It made Eari ashamed to even think about, to know that his father wasn’t strong enough to protect his own sect, that he had bent a knee to another. It was the way of the sects, but he had never thought that it would happen to his father. His death hurt more for the fact that Eari had warned his father repeatedly that the Emberhorn was not someone to be trusted.

He had received a message from the leaders of the new sect, a detailed account of his father’s death. It spoke of his bravery, of his feats and prowess in combat. Every word that Eari read made him angrier. Angry at his father for dying, angry at the way that they had parted, angry at everything. So he did the only thing that he could, and he threw himself into his training, into pushing himself to advance.

“So,” his great-uncle said. “How does the Immortal Realm feel?”

Eari closed his eyes and reached out to his core. He had achieved his father's dream, and yet the only thing he could feel was anger that he couldn't show it to him.

"I understand," his great-uncle placed a hand on his shoulder. His expression softened as he saw something in Eari's face. "Your father would've been proud of you."

Eari tried hard not to wince, he didn't like that he was so easily seen through. But then again, his great-uncle was far more capable and insightful than Eari anyone that he had ever met.

Emar Ji Van was... He was the most impressive person that Eari knew. So much more than anything he had ever imagined. He had known him since he was a child, but before he sought him out, his great-uncle had been just the head of his family. The ruler of the Onyx Fang Sect to whom his father sect was subordinate. Eari had expected his great-uncle to send people to conquer this new sect, the Twilight Melody Sect, but he had been surprised when he hadn't. The new sect had no obligation toward the Onyx Fang Sect, yet they had continued to trade in the core and with the Onyx Fang Sect, at the same rates. Not that there was much need for them to change that. And his great-uncle hadn't minded the fact that the new sect increased the paltry amounts that his father's sect had been sending. Even without the tribute, the Onyx Fang Sect had profited. Eari's own feelings on the matter had been complicated. He felt ashamed that his father had lost, but glad that he was alive. Now, he was regretful that he hadn't sent a message as soon as he heard. He had missed his chance to speak with his father. In the end, his father had lived as a warrior of a sect, and had died as one. His death had been avenged by his Sect Head, there wasn't anything left for Eari to do.

When Eari asked his great-uncle why he hadn't tried to conquer the sect back, he just shrugged and said that it would be a waste of time. The Onyx Fang Sect didn't need a small frontier sect, and there was no point in wasting people on the effort. The fact that Eari's father, Emar Ji Van's nephew had accepted the new rule made things more complicated. It meant that there was no need for retribution.

The more Eari learned of his great-uncle, the more impressed he became. Before he came here, his great-uncle was a distant figure. The head

of the main family, a relative that Eari had seen a handful of times but had never really interacted with. What he knew were the stories that the people in the sect whispered. That he was powerful, enough that perhaps he should bear the title of a High Ranker. That he had been trained by Spear of Sorrow herself.

Those stories were amusing to him now, after years of being mentored by his great-uncle and learning the truth. It never ceased to amaze him just how much rumors twisted the truth. His uncle was powerful, far more than anyone realized. As powerful as High Rankers for sure, but then again, Eari knew now that being a High Ranker wasn't a real measure of power. It was a popularity contest, a ranking made by others based on feats that had been witnessed. Based on rumors and witness accounts. Emar Ji Van was most certainly as powerful as a High Ranker, he just didn't demonstrate his power freely.

He served the Zenshuen Sect, and yes, he had served under the Spear of Sorrow in sect wars, had even learned from her. But his great-uncle insisted that he had never really been her student, more something like a peer, a rival once. They had been trained together in the Zenshuen Sect. It had surprised Eari to learn that the Spear of Sorrow was close in age to his great-uncle. It made the stories about her all that more impressive. His great-uncle did admit however that she had left him far behind in the terms of power.

It was the greatest privilege of Eari's life that he had been accepted as his great-uncle's student. He had known of his father's dislike of his uncle, he even understood some of it. But the truth was so much different than the rumors. Eari had seen first hand just how his uncle ran his sect. He did require contracts, that was true, Eari himself had accepted one. And yet, the sect did so much. They kept entire territories safe for every person that lived within it. There were no free monsters like there were in the frontier, everyone had a place. A contract was a small price to pay for stability.

And his great-uncle was a great man. He had clawed his way through the Zenshuen ranks, had gained enough power to be given the rights to form his own sect. He was an inspiration.

"I... It feels strange," Eari said as he finally managed to gather himself.

“That is what immortality feels like,” his great-uncle smiled at him.

“I can’t even imagine that,” Eari said slowly.

“You will adjust,” Emari Ji Van said. “Now, I hope that you don’t think that this means you can slack off. Your real training starts now.”

“Are you sure great-uncle?” Eari asked. “I don’t think that I could really make a good showing even if I continued training daily.”

The man smiled at him. “We’ve spent years building up your basics, teaching you how to fight, how to use your power better. How to use it smarter. That is all there is to a fight in the end. Greater power might win more often, but the smaller the gap between you, the more your skill will shine through. Do not concern yourself with results.”

“There will be people there who are far older than me,” Eari argued again.

His great-uncle shook snorted. “Pampered idiots who can barely handle their power, or heirs that have their power handed to them. Listen to me Eari, you will be weaker and younger than probably most, but power is not something that comes just with age. Talent, mastery of your power, your mind, these things are far more important. Trust me when I say this; reach the semi-finals, make an impression, and you will gain greater power still.”

Eari took in a deep breath, then nodded his head. Ever since his great-uncle had seen the speed at which Eari learned, how fast he could advance, and how pushing himself made him attain his own inspiration, the man had put all of his efforts in training Eari himself.

It went beyond anything that Eari had expected when he had come to him. At most, he had expected to be given a place in the Onyx Fang Sect, perhaps some resources to help him along, and the freedom to do what he wanted. Instead, he had gotten a mentor who spent every day with him, for years now. Eari didn’t quite understand why his great-uncle was doing this, and the man never quite gave him an answer. Sometimes it was because Eari was family, others because not training him would’ve been a waste. Regardless, Eari had taken everything that the older man had to offer. He knew that private instructions, a mentorship under someone as powerful as High Rankers was priceless.

Then his great-uncle had told him that he intends to have Eari enter the Tournament, and in the High Division. Eari had always intended to attend, to join the Mid Division, and prove himself. At first Eari had thought that his great-uncle had been joking, but the more time passed, the more his great-uncle increased the tempo of his training.

Now, Eari had finally reached the point that his great-uncle had been pushing him for so long, the ninth tier of power. And Eari wondered if perhaps this was a good time to try and get more answers.

“Why are you insisting on me joining now? Some people train for decades before deciding to participate, especially in this category.”

Emar Ji Van opened his mouth, then closed it. He almost seemed to think about it, and then he nodded to himself and spoke. “Why do you think that my sect has survived for so long? That we haven’t been conquered by another? A part of that is my own power, and the power that the name Zenshuen brings. But there are sects and people out there that are powerful enough to attempt it. They don’t, because aside from myself, I have many powerful warriors serving me. To conquer us would take a lot of planning and resources, too much for anyone to really consider it. The reason why I want you strong is in part to keep my sect strong. You are my family, adopted into the main branch, your power is my power. That reason should be enough, but,” he paused, and his slit, viper eyes, narrowed at him. “There is more, of course. I want you to attend for many reasons. One of them is that the experience itself will be priceless, even if you do not qualify and lose your first match. To even stand on the field with so many other warriors will teach you something that words alone cannot. They will frame you in the reference to others on your level. You will learn just how strong you are, and perhaps glimpse how strong you can become.”

His great-uncle’s eyes kept Eari frozen with their intensity. He seemed to be trying to make a decision, and then he spoke. “My boy,” he started softly. “You are very talented, more so than most that I had the privilege to train. No, perhaps you are the most talented one of my students. You have a great drive, and you have a knack for figuring out your own inspiration. I have no doubt that the higher Realms will not be barred from you.”

Eari perked up at that, it was high praise. For most, Immortal Realm was a dream. To have achieved this much, already put him ahead of nearly everyone else. He could become respected, powerful and known across the Infinite Realm. And yet his mentor believed that he could reach higher still.

Before Eari could say anything, his great-uncle spoke again.

“But as much talent as you have for Cultivation, you lack something else,” Emar Ji Van’s voice stabbed through Eari. “You are missing a... a drive, an instinct deep inside that defines you. An *Ideal* that would shape your very being into something more, something greater.”

Eari frowned. He did not enjoy the feeling that his great-uncle’s words elicited inside of him. “I don’t understand.”

Emar Ji Van sighed. “Your life has been... easier than most, but it is fire and death that shapes such strong inner ideals that they can twist one’s very being. It is not something that can be explained, and I had tried to stoke the fire of it inside of you. And I have failed. It is not your fault, I am a poor teacher in this regard. But, there are ways around this problem. What I want you to achieve can be done in two ways, one from within and the other from without. This is why I want you to attend, because if you manage to captivate the minds of the audience, you will be given an ideal. I have prepared you as much as I can, shaped you into a warrior of unique presence. I’ve done so in hope that the ideal you gain will be closely related to how you appear to others.”

Eari blinked, he was still somewhat confused, but he trusted his mentor. He hadn’t steered him astray yet, and he owed him everything.

“I welcome your guidance, great-uncle,” Eari bowed again.

“Come, my boy. Let’s test out your new power. There is much to be learned about controlling the power of an immortal, many secrets for you to learn,” his great-uncle said as he put his hand around his shoulder and guided him out of the room.

Eari wasn’t sure what this new training would entail, but he was eager to find out. There was much to be done before the tournament came, and so little time to do it. He could no longer fix things with his father, couldn’t show him what he achieved. But he could show it to the world. And perhaps that

would be enough to help with his regret, perhaps he could honor his father by reaching for heights that he hadn't even dreamed of.