

Daily life 31

Chapter 31 The Ripple Effect From The Eighth Zone

The clash between the two false kings only grew more volatile by the second with its scale of destruction exceeding the half-mile radius it had started with. The ground violently shook with tremors spreading vastly around the forest with trees and everything in between being eviscerated to dust.

The spirit beasts from earlier had retreated even further with trembling fear as they looked back at the fight that was still ongoing. Li Lun and Liao Ying couldn't be seen but what was clear as day for miles was a huge black mass clashing with an equally huge green mass with explosions and destruction following everywhere they went. The battlefield kept changing in the time it took to blink. Nowhere seemed safe as the battle would crisscross a few miles within seconds. Spirit beasts who were slow, those too curious, or those with the worst luck ended up getting caught up in the battle. Their deaths were swift and painful. A loud yell was heard from an earth claw bear that was in deep hibernation in its cave. It was at the fifth stage of core formation realm and was known for its sturdy defense. However, the fight between Li Lun and Liao Ying had shifted towards its cave and before it even had a chance to put forth its defense it was blown to bits leaving behind a record of the shortest yet loudest yell.

A mass exodus soon started spreading out throughout the eighth zone as a result of the fight. Spirit beasts within a 50-mile radius could feel the tremendous shockwaves and pressure from the battle between the two false kings. None of them had any hesitation as they all started fleeing not caring about anything else other than ditching this powder keg with their lives and limbs intact.

They all fled in different directions but most fled towards the lower zones. This in turn caused mass hysteria in those zones as the creatures there were weaker and were surprised to see all these core formation big shots invading their turf. They did the prudent and most respectable thing they could do at that moment which was to give up their own homes and help welcome the visitors while they graciously went to find accommodation elsewhere most likely in the final zone, zone ten. What happened in zone nine repeated itself in zone ten except those in zone ten had no other zone to go to.

This movement resulted in what later came to be known as the zone shuffle migration. The core formation spirit beasts who made their way to the ninth zone waited for a long while to move back to the eighth zone while some decided to permanently settle in the ninth zone out of fear of what they had seen or experienced in the fight of the two false kings. This led to a sudden increase in the number of core formation beasts there and the foundation level spirit beasts from zone nine took up permanent residence in zone ten. This added further dreadfulness and eeriness to the green fog region as the uninformed speculators assumed it was the beasts in those zones that had massive leaps in cultivation. This train of thought led to further speculation that there must be a powerful treasure at play which then drew droves of human cultivators to zone nine and ten in search of the treasure. The spirit beasts and those humans clashed making the area more volatile than normal for a treasure that didn't exist.

However, all these happened years later and become a black mark for the cultivators of the southern continent once it spread that thousands of cultivators had died for a treasure that wasn't even there.

The battle between Li Lun and Liao Ying was still ongoing with no signs of stopping soon as the scale only grew larger. The human sects in the area had to burn spirit stones to power their sect formation arrays once they detected the violent qi fluctuations of the fight. Some that had weak illusory arrays had their locations exposed which was a death sentence to them in a place filled with spirit beasts.

This was the day that changed the eighth zone forever. What had been a norm for centuries had been upended with a new era being ushered in with a reshuffling of hierarchy and powers all from the fight of two false kings. On this day one or two kings would fall it was uncertain which but one thing was certain, at the end of the fight the eighth zone would never be the same. Whether that was a good thing or bad only time would tell for the residents of the area.

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A couple of miles northeast of the green fog swamp sect a dragonfly could be seen bursting through the forest with tremendous speed. There was a human standing atop the dragonfly with a long sword drawn. This was Haishi and Feng Xin. Haishi deftly moved around the forest with speed and finesse. She had improved control of all her body thanks to the lotus dew she drank which increased her maneuverability as she moved each of her four wings in independent directions with such ease that she didn't have earlier.

It was at this moment that a sticky grey tongue rushed towards her with speed aiming to strike her down. The moment the tongue was a few inches away from Haishi it was sliced cleanly in half as the strike still full of momentum slashed at the rest of the body that was neatly camouflaged in a nearby tree. A geyser of blood sprayed out as the creature was soon revealed once it fell on the floor.

The attacker was a large green chameleon with silver-like needles spread out through its whole back down its tail. It lay dead on the ground, body split apart with its eyes wide open with a look that said it had no idea that it was dead. Feng Xin didn't bother to collect it as Haishi did as she was ordered before, not to stop for a thing.

"This was the eighth one already, don't these spirit beasts learn? I can't release my full pressure here to avoid attracting some palace stage beast but this is getting tiring. Haishi you need to pick up the pace a little more," Feng Xin gently said as he carefully monitored his surroundings.

Haishi obeyed the instructions as she pushed herself even further. The wings were moving so fast that one would think they were absent if they ignored the powerful wind gales produced by them. Spirit qi from all over was constantly flooding her body from all over. The effects from the primal lotus dew were in full effect at the moment with qi being effortlessly drawn towards Haishi's body. Every qi she expended was replaced within seconds later. This helped her burn wantonly through her qi without fear of her internal reserves running out.

At the rate she was pushing herself Haishi's body from before would have been injured from the strain even before she was halfway through the journey. However, the bonus effect of refining the dew had greatly strengthened and altered her body. Her body could handle the intense speed and her meridians were strong and ductile enough to handle the huge volume of qi that was flooding and coursing through her body especially the meridians attached to her wings made them sturdier than before.

Haishi had an exhilarated almost euphoric look at the moment as she burst through the forest with speed she never knew she had. It felt like some part of her had been unleashed after being shackled for a long time. All her life Haishi had always been reserved, watching and calculating her every step as she hid in her mirage. This was the first time in her whole life that she acted without caution as she flew with reckless abandon. It was a new experience for her that left her heart racing wildly. She didn't have to worry about being attacked as there was a powerful fiend above who would take care of it. All she had to do was be carefree and fly to her heart's content and fly she did. The more she lost herself in her flying the more she felt certain concepts tugging at her. At first, they were almost opaque but with time the longer she pushed herself the clearer those concepts became. She kept having the same feeling she had in the river, moving with the flow instead of against it. Her movements became even nimbler than before.

Feng Xin noticed her situation as he smiled in admiration. Haishi's movements had become smoother and more efficient. Before she was a brute forcing her speed using the copious qi flowing in her but currently she was integrating the qi to achieve the best results with minimal effort. Her speed had increased by several notches. Feng Xin nodded in satisfaction as this meant they'd reach the location of the swallow birds earlier than he had expected. This would help reduce the number of variables he would have to deal with. Within ten minutes or less they would be close to the edge of the green fog region and closing in on the rogues from the green fog swamp sect.

Chapter 32 Brace Yourself

Haishi continued on with her flying getting better by the minute. The air around her seemed to be carrying her and guiding her toward the path of least resistance. There was a wind current that moved like a river wherever she flew. Feng Xin was carefully monitoring their surroundings to prevent any accident from interrupting her in her current state. The further along one moved in the cultivation realms the less talent played a part and it became more on your ability of comprehension. Unlike

epiphany which is a burst of inspiration. Comprehension is built on experience and even if one was interrupted in the middle of it, one can still enter it during silent meditation.

Haishi's current state was influenced by the time she spent as a rock in the primal lots dew river. Inside that river, she felt like she had lived in it for years moving along with the current when in the real world only a few minutes had passed by. However, her years-long experience in the illusion was very real to her and had planted certain seeds in her that needed just a sudden catalyst to be triggered. Her pushing past her limits in flying and becoming unbridled like the wind was exactly that trigger. This was a boon for Haishi as what she comprehended now would form the pathway leading towards the later stages of core formation realm.

Feng Xin was busy monitoring the surroundings before he frowned as he noticed Haishi was borrowing the momentum from her comprehension and the qi that was flooding into her to break through the gates leading to the 5th stage of core formation realm.

"She's being too hasty," Feng Xin silently thought to himself

"Haishi don't be in a hurry to break through to the 5th stage just yet. Use the opportunity you have now to reinforce and solidify your foundations. The sturdier it is now the further and easier your road will be ahead. This will also help you be stronger in a fight against those in the same realm as you." Feng Xin gently advised as he placed his palm above her head and used some of his qi to calm Haishi's excited qi.

Haishi didn't stop the invading qi even though it's very dangerous for a cultivator to let foreign qi run around in their body. Feng Xin's qi had helped her calm down as she quickly halted her attempt to breakthrough without a second thought. She may not trust Feng Xin yet and was more terrified of him than anything but she believed in his insight. She had seen and experienced how Feng Xin had massacred spirit beasts that were at the same level or stronger than her as if they were nothing. That display of power left a clear impression on her. She both feared and envied it. So when Feng Xin offered his suggestion on what she should do she didn't hesitate and took it as a creed hoping that someday she'd have a sliver of the ability she saw from him.

Haishi was still maintaining her speed despite the brief interlude with Feng Xin. Five minutes passed by and they were close to zone ten. The spirit beasts had stopped attacking as most of the spirit beasts there were in the early stages of foundation realm or at the qi refinement realm. Haishi's core formation pressure was enough to scare a whole lot of them away and leave some petrified for life. The distance to the edge of the green fog region kept shrinking by the minute with little to no external interference.

The green cloud miles ahead became visible as the green fog thinned out the closer they were out of the green fog region

"Haishi you see that area with the small green cloud that's the destination I need you to fly to." Feng Xin said as he pointed to the fist-sized dot in the clouds. With their eyesight as core formation experts, it was easy to spot the cloud especially Haishi with her compound eyes filled with over a thousand lenses. Years of living in the green fog region had made her eyesight keener. She swiftly flew in that direction drawing closer to the exit of the green fog region.

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The fight between the tupelo tree and the Ao Yin was still heated and intense. One tried to corrode the other while the other tried to purify it. However, things were not looking too good for the Tupelo tree as it had to fight against Ao Yin and also maintain the barrier to protect Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen from the aftermath of its fight. Both these elders had pained expressions filled with guilt and frustration at their weakness. If things stood as they were it was only a matter of time before the Tupelo tree lost. It would lose more leaves the longer the fight progressed but it had no way of ending the fight not with it supporting the both of them.

Peng Zhen couldn't help but look upwards at the sky which was filled with the green cloud. His instincts kept screaming at him that something terrifying was about to fall. If it was any other time he would have dreaded but at this moment that brewing disaster felt like a saving grace. If it fell the Ao Yin would definitely suffer the brunt of it giving them and the Tupelo tree a chance to survive. Dong Yanlin was still in a petrified state however some color had started returning to his limbs and parts of his face. Peng Zhen had been monitoring his situation ever since the barrier was put up. From his experience with the person, he had a feeling Dong Yanlin wouldn't risk his life without living a slim chance of a way out. His assumption was proved right as Dong Yanlin seemed to be regaining vitality albeit at a slow pace. If he woke up things would get dicier than they already were.

Just as Peng Zhen was debating how he would convince the Tupelo tree to let him out of the barrier and deal with Dong Yanlin his earlier wishes were answered. A green light in the shape of an arrow flashed so fast that even Peng Zhen could barely catch a glimpse of it. The green-like arrow was targeting the area Ao Yin was. Before Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen could register what it was there was a blinding explosion the moment it clashed with the Ao Yin. The Ao Yin roared defiantly but the green light in the shape of an arrow decimated part of its silhouette as it struck the flesh-like finger where the bone saber was with a force so high that it threatened to blow apart the Tupelo's tree barrier. The barrier that was sturdy before was now filled with cracks all over. The tupelo tree grew even brighter than before as more leaves fell. The barrier that was moments away from being blown apart was rapidly mended soon after.

After the dust settled from the collision both Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen got a clear look at what the green-like arrow was. It turned out it was a green feather and it had penetrated a small part of the bone saber before it disappeared into a small gust of wind. Just as Peng Zhen was about to make sense of what he saw up above him the green cloud cleared out all of a sudden but in its place was a gigantic swallow the size of an elephant. It was coldly gazing at Ao Yin as it gently floated with its wings. It screeched so loudly that Peng Zhen felt his eardrums quake. He quickly used some of his qi to dampen his ears and reduce the sounds coming in. The screech didn't last for long as it was silent once more after a few seconds.

But this made the atmosphere even eerier. As Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen looked up once more they saw a green light being charged from the mouth of the swallow. The levels of energy were multiple levels higher than the previous feather attack.

"GUI WE NEED TO HURRY TOWARDS THE CENTER OF THE TREE!!! Tupelo you need to shrink the barrier to just within a few meters of you or we won't survive the attack that's to come." Peng Zhen yelled as he rushed towards the tupelo tree. In a few seconds, they were both beneath the tree which shrunk the barrier and concentrated it to the tiny spot they were together.

Without even speaking as if in tacit understanding both Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen started driving all their qi in the Tupelo tree without reservation. That barrier was the only thing that could protect them. The barrier grew brighter as the tupelo tree stacked five more on top of the current one. It lost over two hundred leaves the moment the barriers all went up.

"IT'S COMING GUI BRACE YOURSELF!!"

The swallow's charged attack finally fell like a pillar of green light except the light was filled with millions of tiny squalls compressed together. The attack struck the Ao Yin that was roaring defiantly to the skies as it struck upwards with a ferocious punch.

BOOM

A huge green mushroom explosion filled the area which drowned out even the Ao Yin's yell. The wave spread beyond the collision point as it spread like an ocean drowning out a shoreline. The range of the explosion ran for more than a mile with the earth being sliced and diced into dust with Ao Yin, the

tupelo tree, and the rest being blanketed in the sandstorm that was being formed concurrently with the destruction.

Chapter 33 How Is This A Reconnaissance Spell?

The explosive impact of the attack from the green swallow lasted for over five minutes before it started fizzing out. Soon the tremors and the widespread destruction halted leaving a cloud full of dust in the whole area from the center of the attack to half a mile radius with its height almost reaching the clouds.

It took a while longer before the dust finally settled revealing a 700-meter-wide crater that was over 200 meters deep with it being deeper in the area where the Tupelo tree and the Ao Yin were. The Ao Yin's silhouette had disappeared and what was left behind was the bone saber in its original pure white form however it seemed to have an impure and coarse shade of white, unlike the earlier refined and smooth white. There was a small indentation where the green feather had struck it.

Ahead of the bone saber was a tiny golden barrier that was flickering close to dimming out and surrounded by cracks all over. By its state, a tiny breeze would likely break it apart. As if on cue a small gust of wind passed by and with it came the last straw that broke the barrier that shattered into tiny motes of light that soon faded out of existence revealing an almost withered tree and two old men who barely supported themselves using the bark of the tree.

The Tupelo tree was still standing tall however it had shed most of its leaves being left with only less than 200 and its earlier bright lustre had disappeared. All that was left behind was a normal-looking tupelo tree that had a white smooth bark. Its leaves were no longer alternating among the three colors; red, orange, and green. The leaves were only green in color with some of them having patches of brown like dried leaves. As for Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen they looked so spent that they could barely support themselves with the bark of the tree. Their arms were hanging loosely as they used their shoulders to keep themselves standing but that soon gave in as they both dropped to the floor like logs. Their skins were pale white, robes soaked with sweat and they had labored breathing, all clear signs of qi drain.

When the attack fell the first three barriers were shattered in an instant leaving only three remaining. The fourth fell seconds later with the fifth being layered with numerous cracks. It was then Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen used every means they had to pour all the qi they had as fast as they could into the Tupelo tree. Those means included some forbidden techniques that had a steep price such as using the user's lifespan in exchange for a short burst of qi. None of them were worried about the consequences because if they did nothing they were all but guaranteed to fall and the Tupelo tree along with them. They wanted to avoid the latter from happening at all costs even at the expense of their lives. Their efforts though minuscule in the larger scheme of things paid off. Two peak foundation establishment experts could provide very little help against an attack that was touching on the precipice of a palace realm attacker. But thanks to that drop in the bucket from the two the tupelo tree didn't have to sacrifice all its leaves and the reserve energy along with it to stop the attack from the green swallow.

Despite the result, Peng Zhen couldn't help but show a regretful; look as he caught a glimpse of the state the tree was in when he was struggling to move his head. Before all this debacle, the tupelo tree was at a critical juncture in its evolution. During that period it would be in a hibernated state. The more energy it had, the greater its chances of making it through to the other side. But currently, it seemed to only have a quarter of its original reserve. Peng Zhen knew there was a chance the Tupelo tree might not wake up once it went under. The situation could not be avoided as once the evolutionary state was triggered it could not be undone, everything will have to follow the set path.

Peng Zhen craned his neck to look upwards to the sky and spotted the culprit behind the terrifying attack that almost blew them apart, the green swallow. It was silently maintaining its altitude as it stared down below with a deadpan expression. Peng Zhen couldn't help but sigh at his own weakness as he thought to himself just someone's technique was capable of pushing them this bad what if the owner of that technique was here? He shook his head to clear himself of such discouraging thoughts as he focused on what he was currently most concerned about. This was Dong Yanlin's state. He used whatever energy he had left to scan the area where he last saw him only to spot the bone saber lying horizontally on the ground that was now mostly sand and other areas had streams of water puncturing through from below. Peng Zhen didn't stop as he scanned all around before he managed to spot a small object atop one of the sand pits. That object had green wavy cloak energy surrounding it. Peng Zhen stared at it for a while in disbelief that the object survived and by the looks of it unscathed too.

"Is that...? It can't be? Can it? Such a thing was able to survive the attack and remain unscathed. I knew it was special since it was able to store the Tupelo tree but I can't believe Dong Yanlin's leopard storage pouch had such defensive capabilities. Its rank may even be higher than that bone saber. How does Dong Yanlin have these many treasures? is he some elder's kid from the blood ghost hands?" Peng Zhen couldn't but worry however beyond that was a relief as the sect treasures they had pilfered were all safe.

"Gui, Gui the treasures are safe. I told you I had the best luck." Peng Zhen smugly said in a dried parched voice. Gui Bingwen who lay just next to him could only groan like an old geezer as his body was too weak at the moment to even move or make a sound.

"It's good they are s...a...f....e," Peng Zhen as he slowly passed out giving in to the drowsiness that had been overwhelming him.

Moments later a dragonfly could be seen making its way toward the crater as someone quickly jumped from it and gently landed on the crater below.

"Luckily we made it in time but what is with this level of destruction? Did Yang Qing tweak the technique? What reconnaissance cultivation spell has a destructive might of this level? I knew something was off when he was all too enthusiastic to help me craft more talismans and the cheeky smile he had on the whole time. He may have done something to the rest too, that sleazy judge." Feng Xin shook his head and didn't bother thinking too much about it as he made his way toward the bone saber. He was surprised to see something survive the destruction on this level. The attack was just a few inches shy of what a palace realm expert is capable of unleashing. For an object to survive such an attack it had to be a monarch-level weapon whose power level was equivalent to a palace realm expert. So the bone saber piqued his interest.

As Feng Xin was scrutinizing the bone saber the green swallow swiftly made its way toward him. Feng Xin had an object with Yang Qing's qi signature which served as a beacon and a controller for the green swallow. Cultivation techniques whose effects produce a sentient spell when not cast by the owner and instead via talismans, the caster needs to have an object with the qi signature of the owner of the spell to prevent mishaps.

Feng Xin ignored the swallow as he was deeply engrossed with the bone saber. He used a sliver of his spiritual sense to investigate its inner structure. However the moment his sense penetrated the saber an accident happened. He seemed to have triggered something as he felt his vision change as he was sucked into a dark world filled with the putrid smell of death, bloodlust, and torture. A humungous bull-like creature appeared roaring loudly as it charged toward Feng Xin. Feng Xin recognized the creature as the Ao Yin in an instant as he hurriedly severed his spiritual sense from the saber. The roar shook his head before the spiritual sense had been completely cut off but it only affected him for a few seconds. The roar made him feel like he had been hit in the head by a massive club. Any other core formation expert would have suffered injuries to their soul from that attack however Feng Xin was okay as all inquisitors were required to cultivate soul meditation techniques to help them from being susceptible to attacks such as this one and also strengthen their souls and their spiritual sense by effect.

"Who is crazy enough to make a weapon from the remains of an Ao Yin and one at the middle levels of the palace realm to boot? Aren't they afraid of being corrupted by its murderous spirit and being enslaved or used as a furnace by it? Truly insane." muttered Feng Xin with some weariness. He quickly removed a brown coarse looking cloth from his storage ring which he used to tightly wrap the bone saber in. The moment the saber came in contact with the cloth, it trembled as if it wanted to flee however it was immediately locked into place by four chains that appeared from within the brown cloth. Each chain had a different type of seal attached to it. The seals seemed to be representations of four different elements which were; water, light, earth, and wood.

The seals were the antithesis of the bone as they completely restrained it with ease.

"Figures the four element life divergent seals would have an effect on a creature so steeped in murder and blood." Feng Xin silently thought to himself as he stored the smothered bone saber in his storage ring. As he was moving toward where Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen were he quickly spotted the leopard pouch that was half buried in the ground and faintly glowing with a greenish hue.

"What an interesting storage pouch." Feng Xin said as he picked it up and dusted it off. He was a little more cautious this time as he carefully studied it to avoid any tricks that may be planted on it. It was during the examination that he noticed a trace locator array deeply hidden in the pouch.

"Mmmh looks like it has been drawn by someone at the palace realm though they don't seem to have much expertise in the area as compared to a real formation master at the palace stage. Breaking it with a weapon at the monarch stage should suffice." Feng Xin silently calculated as he unsheathed his sword. He formed multiple hand seals which were all compacted to the tip of his sword. The seals were pure white which in turn made the sword tip just as pure white. When Feng Xin was satisfied with the number of seals, he slashed downwards toward the pouch. There was a small resistance as the sword was moving downwards with the tip of the sword sizzling as if it was burning something with the sword progressing downwards with every sizzle before it soon made a complete slash. Feng Xin sheathed his sword as he smiled in satisfaction. With that, the one who planted the array would never be able to track it.

Feng Xin quickly examined the leopard pouch which left him whistling in excitement soon after.

"This is really good stuff. A storage pouch capable of storing live objects and an internal space the size of two living rooms combined. Must be what they used to transport that tree. What a steal!!!" Feng Xin couldn't help but glee in excitement as he played with it using his index finger before finally tying it to his waist.

"Now what do I do with those two? Only one may be needed for the case." Feng Xin's tone and aura turned so cold that it even made Haishi at the back flinch. Feng Xin slowly made his way to the trio of two men and one tree. He stopped in front of them as he gazed at the Tupelo tree brushing his fingers against some of the remaining leaves

Chapter 34 Contacting The Branch

"This tree is truly something to have withstood an attack of that level and even protect these two. But it seems to have paid a cost for it. I wonder if it was worth it." Feng Xin sighed as he saw its current lackluster appearance. It looked more like a shrub than a tree as its height had shrunk to less than a meter tall and almost half of the remaining leaves had hints of dryness to them. Feng Xin stored away the tree in the leopard pouch before he squatted down and placed both his palms atop Peng Zhen's and

Gui Bingwen's backs. He started channeling his qi into them to revitalize their dried-up meridians and empty dantian.

At a glance, he could already tell they were suffering from qi drain. Given sufficient time they would recover by themselves but Feng Xin didn't have the luxury of that time as both of them had things to answer for and he too had questions of his own that he needed answers to. More specifically the owner of that bone saber. He had a feeling their identity was not normal as there were not many people who had an Ao Yin's corpse lying around and even fewer people who had the capabilities to refine a weapon out of it. The leopard storage pouch was the nail in the coffin. Storage treasures that had life-nurturing capabilities were a true rarity that even rank 3 sects may not have one. Something of that grade was qualified to be a sect's highly valued treasure but here it was along with a monarch-rank weapon. The owner must have had powerful backing. The sooner Feng Xin knew their identity the better he could plan his next moves.

After a few minutes of Feng Xin continuously channeling his qi into the two elders, they started showing signs of recovery. Their skin tones had turned rosy as opposed to the earlier paleness. Peng Zhen groaned as he showed signs of waking up. He felt a cool gentle qi coursing through his body washing the fatigue and pain away. It was the most comfortable he had felt in a while. He slowly opened his eyes and turned towards the source of the sensation he felt over his body. It was then that he caught a glimpse of Feng Xin. However, Peng Zhen's eyesight was blurry so he at first saw the vague outline of a male cultivator. He immediately panicked thinking it was Dong Yanlin but cool reasoning soon took over as he thought it was highly unlikely for it to be him. For one even if Dong Yanlin survived the second attack he would barely have any energy to spare and the man was a member of a bloodthirsty sect so benevolence wasn't in his creed. Peng Zhen in coming to this conclusion decided to no longer worry too much about who the person was and go along with it. In his current state, even someone at the body refining stage could easily kill him much less the person before him. He could sense how vibrant and pure his qi was and that told him that the owner of that qi was powerful even more than Cheng Yuan. He guessed the person must have had a reason for saving them and almost as if in response to Peng Zhen's thoughts Feng Xin softly spoke up,

"Nice of you to wake up Peng Zhen. I hope you had sufficient rest to be able to take a journey with me. You and your friend over here will have to follow me back to the Cultivation order courts to answer for a few things one of which is using the Order in one of your schemes. You have quite the guts on you, I almost can't help but admire it." Feng Xin's cold gaze bore into Peng Zhen which left him feeling suffocated. Peng Zhen felt for a brief moment his lungs freeze over before they thawed out a second later. The thick murderous aura Feng Xin was releasing was just as heavy as the one he had experienced from the Ao Yin.

"I will do as you say, esteemed master." Peng Zhen said in a humble tone. He internally sighed to himself but he soon regained his calm. The moment he set his plan into motion of the different scenarios he had

expected to happen this was one of them and which had the highest likelihood. He had resolved himself to what would come next. Being caught by the Order was one of his best-case scenarios. His only regret was things didn't quite work out as he expected especially when it came to the Tupelo tree's current state and Dong Yanlin's scary background.

Feng Xin observed Peng Zhen's ability to regain his calm quickly and couldn't help but admire his mental fortitude. This was one of the prerequisites to ever make it far in cultivation. Normal people paint cultivators as lofty people fighting against fate, challenging the heavens. But the reality of it is much simpler, they just want to improve their quality of life. It is a road with a lot of hurdles and those who keep on overcoming them are those with the appetite to take a beating and still keep hoping, trying, and getting up and continuing onwards. Mental fortitude was what fuelled this journey when talent and resources just couldn't cut it.

Gui Bingwen woke up moments later and just like Peng Zhen he at first had a bewildered expression at how he woke up so fast before it turned to panic when he assumed it was Dong Yanlin's doing. He hurriedly scurried back on his knees trying to get away from Feng Xin. He only calmed down when he got a clear look of his face. However, this left more questions as he turned his head towards Peng Zhen almost as if asking who the person before them was with Peng Zhen shaking his head with a bitter smile. That reaction was enough for Gui Bingwen to know it was someone from the Order.

"Good, now that both of you are up and okay it's time for us to leave. Haishi come over here, we'll be heading in the southwest direction closer to the outskirts of the green fog region. There is someone we have to pick up there." Feng Xin said as he jumped atop Haishi carrying Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen along with him. The two elders were shocked to see a spirit beast that was as strong as Cheng Yuan and the qi flooding in due to the primal lotus dew effect further mystified Haishi in the minds of these two elders. They weren't sure if it was a special trait of hers.

Haishi quickly flew in the direction Feng Xin said with the green swallow following at the side. It still had a few more minutes left before it disappeared. During the journey, Feng Xin took the opportunity to question Peng Zhen about the owner of the bone saber. It was from them that he learned of Dong Yanlin's true background. Everything clicked into place on how such high-end treasures could be with one person. In terms of rank, the blood ghost hands sect was equivalent to rank 1 sects. They may be even richer since they've wantonly robbed, murdered, and pillaged other sects and empires without fear. They were also crazy and skilled enough to fashion a weapon from a bloodthirsty creature such as the Ao Yin. The weapon refiner was even skilled enough to trap the spirit of the beast into the weapon making it a spiritual ranked monarch weapon.

A weapon or treasure having a spirit means it has the ability to grow past its current rank without the use of treasures as long as it's given sufficient time. The weapons themselves also require less qi to

operate as the weapon is sentient to absorb the surrounding qi by itself and adding the user's qi on top of that is like adding wings to a tiger.

This derived conclusion left Feng Xin with a furrowed brow as he remembered the trace locator array he had removed from the leopard storage pouch that was drawn by someone at the palace stage, most likely the real owner of the pouch. He was confident of mopping the floor even against someone at the peak of core formation realm despite being at the late stage himself. However, someone at the palace stage was a whole major realm above him. He would consider it a win if he escaped from such a fight with only light injuries. Of course, if push came to shove he had certain means to ensure he kept his life. However, those means worked against those in the early stage of the palace realm. If someone in the middle stages or the late stages show up he would have to wash his neck or achieve a major breakthrough in fawning dao otherwise only certain defeat awaited him.

"How could a case between a sect master and his spirit beast over food end up with so many twists and complications? Someone in your sect must have the worse luck alive." Feng Xin said once he had heard the complete story and had sorted out his thoughts.

Gui Bingwen coughed almost trying to stifle a laugh as he threw Peng Zhen a mocking look who on seeing that look decided perfect the stillness dao with barely any reaction coming out of him. Feng Xin saw their antics but ignored them as he had urgent matters at hand. He was even debating whether to request backup from the nearest order branch. It was bound to have someone at the palace stage at the helm of it and in case they were unavailable even a few late-stage core formation experts there would be sufficient to put up a fight against someone at the early stages of the palace realm.

"If you can pull in more people to make your work light, do it no need to break your back." Feng Xin couldn't help but smile to himself as he remembered one of the creeds Yang Qing piously lived by. He pulled out a map from his storage ring. The map had eagle-shaped symbols vastly spread out throughout the map. Those eagle symbols represented the branches of the Order spread all over the southern continent. Feng Xin traced his current location as he marked the closest branch to him before he pulled out a communication talisman specific to that branch. It didn't take long before it connected.

"Hello, this is inquisitor Feng Xin numeral IV of the superior core court attached to the main headquarters."

"Hello Feng Xin what is the mantra of the day." A young male voice sounded from the other end

"The blue dipper downs the raging storm."

"Mantra matches. My name is Long Song a numeral III inquisitor and the person in charge of branch communications today at the green mountain branch. How may we help you today inquisitor Feng Xin?"

"No need to be so formal there Long Song. I may require the branch's help in handling a potential rank 3 problem. I'm not too certain but I may have attracted the attention of a palace realm member in the conduct of my duties."

"A rank three issue huh sounds troublesome. Let me call the boss. Something of that level will need his input, luckily he is around." Long Song disappeared and shortly after another voice sounded.

"Hello there this is branch leader Hu Fang, I've just heard you may have a rank 3 problem on your case. Can you tell me which direction you are coming from, the background of the potential threat, how far away you are, and the means of travel?" Hu Fang said in a gruff voice.

"I've just left the green fog region and I should be arriving from the south of your location. The case I'm working on may have members of the blood ghost hand sects involved as one of the perpetrators was a core formation expert of the sect. The reason I suspect a palace realm expert involvement is the treasures I confiscated were at the monarch stage with one of them having a trace locator array inscribed on them by someone at the palace stage. I have already destroyed the array and sealed the other treasure so there is minimal chance of being tracked through them but this is the blood ghost hands, I'd rather not risk it. I'm about 200 miles away flying with a cloud-swallowing kite at the late stages of the core formation realm." Feng Xin calmly replied.

"Blood ghost hands huh mmmh this is troublesome. It's better if I come personally. With the speed of the kite, we can meet halfway in twenty minutes or less. Being attached to a superior core judge you should have measures to ensure your safety until then. Who are you attached to?"

It was a while before Feng Xin answered and when he did it was in an almost muffled tone with some embarrassment. This reaction of Feng Xin drew curious looks from Peng Zhen and the rest wondering what could be wrong.

"Hello, are you there?" Hu Fang curiously asked when he didn't get a response.

"Sorry I was distracted for a moment. His name is Yang Qing."

"Whaaaat? La... ahem I mean Judge Yang Qing who's about to be promoted to the palace realm courts?"

"Yes him." Feng Xin sighed as he answered choosing to ignore what Hu Fang almost said at the start. Yang Qing's antics were well known throughout the order even down to the branches. It made for a great topic of conversation during tea and lunch breaks.

" Ahem, I'll make my way over. See you then inquisitor Feng Xin." Hu Fang quickly said as he cut off the connection which Feng Xin couldn't have wished for it to happen any moment sooner.

"Why couldn't I have a normal boss." Feng Xin internally lamented completely ignoring that he too had a widespread negative reputation as a food fiend.

It took over twenty minutes before they were close to the area where Feng Xin had earlier come in from. It was then that a huge black shadow charged at them from one of the clouds before it stopped a few meters above them causing a massive shade on Haishi and the rest. Haishi's body froze midair with massive tremors appearing on her body from a deep sense of fear from the shadow looming above them. Everything within her body was trembling and racing wildly as an internal voice deep within her was screaming for her to run with all she had but she couldn't even move a step. As for Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen they were flatly pressed on her abdomen with Feng Xin still seated calmly next to them.

"Ellie quit with your antics we need to leave fast. There may be trouble brewing that even I am not confident of dealing with and oh you can't eat her. I plan to introduce her to the beast tamer hall and have her inducted into our unit. She'll be your partner from now on." Feng Xin said as he waved his hand dispelling the pressure the cloud-swallowing kite was emitting.

Haishi was still trembling as a leaf despite the earlier pressure being cleared. Feng Xin was not too surprised by this as it was expected. Spirit beasts with a higher bloodline could suppress those with lower bloodlines just by emitting their presence. This suppression was so potent that a spirit beast at the 5th stage of foundation realm with a higher bloodline could suppress another beast with a lower bloodline at the peak of foundation realm. However, this suppression loses effect if they are major realms apart. But in Haishi's case, she was suppressed by a spirit beast who had a higher bloodline than hers and also had higher cultivation too as Ellie was at the 8th stage of core formation realm. She was suppressed on two fronts.

"Everyone get on the kite we will be using her to fly back. You too Haishi." Feng Xin said as he leaped off towards Ellie. She was big enough to accommodate them all and then some. Feng Xin to avoid any mishaps decided to use Ellie on the flight back.

Haishi meekly got on with Peng Zhen and Gui Bingwen in toe who at the moment had the same look of worry on their faces. They knew the Order was powerful but hearing something and seeing it for themselves is a different thing. They couldn't help but worry that they had triggered a sleeping dragon that may destroy even their sect in retaliation. Once they were on board Ellie bolted without a second to lose in a speed that was a hundred times faster than Haishi's. Feng Xin had to erect a spiritual barrier to prevent the rest from being thrown off or torn by the winds.

"I tried to hurry here as fast as I could once I detected the Ao Yin's aura being released from the broken first seal but it seems I was still a step too late."

Chapter 35 Thousand Flavors Restaurant

There was a man in silky red robes crouching in the area which had just been decimated by the attack from the green swallow. There were two swords at his right hip sheathed in a black scabbard that had scarlet clouds engraved on them. He had deep black hair that was tied in a half bun man ponytail. He looked like someone in his late thirties. He had a medium build and scarlet red pupils and pale white skin that seemed it had never seen the sun in a millennium.

He grabbed a handful of sand at the area where the Ao yin bone saber had just fallen. He then let slip the sand in between his fingers closely scrutinizing it before he dusted the sand off his hands.

"Dong Yanlin you silly boy. You not only lost my leopard storage pouch but you couldn't even keep master's Ao Yin's saber despite breaking the first seal. Some easy score this was. With you dead, I'm the one who will have to get an earful from him even more than usual since off late he has been in a sour mood from not having enough subjects for his spirit refinement experiments.

I don't even know why master, the man known as the bloodless refiner would spoil you this much. Always a handful and causing nos small amount of trouble that I'm left cleaning up. I can no longer track the pouch as the trace locator array seems to have been dismantled, and the Ao Yin blood droplet I expected to help me locate the saber stopped working. Either the weapon was completely destroyed and no trace was left behind or it has already been sealed. For my sake, I hope it's the latter. But how do I track the perpetrators judging from this level of attack it should have been made by someone at the peak stage of the core formation realm almost half-step into the palace realm. I should be able to handle them easily as long as there are no surprises." The red-robed man silently thought to himself before he rose and started levitating from the ground. This was a clear sign that the man was someone at the palace stage.

Cultivators get flight capabilities when they reach the palace realm. Before that, they can only use spirit beasts or specialized flying artifacts such as flying ferries. As for flying swords, unlike ferries, can only be used by someone at the palace realm. Most experts who have only broken through to this stage prefer to use flying swords as opposed to flying without them. The advantage of using the former is that the flying swords are engraved with formation arrays that aid in boosting their speed. The better crafted the sword the greater the boost. It's only at the later stages of the palace realm that most cultivators are confident in their speed that they don't have to use things such as flying swords.

The young man flying up scrunched up his face as he started sniffing the air before a small smile formed on his face.

"This dense qi mmh it seems like someone used the primal lotus dew and luckily for me there are a few traces left for me to follow the general direction in which they went," said the red-robed man as he unsheathed one of the two long swords attached to his waist. It was deep red in color. He placed it beneath his feet and flew off in the direction Haishi had flown off to. A red streak could be seen flying rapidly through the air.

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Within the cultivation order court grounds, Yang Qing and company could be seen making their way down an alley filled with different kinds of buildings neatly arranged and spaced on both sides of the alley.

This alley was still within the same compound as the Cultivation order courts. The compound was partitioned into different zones sparsely spread out. The courts were centrally located within the grounds. Certain zones were off-limits to the public such as the area where carriages were stored and special stable grounds for the spirit beasts. But certain zones were open to the public such as where Yang Qing was headed. The area was filled with buildings that housed different things. There were restaurants, inns, pavilions, and courtyards available for rent. This area was created to cater to the needs of the parties that would be having their cases heard and deliberated. Since the use of teleportation arrays was strictly forbidden within the Order grounds unless special permission is given, traveling back and forth to the Order becomes rather tedious and strenuous to those parties especially those with weaker cultivation whose sect or family grounds were quite a distance from the court grounds. There was therefore a need to create places where cultivators could rest especially those whose cases would last more than a day. To help with this the Order allowed different businesses that would cater to those needs to be created within its grounds. The services were to be charged at an affordable rate so those parties could use them at their discretion.

Those businesses blossomed and soon became not only popular with the cultivators who had cases but even the staff of the Order became regulars at them. Yang Qing was leading Cheng Yuan and the rest to one of his favorite spots, the thousand flavors restaurant. The restaurant had four stories and was made completely of red starlight wood. This wood was famous for being sturdy and it also had an ambient and inviting effect. It made one feel as if they were hurdling with a group of friends around a campfire enjoying laughs and a piping hot meal. Most of the young staff of the Order were frequenters of this place because of that effect. It was for that reason that Yang Qing decided to bring Cheng Yuan who was a bundle of nerves. The effect of the wood would help him loosen up a bit.

They soon stopped at the entrance of this fine establishment as one of the servants hurriedly made his way towards them with a smiling familiarity once he saw Yang Qing and the rest make their way over.

"Welcome judge Yang Qing, judge Mao Yunru, inquisitor Yi Jie and esteemed master. Can I guide you to your usual place?" the young servant who seemed to be around 17 years warmly asked.

"Cao Ying still chipper as always. Sure we will go to the usual place, thank you very much. Your presence in this place will be missed. Your rest period from the institute is almost over, right?" Yang Qing asked as he patted the young Cao Ying's back.

"Yes, it's almost over. I only have three more days left before I have to head back. If I wasn't afraid of the threat the instructors made if we were even a second late I wish I could extend my stay here. It was much more relaxing and fun being here unlike the brutal competitive atmosphere at the institute." Cao Ying couldn't help but lament as he led Yang Qing and the rest inside the restaurant.

"Hahahaha every student had the same thought you have when it was almost time to go back to the institute after a break. Even me so has Yi Jie over here and the studious Mao Mao here. Though little Cao I'd warn against you being late. Those instructors are of the same ilk as demon Lei Weiyuan. They are very creative in the punishments they dish out. There was once a young cultivator in the prime of his youth who got late because he was being a dutiful son and grandson but those instructors could hear none of it. They sealed his meridians and made him go to classes for a week with no cultivation knowing full well those classes were over ten miles apart with some being on top of hills. I wonder which insensitive person designed those classes so far apart. The cultivator collapsed every single day, had blisters the size of mushrooms, and was added further punishment for being late to those classes. How is someone with no cultivation expected to travel over ten miles in ten minutes or less...." Yang Qing went on rambling as his face flushed red in anger before Yi Jie interrupted him to get a move in before he finally settled down as he made their way in.

Mao Yunru couldn't help but shake her head as she knew the young cultivator in the story wasn't late because he was dutiful to his parents and grandparents. That dutiful cultivator had eaten a few dozen questionable crimson boars with a few friends. The boars were suspected to have weird mutations and were being thrown out by a certain restaurant. The young cultivator heard of it and they pooled their money with a few friends and bought all of them despite being warned it might be dangerous to eat them. The young cultivator and his friend of course paid no heed to the owner's warnings and roasted all of them later that day. They ended up passing out resulting in the young cultivator and his friends being 2 days late. The young cultivator was of course Yang Qing with the other being Feng Xin. Yang Qing had tried to beg his parents to cover for him and they did what any typical parent would do which is to betray their child to their teacher and encourage the teacher to be ruthless with the punishment as possible.

Yang Qing was never late again after his weeklong punishment but his recklessness when it came to eating questionable food still strongly prevailed to this day.

Chapter 36 Five Judges

As the party made their way into the Thousand flavors restaurant, Cheng Yuan who was walking at the back, had a look of extreme shock on his face and it wasn't due to the use of red starlight wood by the restaurant. It was entirely because of the young man who was ushering them into the restaurant, Cao Ying.

From what Cheng Yuan could tell, Cao Ying was 14 to 15 years old, however, someone that young had a cultivation realm in the early stages of foundation establishment. From what Cheng Yuan could tell, Cao Ying was at the peak of level 3 and just needed a small nudge to break through to the fourth stage.

He couldn't believe just some servant at a restaurant had talent that wasn't even suitable to call genius anymore, as it was on the grounds of a monster. At his sect, the disciples who were labeled talents were those who had managed to reach the foundation realm at the tender age of 30.

Cheng Yuan couldn't quite put his finger on why, but he felt Cao Ying was vastly different and several levels more powerful than what a regular Foundation establishment member should be at within the same level.

Meeting someone so young at the foundation realm had shaken him. Even his ambitions of making the Green fog swamp sect great had wavered. If a servant was this powerful, what about the rest of the world? Rank 3 sects and above are bound to have stronger people and that's not even mentioning the Order. Yang Qing and the rest noticed his reaction but they did not say anything and just continued on their way.

The inside of the restaurant stayed true to the capabilities of one who could use something as precious as red starlight wood to make a whole restaurant out of it. The inside had qi three times richer than the outside world.

Cheng Yuan's pores opened by themselves swimming in the opulence of the qi around them. The chairs and seats were made of the same wood with a delicate and intricate design. It looked more like art than furniture. It was arranged into four rows with equal spacing between them. But what caught Cheng Yuan's eye, well his nose mostly, was the different food fragrances that filled the air. The weird part was, it was not convoluted or a mix and marsh of food fragrances. There seemed to be a rhythm and law to it, almost as if all the smells originated from one source.

Seconds later, there was a grumbling sound, and moments after that, there was an even louder one that sounded like the roar of a tiger. Cheng Yuan was embarrassed when his stomach grumbled but he didn't get to live through that embarrassment, as seconds later there was a louder one that almost gave him a heart attack. However, the culprit didn't show the normal embarrassed expression one would have in such a situation. He was instead patting his stomach with the expression of a bloodthirsty beast going for a hunt.

"Cao Ying, tell the chefs today not to slack off. I haven't had anything all day all thanks to Yi Jie here. I'll need a few bites here and there to tide me over." Yang Qing said as he kept slurping over and over staring at the door ahead that led to the kitchen.

Cao Ying could only drily laugh as he shook his head. Yi Jie and Mao Yunru were long used to it because there was an even bigger glutton, by the name of Feng Xin in the group. As for Cheng Yuan, he was the only one grateful for Yang Qing's roar like grumbling.

"Heeeey!! Yunru over here?" Mao Yunru was soon called over by a few ladies seated a few tables to her right. They had the same blue color robes as her and were just as picturesque.

"Does the Order only accept beauties?" Cheng Yuan couldn't help but wonder to himself as he saw the crowd calling Mao Yunru over.

"See you, Yang Qing," Mao Yunru said as she waved back to her friends while going over. As for Yi Jie, he had long disappeared to the second floor with another friend, leaving only Yang Qing and Cheng Yuan together.

"Would you look it here, our soon-to-be model palace judge decided to grace us with his presence? Yang Qing what are you doing here this early, it's barely midday. Wasn't your old buddy supervisor Lei Weiyuan making rounds near your court today, no way you managed to pull a fast one." A teasing young man seated to the left of Yang Qing next to one of the windows said.

He was seated at a table with a party of five inclusive of him. It was three men and two women. The young man had yellow hair which was tied in a half ponytail. He had matching yellow eyes with the same average build as Yang Qing. His eyes had a crafty look to them with a goofy smile on his face. He seemed like the always goofing and making jokes type. He had on the same similar blue robes as Yang Qing with the same numeral IV at the back.

Just like Yang Qing, he was also a superior core court judge. In his group, two others also had the same blue robes and numeral IV inscribed inside a rhombus shape showing they were judges too.

One of them was a young woman with pink plum-like hair flowing smoothly down her shoulders. She was slender and taller than even the rest of the males there. Her beauty was breathtaking like a sakura tree in winter. She had a soft but silently bold expression. As for the other person with similar robes, it was a man with a slender build too with black hair tied in a top bun, his robe and demeanor were meticulous like that of a noble or a clean freak about to level up his skill tree. If a stranger was asked to pick out who among the group was a judge, he would be the most likely pick. He had the righteous aura to accompany his noble-like demeanor.

As for the remaining two in the party of five, one was a young man who had medium-length brown black curly hair that was tied loosely into a small ponytail, with a pink ribbon. He had a short coarse beard, one that was a cross between someone who wanted to shave but didn't want his face to remain completely naked. He had a wild freedom-loving look to him with a carefree grin. He looked completely dissimilar to the noble, as his robes were loosely worn with his inner robe slightly revealing his chest. And unlike the others, his robes were dark golden with the numeral I at the back.

The last member of the group was a lady. She was so small that she would be easily buried within the group. She had chin length bob hairstyle that was pure black with amber eyes. Her cheeks were fluffy and had a shy docile expression. She kept staring below every now and then or play with her food. Despite her looking down, her beauty could not be hidden, it was like the blazing sun. She too had a dark gold robe with the numeral I on the back.

"Of course, I need to come to this place and raise its standard a bit because a certain yellow-haired ruffian keeps classing down the joint, that reminds me, pay up the three thousand high-grade spirit stones you owe me. It's almost been half a month." Yang Qing said as he made his way over to their table stretching his palms out.

"Yu Huifang, Zhang Qingge, Dai Chen, and Xia Boqin, why do you all keep hanging out with him especially you Xia Boqin with your meticulous personality can you stand this walking heap of trouble?" Yang Qing asked as he stared at the judge with the meticulous robe and noble-like demeanor.

"I think of it as mental training, not like you are any different either." Xia Boqin softly answered.

"Hahahahaha you two are always at it. The next monthly competition will be held at Zhang Qingge's place right? Can't wait." Dai Chen the rough-looking young man in dark gold robes boisterously laughed as he gulped what looked to be rice wine.

"Huuh it....i..t..it....it....it is me this time? But I haven't made preparations since I was swamped with work and reprimands again." Zhang Qingge said with shy stuttering in her voice as it trailed off towards the end due to embarrassment.

Due to the shock of her hosting, she ended up looking up, which made Cheng Yuan inadvertently gulp at how someone could look this pretty. Even Yu Huifang at the side had a beauty that couldn't be overlooked. But Cheng Yuan dare not stare as he felt a faint unapproachable aura from her.

"Don't worry Qingge, I'll help you, besides there isn't much to prepare anyway." Yu Huifang gently said with a warm smile on her face as she looked at Qingge like one would look at their small sister who was helpless without them.

"YOU WILL....Thank youuu sister Huifang. That saves me a lot of trouble. I was worried about the food and drinks. Yang Qing eats like a million pigs and Dai Chen drinks like a deep abyss whale...eeeeeeeh!!! DID I JUST SAY THAT LOUD?" Zhang Qingge suddenly yelled as she quickly lowered her head and covered her face in embarrassment. She ended up blurting out what she thought due to her excitement about receiving help.

The table suddenly burst out laughing, even the meticulous Xia Boqin couldn't hold it in.

"I'll bring the food." Yang Qing said as he continued laughing

"I'll bring the drinks." Dai Chen added immediately after

"See, everything is well and sorted." Yu Huifang gently coerced her as she softly smiled at the side.

"Qingge never disappoints." Kang Huilang said as he pushed away Yang Qing's hand.

"Thank you." a soft mosquito-like reply came from under the table as the rest could only smile at this.

"Huilang, spirit stones please, don't think this little interlude will prevent me from collecting what is owed."

"Fine, fine, I'll pay at the end of the day. How can a palace court judge be so stingy? collecting every single debt even from a lowly superior core court judge like myself. You sully that post. Why can't you be magnanimous like Dai Chen or Qingge? They have the demeanor of palace court judges." Kang Huilang scoffed with bitterness in his tone.

"Accountability my good friend Huilang, accountability. I am the embodiment of order and justice. I will not bend the rules, even for friends." Yang Qing righteously said as he puffed out his chest. However, like a sleazy chameleon, Yang Qing immediately changed his bearing.

"Big brother Dai Chen, sister Qingge please play for this lowly one's meal as my seniors in the Palace courts. That old man Lei Weiyuan halted my payments for the past three months. I don't have much left. Please seniors take care of your junior in his hour of need." Yang Qing humbly said as he performed the best bow he could make. His righteous indignant aura from seconds ago was gone and replaced by a humble fawning underling's aura.

"I don't have much myself, it got taken away for reparations because of an accident. It is big sister Huifang who is paying my bill" Zhang Qingge softly replied as she still kept her face covered looking down.

"Reparations again?" Yang Qing asked in shock

"It wasn't my fault this time, I tried my hardest and things just ended up that way. It really wasn't me this time." Zhang Qingge suddenly raised her head as she defended herself like an aggrieved cat. However, her cheeks were red from embarrassment, and her eyes darting all over.

"It's definitely her fault." Everyone unanimously thought.

"Okay I believe you,.. Big brother Dai." Yang Qing still not giving up in the pursuit of a free meal

"Fine, but just the appetizer. Wait, forget the appetizer, I almost forgot you're shameless enough to order a million of them. I'll pay only a thousand middle-grade spirit stones for your meal. Anything above that you pay yourself."

"Thank you." Yang Qing said with some cheer in his voice.

Dai Chen wasn't fooled by his amiable expression because he heard Yang Qing click the moment he changed the idea of buying him appetizers.

"Well, I'll leave you guys to it, ooh before I forget, this is Cheng Yuan, a diligent sect master of a rank 4 sect in the green fog region, Cheng Yuan these are my friends."

Cheng Yuan was too nervous to even say anything he ended up cupping his fist which was trembling and pale. The rest nodded at him as Qingge stared at him. Seeing someone this nervous made her feel emboldened enough to stare before she went back to her eating.

"Okay then and don't miss my ceremony. Huilang END OF DAY." Yang Qing said as he eyed Kang Huilang like a vicious loan shark before he made his way to a table a few steps over where Kang Huilang and the rest were. It was also next to a window and where the thousand flavors aroma was denser than in other areas. It was Yang Qing's spot. He had a satisfied expression as he sat down with the Cheng Yuan in tow.

"You'll cover that thousand from the 12,000 spirit stones you owe me, Huilang." Dai Chen said after Yang Qing left.

This left Kang Huilang coughing as blood drained from his face. Zhang Qingge at the side stared at him fidgeting almost as if she was debating asking him something, but on seeing his pitiful look, she shook her head and went back to eating.

Chapter 37 Different Pathways, Different Dao

Once Yang Qing and Chen Yuang were settled in their seats, Cao Ying dutifully appeared with a small red clay pot that had the image of a red parasol tree drawn on it. Cheng Yuan felt a faint warmth coming out from that tree. The warmth wasn't like the warmth of a flame but a life-nurturing kind of warmth like the one of a hen laying on an egg.

"You can enjoy our famous oolong tea as you make your order," Cao Ying warmly said. The tea introduction was mostly for Cheng Yuan's sake. Regulars like Yang Qing unless they state otherwise are usually served oolong tea. Most regulars here prefer it over the other kinds because one of the chefs of the restaurant specializes in nothing else other than brewing oolong tea.

Because of how dedicated he was to the path of tea brewing he ended up unlocking his own kind of path in tea brewing and from it, he started getting glimpses of a dao borne from that path.

The world is huge and composed of over a million components and with those components come different paths and from those paths come different dao. The ignorant think cultivators achieve breakthroughs through endless fights, competition, and trouncing their enemies beneath their feet but they could not be further from the truth.

Some or most choose to pursue their path through the sword, fist, saber, formation arrays, and soul this ends up creating the sword dao, fist dao, saber dao, array dao, and soul dao but even in those dao, there are further divisions like those who pursue slaughter, invincibility, protection, solitude it all depends on the person they are. Then they are those who chose dao which doesn't necessarily involve fighting or a weapon. They are usually generalized as the life skill dao by some. In this category are the likes of alchemy dao, medicine/ healing dao, painting dao, musical dao, nurturing dao for those who find meaning in teaching others, and cooking dao which features all kinds of chefs like the oolong tea brewer of the thousand flavor restaurant. The paths that one can pursue are as endless as the people pursuing them as dao in its simplest form is a way of life.

Those who have found their dao find their cultivation ahead smoother and there is never a right time or stage in cultivation to start pursuing it. Some started as kids while others discovered it in their old age, it only matters if you know your heart.

"Thanks, Cao Ying." Yang Qing said as he got up to pour himself and Cheng Yuan a cup of tea.

"No, No Judge Yang Qing let me." Cheng Yuan said with a flustered expression at seeing a judge pouring him a cup of tea. He knew that although Yang Qing was amiable and easygoing just his single finger was able to obliterate him and his sect. He still remembered how terrifying that illusion he saw of Yang Qing being a massive body of water reaching the sky and the moon-like eyes that petrified him for what seemed like forever. Just as he was about to stand he felt a soft breeze-like force sit him back down.

"Don't worry too much about it Cheng Yuan. Cultivation ranks aside, I'm still a person and you are my elder as by right I should be doing this besides you are my guest and it's customary for the host to pour the tea. Don't fuss too much." Yang Qing said with a carefree smile as he poured the tea for both of them and sat down.

Cheng Yuan couldn't do anything else but sit but he was still flustered and fidgety. All that apprehension dissolved away the moment the mist from the oolong tea wafted over to him. He felt its light fragrance penetrate his body before it drifted to his head making his mind accelerate. He felt his mind had been unclogged, all sorts of jumbled thoughts were getting aligned and arranged in their right order. That state only grew stronger with more of the misty oolong tea fragrance wafting over.

"What is this tea? Just the mist was able to do this, what about..." Cheng Yuan couldn't help but have a shocked expression as he greedily stared at the tea in his cup. His cultivation had halted for quite a while in the 5th stage of the core formation realm. He had not made a single improvement in several years. Most of the reason was the pressures of guiding the sect forward, especially his project of ensuring the growth of the young disciples. He spent most of his days nurturing them while also keeping a handle on the rest of the sect which didn't leave him any time to cultivate. But the sensation from the oolong tea had helped trigger some movement in his long stagnant realm, he couldn't help but get excited.

"It is only here at this restaurant that you can get to taste oolong tea crafted by a master half step into the palace realm. What's in this tea is better than any pill, potion, or elixir. This is a taste of the world seen by someone who has understood a part of one of the world's paths and is about to break through to the palace realm. Cherish it well Cheng Yuan not many get the opportunity," Yang Qing calmly said as he pulled the cup below his nose closing his eyes as he savored the smell. Even though he was stronger than the chef and had his own dao it never hurt to see the world through another person's eyes. It may give him more ideas on improving his own path.

There was one more thing that Yang Qing didn't tell Cheng Yuan. Only a few people were qualified to drink this tea, not all judges could do it. Only those at the superior core courts and a few upper core court judges and outer palace court judges can taste this tea. The judges at the lower courts and some at the upper court don't have this chance not unless they leach off the superior core court judges. The

reason for this wasn't that the chef and the restaurant were conceited and disdained others from drinking it. One of the reasons was it took considerable time, effort, and precious ingredients to brew it so there wasn't enough to go around and the other which was the most important was that the chef would consult them on their insights and experience from the tea they drunk so he could improve himself. Only those who stood at the same level as him or higher could give him the input that could help him improve himself. It was a beneficial give-and-take relationship.

Cheng Yuan's heart was madly palpitating. A half step to the palace realm that was a realm he hasn't dreamed of reaching yet. A half-step is still someone at the peak of core formation but unlike typical core formation experts those at the half-step had started seeing an outline of their roads it's just that the building stones required for that road hadn't formed yet and required further effort and refining to be completely dug out. Those at this stage could hold their own against two at the peak of core formation realm provided he did not have a weaker core to them. Someone at the half step with a blue core would still get beat by someone at the peak who had a purple core and a gold core could force a draw or even a defeat depending on their skills.

Cao Ying was still at the side waiting with some envy in his eyes. He had been a worker here but even he had never tasted it, most of the other workers in the place had not either it's just one or two other chefs who were at the same level as the oolong chef and the manager of the restaurant who have drunk it. Cheng Yuan lifted his cup holding it carefully like some hot treasure as he gently took a sip. The taste wasn't explosive it was gentle and mellow like that of black tea with the light fragrance of green tea. It had a freshness and brightness to it that spread from his tongue down his throat and within seconds his whole body felt that way. His mind felt rejuvenated and his earlier sensation of being unclogged up was even more prominent this time. He felt answers to questions he had been struggling around with. They were clear and direct guiding him to questions he never thought to ask himself. He soon lost himself to the feeling of exploration and discovery.

Yang Qing at the other end had also taken his sip and was swirling it around his mouth as he pleasantly nodded before he swallowed it down.

"It seems like Jiang Fu is close to a breakthrough he is just at the cusp of it. A single push and he is through. I'm happy for him but seeing how this close he is, I guess he'll be going into seclusion soon. The meals will miss their spark without his tea to go along with them but I can't wait to taste his new brew once he is at the palace realm. Gulp." Yang Qing silently muttered to himself as an excited glint flashed through his eyes.

"Cao Ying sorry to keep you waiting. I'll be having mmmh well if I let Cheng Yuan choose for himself he may end up being too reserved and say the tea is enough for him. Bring us dim sum. For the dim sum let's have barbeque pork buffs and buns, meatball soup, beef and pork short spare ribs in black bean

sauce, sesame balls, pineapple custard buns, fried taro dumplings, zhaliang, orange chicken, steamed lotus root with sticky rice and maybe we can finish with yellow radiance egg tarts." Yang Qing finished as he sneakily tried to wipe off his drool towards the end. Cao Ying as a cultivator had excellent memory so he didn't need to write anything down and just went to the kitchen to make the order.

Cheng Yuan was still in a trance-like state completely cut off from his surroundings as Yang Qing continued enjoying his tea at the side eagerly waiting for the food.

Chapter 38 38: Don't Forget Me

Yang Qing waited for ten minutes joyfully enjoying his oolong tea before Cao Ying appeared from the kitchen with a table tray filled with the meals Yang Qing had ordered. The tray seemed to have an isolation array inscribed on it as none of the smell leaked out. Yang Qing's eye gleamed as he saw Cao Ying come over that he quickly gulped down his remaining tea before he hurriedly got up almost rushing Cao Ying.

"Enjoy Judge Yang Qing." Cao Ying said as he placed the food tray by the side of Yang Qing's table.

"Thanks very much, Cao Ying." Yang Qing hurriedly said as he opened the trays deciding which dishes to start with first.

"Hello my precious, which one of you will be the lucky ones to undertake the great mission mmh it shall be you barbeque pork buns just perfect to be washed down with Jiang Fu's oolong tea." Yang Qing said as he removed a large plate filled with over a dozen barbeque pork buns. Half of them were steamed with the other half was baked. The moment the plate full of buns was placed on the table, the thick steamy air of buns suddenly exploded filling the whole table even waking Cheng Yuan from his trance state.

He was surprised to see a table filled with buns. However, its sweet and savory smell made it hard for him to keep his mind straight. When one broke through to the core formation realm one could spend almost half a year or more without needing to eat or drink. Some even substitute the need for food by eating fasting pills which can help them stay longer without needing to eat anything. The longer they do this the easier it becomes for them to lose the part of themselves that desired food. Cheng Yuan was part of this group of cultivators who substituted food for fasting pills that he even forgot what food and desiring food felt like. The close he came to it was drinking milk tea. He had visited the various mess halls in his sect during his rounds but not once in those rounds did he feel the urge to eat as he did at this moment. He felt like some part of him that he had sealed and deemed unimportant was unlocked.

"Judge Yang Qing this.....?" Cheng Yuan wanted to continue but he rapidly stopped to cover his mouth with robes due to how much drool was dripping. It was a small waterfall about to grow into a full-blown rapid.

"Hehehe eat sect master Cheng Yuan. I can't eat all this alone so there's no need to be reserved about it." Yang Qing said as he pulled a plate over to Cheng Yuan's side and filled it up with half of the pork buns before he had a chance to decline.

"Tsk my pork buns!! Being a host sucks. Is the remaining food even enough to fill me up? Maybe I should add more? Yes I'll add more I already have the 1000 spirit stones from Dai Chen" Yang Qing internally grieved before he was upbeat again but outwardly he had no change in expression other than the warm amiable expression a host should have.

Cheng Yuan on seeing the plate filled with pork buns didn't have the heart to refuse for one he didn't want to spite Yang Qing's kindness with his refusal and the other reason was he couldn't help himself the buns just looked too delicious begging to be eaten. He picked one up with his chopsticks with the smell getting dense the closer it was to his mouth.

"Crunch" the sound of something crispy being broken sounded the moment the baked bun was in his mouth. The flavors of the pork soon exploded in his mouth as the juices splashed out. With every bite, it was sweet, spicy, and savory. Cheng Yuan could detect an intrinsic fiery texture to the pork itself like it was its natural attribute. That quality seemed to ignite the memories of his youth when he was hot-blooded and carefree. The days when he duelled with his fellow disciples, the competitions, the exhilaration it felt breaking through from body refining into the qi condensation realm and to the foundation realm, succeeding and failing in missions, times with his master, Peng Zhen, and the late Zou Wen. All these memories came flooding back and with it the passion for life which he doesn't know when but had been slowly worn away with time.

Cheng Yuan felt his face heat up as tears dropped down his face, he tried to stop it but some part of him didn't want to and just wanted to enjoy that release. That was the part that won out in the end.

"I don't know about others but I have never really liked these cultivation principles out there that dictate for one to grow they need to be indifferent to everyone and everything. To be a calm spectator and be detached all in the name of pursuing the peak. But is that really alright? Before being cultivators we are people first. How can we achieve anything if we deny such an important part of ourselves? Laugh, cry, be satisfied, be angry, argue, makeup, hate, love, eat, drink and have things in your life that you will never let go of no matter what, and on this long journey try to hold on to who you are as much as possible and not stick to other people's definition of what a cultivator should be.

Cultivation is a part of life like sleeping and yawning, you can't let it be all your life is about it should always just be a part that enhances your life like eating food to satiate hunger. Cultivators are blessed with a long life do you want to spend that life alone, burying who you are, or do you want to spend it living? Cheng Yuan decide what living means to you, you'll find the world just a little bit exciting every time you work towards that answer. Keep dreaming, keep trying, keep failing, keep growing and add more color to your life Cheng Yuan," Yang Qing calmly said as he stared into the pork bun with a deep look like he was looking at some unfathomable secret but the drool and the silly grin that appeared second later ruined his whole expert like demeanor.

"What world will you show me master pork bun, your humble student awaits your teaching." Yang Qing joyfully said as he took a bite of a steamy pork bun that left his eyes curved up into crescents in satisfaction.

Cheng Yuan had his eyes wide open as what Yang Qing just said sent waves in his heart and mind. He saw himself in a dark space and ahead of him, he saw someone surrounded by chains. Without even seeing who was in there he instinctively knew it was a four-year-old child and that child was him. He was currently locked by thousands of chains however there was a breeze flowing around the chains shattering each of them one by one. The chains kept shattering until only less than a hundred were left before the breeze disappeared. With the shattered chains some body parts of the four year Cheng Yuan could be seen. His left shoulder down to his hand was exposed. Cheng Yuan with trembling legs walked forward to the four-year-old him and tried to touch his left palm.

The moment he did he heard a childlike voice whisper in his head,

"Don't forget me." The illusion shattered and Cheng Yuan came too. His shoulders and heart felt lighter even his body felt younger and his mind clearer. He stared deeply at Yang Qing whose eyes were still crescent shaped taking delight in the taste of the pork buns. Cheng Yuan gently woke up and bowed solemnly which drew some looks from the customers around the restaurant.

Mao Yunru stopped chatting with her friends as she thoughtfully looked at Yang Qing's table.

"What is he planning?" She couldn't help but wonder.

Yang Qing acted completely oblivious to what was happening around him deeply engrossed with his bun. Cheng Yuan sat down and continued eating with less apprehension than he did at first though he was still a bit reserved.

"I've only helped you partly the next steps are all yours. All the best sect master, I hope you'll show me what sect you'll make that made it worthwhile for you to take the risk you didmmh the bun is already finished? Did those scumbags reduce the size again?" Yang Qing quickly opened his eyes as he closely scrutinized the size of the remaining pork buns with heavy suspicion growing on his face with every second he looked at those buns.

Chapter 39 39: Institute's Idea

The duo continued eating, one was relishing every bite with the other showing a disgruntled and pouting expression. The former was Cheng Yuan while the latter was Yang Qing who was aggrieved when he noticed a few of the dumplings were smaller by a few millimeters. He would have complained but he'd have to wait for replacement and that was if the restaurant decided to listen. In the end, he decided to eat them first and give the restaurant an earful later.

After a few minutes, the steamed and baked pork buns were finished as Yang Qing pulled up the plate of fried taro dumplings. It was crisp golden with a hint of red from the phoenix tail shrimp used in the filling. Yang Qing due to the doubt that was already rooted from his earlier discoveries was quick to examine each of the fried taro to find if they were even and in the correct size. It was only after he had confirmed there was nothing off with their size that he nodded in satisfaction and started dividing them up. Cheng Yuan wondered what Yang Qing was doing when he was examining them, he just chalked it up to an eating ritual of Yang Qing's. He had thought of copying him but then decided against it.

Cao Ying like a dutiful waiter came to clear the plate that had the pork buns on them. Cheng Yuan couldn't help but meaningfully glance at him as he was taking the plate back to the kitchen. He still wasn't over how someone this young and at the early stage of the foundation realm was just a servant at a restaurant no matter how glamorous it was.

"Is the Order blind or do they have so much talent that they don't care about someone with this level of talent." Cheng Yuan silently wondered to himself.

"Curious about Cao Ying are we?" Yang Qing asked with a smile when he noticed Cheng Yuan still looking over at Cao Ying.

Cheng Yuan ended up choking on the fried taro that was midway down his mouth before he got clear enough to respond,

"No it's not that it's.....it's...it's.....Yes, I'm curious why someone that gifted is just a servant at a restaurant. Doesn't the Order want someone with his talent? By what I've noticed even rank 1 sects and families would covet someone with his level of talent. From what I can tell he doesn't even seem like a regular early-stage foundation expert. His realm seems multiple levels stronger and more defined." Cheng Yuan decided to be honest and speak out his thoughts when he saw he couldn't come up with a good excuse for why he was looking at Cao Ying. Yang Qing was a judge and stronger so he should have noticed it. Lying here would just be foolish.

"You have a good eye Sect master Cheng Yuan. Your years of guiding and nurturing your core disciples personally were not spent in vain for you to be able to detect something different about Cao Ying's foundation establishment realm. Nurturing might be your lane." Yang Qing calmly said as he smiled before he chewed on the taro dumpling in his chopsticks.

"The Order is not full of talents to the point that it would ignore someone of Cao Ying's caliber. He is one of us. To be more specific he is a student of the Cultivation order institute. When he reaches the core formation realm he will be inducted to the Order either as a judge, inquisitor, or a different kind of staff for the Order depending on where his interests and talents lie." Yang Qing said as he fished for another taro dumpling.

"Then why?..." Cheng Yuan wasn't able to finish his question as he felt it was too inappropriate to dig this deep into how the Order did its things.

"Why is a student from the prestigious Order a servant at a restaurant catering to others? Is what you wanted to ask, right Sect master Cheng Yuan?" Yang Qing smiled as he asked. Cheng Yuan nodded in return.

"Well, it's not a secret or anything, anybody with a good source of information would know that most of the servants in these restaurants, inns, and pavilions are students of the Order Institute. Like I told you cultivation is just a part of life and not life itself, I came to learn that from the institute. As kids, we couldn't cultivate all throughout so the institute gives a three-month break every year. During those three months those with family can go see their family should they wish to and those without are given the option to come here. Even those with families, some opt to come here during the remainder of their holidays.

I worked in one of the restaurants here when I was a student and the pay isn't bad." Yang Qing couldn't help but smile as he remembered those days. It was during one of his holidays spent at some restaurant

where he met Feng Xin and Yi Jie. Coincidentally he and Feng Xin had the same idea of working in a restaurant to score free food. The owners were exhilarated thinking they had gotten cheap labor but when they saw how much these fiends ate they had to quickly fire them before they went under. Soon word got around about these two and no restaurant dared hire them. As for Yi Jie, he worked as a wine brewer. He was almost as skilled at it as he was with the saber. He too got fired during the same period as Yang Qing and Feng Xin. However, his reason was similar yet different. It was due to his perfectionist nature that seemed to come out whenever brewing wine was involved that he ends up squandering ingredients to get the perfect blend. He got blacklisted around restaurants too.

The three became close during that time. Yi Jie and Yang Qing were in the same year and Feng Xin was two years below them. Their circle continued growing with time but their bonds remained. When Yang Qing became a judge he requested the two to be placed under his court. If both Feng Xin and Yi Jie wanted they could have both been Judges. They had the talent for it with both having gold cores but none of them wanted to be a judge. Feng Xin wanted to roam around as an inquisitor so he could eat delicacies all around and as for Yi Jie, he chose so because being an inquisitor would give him opportunities to gain inspiration and different ingredients for his wine recipes and the other reason was years of knowing Yang Qing he doesn't know when but he ended up as his caretaker. He had tried leaving once but the higher-ups said he will be Yang Qing's nanny forever.

"Those were fun times." Yang Qing muttered to himself before he came to, meeting the dumbfounded gaze of Cheng Yuan.

"Cough cough ahem where was I, right students like Cao Ying from the institute working at restaurants and whatnot. Well, the pay is good but it wasn't the reason the instructors suggested we do it. Other than helping us achieve a balance from cultivation, they suggested it so it could help us be grounded. It isn't that hard to imagine what would happen to young kids who got accepted at one of the most powerful organizations around the continent. The more their genius talent showed and flourished the more seeds of puffed-up pride would grow and they'd look at others as beneath them. You've seen how disciples from these stronger sects and families act around weaker sects and families haven't you? As a body of order and impartiality, the Order couldn't let its members go down that route. Working in these establishments was one such measure meant to curb that pride. You get to serve the big shots like us judges and those lower than yourself like cultivators from rank 5 sects.

The students have to be sincere and diligent in their services since their conduct is constantly evaluated by us and the reports are sent to the instructors who then share them with the class once those students resume their lessons at the institute. Those evaluations are crucial as those who have great evaluations get the favor of the judges and inquisitors who gave them those evaluations. When their work experience period comes up those judges and inquisitors can put a personal requisition for them instead of being randomly positioned. As for those with poor evaluations, that report isn't only shared by instructors but even among us judges and inquisitors too. Barely anyone would want someone with a

bad attitude under them. So the student is left in limbo with nowhere to go and without work experience, the Institute will never let them graduate and the Order will never employ them. The only way they can improve their image is to come back here and do their work diligently and sincerely.

The mental strain of pretending you're not looking down on someone with a smile on your face is too much especially if you know there are monsters here who will easily spot that pretense. The only way to overcome it is to drop the pride and life becomes easier here for you. The whole outlook of the student changes once they do that besides Judges occasionally come here with the defendants so it makes it easier for the students to re-adjust their attitudes once they see their interactions like how I am here with you." Yang Qing patiently explained.

"Uuum pardon me for saying this but why would the student risk coming here if they know there's a chance of getting a negative evaluation? I would rather stay at home and not get any evaluation." Cheng Yuan couldn't help but wonder as the risk was too much.

"If you were told to take a small test for the chance at receiving pointers from someone in the palace realm and the domain realm when you are just at the foundation or qi stage would you take it?" Yang Qing asked.

"I would." Cheng Yuan answered instinctively. Who would refuse such a juicy pie? He would retake the test over and over. When his thoughts reached this far he couldn't help but smile with a look of understanding.

"Precisely, they get to interact with numerous experts from the core stage and above all in one place and maybe receive a good recommendation when they start their work experience putting them miles ahead of the rest. The students will always reel at such a chance. Besides our evaluations are not that strict. We don't judge their service skills just their eyes. If they treat you how they'd treat their friends, parents, teachers, or us then they pass it with flying colors. Most evaluations are good it's only that like in every society there are always bad apples. This test is one that weeds some of them out. Our eyes as judges and inquisitors will get clouded if something as dangerous as contempt fills them." Yang Qing seriously said before that look disappeared within seconds when his chopsticks picked up another taro.

"How do his expressions switch that fast?" Cheng Yuan couldn't help but wonder as he followed suit in gobbling down the taro dumplings.

Chapter 40 40: Cheng Yuan Red With Envy

As time went by Cheng Yuan lost his earlier reserved display and grew more comfortable as he dug into the remaining dishes with Yang Qing. They chatted and laughed as they enjoyed their meal together like

two old friends though with the disparity in how they looked it looked more like a grandfather and his grandson.

Cheng Yuan was shocked to discover as he ate the different dishes that they were all made of ingredients that were at the peak of the foundation realm. He couldn't help but wonder about the identity of the owner of the restaurant. From the red starlight wood which just a single log would cost over a thousand mid-tier spirit stones to the chef who was half step into the palace realm and now the ingredients which were all in the foundation realm, he couldn't help but wonder if the owner was a member of the Order.

"No member of the Order owns any business establishment within these grounds. To reduce the risk of infighting and competition for such a prime location, all members of the Order are prohibited from owning a business here. Every single owner is an outsider who had to pass a few tests here and there to prove they were upright individuals and had a certain level of capability," Yang Qing said as if he read his thoughts.

"Does Yang Qing read minds?" Cheng Yuan couldn't help but shiver in fear when that thought crossed his mind as he stared wearily at Yang Qing.

"I don't read minds either," Yang Qing said with a playful smile as they went on to the penultimate dish of the dim sum which was the steamed lotus root stuffed with sticky sweet rice. Yang Qing showed an excited voracious expression that had been raised a notch when it came to this dish. His reaction was much more exaggerated than when he was about to eat the other dishes. Cheng Yuan couldn't help but wonder what was special about this dish. It looked just like a regular dish nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was yellow with some hints of white on the base like it had been sprinkled with snow and below the stuffed lotus roots was a red-brown thick sauce which Cheng Yuan assumed was made of sky wolf berries and jujubes.

What he did find weird was even after Yang Qing had picked the plate from the tray and placed it on the table there was absolutely no scent coming from it. The plate may have very well been bare. He couldn't help but find it suspect.

"You're in for a treat Cheng Yuan. This steamed lotus root stuffed with sweet sticky rice was made by someone who is close to the level of the chef who brewed the oolong tea. Though she is younger and in the middle stages of the core formation realm she has already started walking her path. It's still in the early stages though but it is something interesting. Her dishes would be more beneficial to you than the oolong tea since she is closer to your rank than Jiang Fu. It's easier for you to grasp some concepts. The best part is this dish is really delicious." Yang Qing said in excitement as he quickly fished out two small

bowls faster than Cheng Yuan's eyes could follow. He split the soup between the two bowls and then started dipping the steamed lotus root in his own soup as he gently chewed it.

"Mmmmm," Yang Qing couldn't help but groan in pleasure when he chewed on it.

"Qi Shan you've really outdone yourself this time," Yang Qing muttered as he quickly grabbed another steamed lotus root. Cheng Yuan seeing Yang Qing's reaction got curious and hurriedly dipped his in the soup before he chewed on it.

Boom

The taste and even the scent exploded instantaneously. Cheng Yuan had never thought he could taste scent but here he was doing exactly that. His tongue tasted the flavors and the smell of the steamed lotus root stuffed with sweet sticky rice. They didn't overwhelm each other but instead complemented each other pushing the dish to a higher level. The dish was soft that just the movement of the tongue would dissolve it and had a sweet flavor accompanying it which was later complemented with a hint of sourness from the wolfberry soup. Even though the dishes were mixed together the dishes managed to maintain their individuality which was perfectly used to add to each other and form a revolving balance of taste, flavor, and scent.

Cheng Yuan felt his qi circulate automatically using his cultivation technique the green water light saturation sutra. With each completed revolving cycle his operation of the technique became smoother and quicker. He was shocked as he had been using this technique ever since he established his foundation more than 80 years ago but in all his time using it he had never felt as familiar with it as he did now. It felt like the cultivation sutra was adjusting itself to suit his body and not the other way around, which was why his qi circulation currently felt more natural to him than he had ever felt before. His qi was boiling and felt more alive than ever, his whole body even seemed rosier and younger.

After a few minutes, his qi calmed down as it flowed at a gentle pace like a slow river. He blew out turbid qi from his mouth before his face froze in fright. He had forgotten where he was for a moment and did what he did instinctively in his own abode after a cultivation session. Blowing out turbid qi was like farting for cultivators and here he was doing it absentmindedly in front of a judge in a classy restaurant. He hurriedly tried to suck it back in but it was too late, it was already out. He stared nervously at Yang Qing's reaction as he prepared to be slapped to death but what he waited for never happened.

"Maybe my turbid qi isn't that bad and there was that aroma from the lotus root that may have drowned it out. Saaaaaaafe." Cheng Yuan silently thought to himself as he gently stroked his beard with a relaxed expression.

"There are isolation arrays built specifically for targeting turbid qi which is why it didn't reach me. Due to the quality of the food here and those even weaker than yourself eating here, a reaction like yours isn't that uncommon. To help preserve the dining experience the restaurant commissioned a formation master to carve turbid qi isolation arrays below each chair and table around this restaurant. I don't know why you had a smug expression like your turbid qi was roses here." Yang Qing couldn't help but snidely remark once he saw the prideful look Cheng Yuan was having before he went back to eating.

Cheng Yuan's face flushed red in embarrassment as he tried to bury his head in the small bowl like Zhang Qingge at the other table. After a quarter of an hour, the last of the dish of the dim sum was finished. It was the yellow radiance egg tarts. Cheng Yuan felt his body filled with bursting energy due to the high quality of the ingredients and the technique used to create the dishes. He would need to go into short closed-door cultivation to fully digest that energy and the other fruits of realization he had harvested from them. He couldn't wait to get this case over with and head back to the sect. He felt he would breakthrough to the sixth stage in the core formation realm in one go.

Cao Ying came and cleared the food tray and the last of the plate leaving only the parasol teapot at the table. Yang Qing poured the final cup for himself.

"In your current blotted state drinking the tea would be detrimental. It would drown out your other harvests." Yang Qing patiently explained which Cheng Yuan understood as he felt if he dared drink that oolong tea the fragile balance of thought and energy in his body would be broken and he knew the real reason which Yang Qing was kind enough not to say out loud was he wasn't talented enough to swallow all the harvest at once. He would have to sacrifice one for the other. The insights from the steamed lotus roots were much more beneficial to his current state than how much he could glean from the oolong tea.

Cao Ying came later to give the bill which was at a whopping 3,500 mid-tier spirit stones which left Cheng Yuan the penny pincher with a gaping mouth full of shock. This was just the bill for a single meal. He couldn't believe it as he used that same amount to maintain the formations at the lecture halls and inner sect disciples' courtyards for a month. His eyes were green in envy. Mid-tier spirit stones had fewer impurities and multiple levels of stored energy than the low-tier spirit stones. Cultivators at the core formation stage and even those in the palace realm could use them to speed up their cultivation as opposed to drawing qi from the environment. Just a single mid-tier spirit stone could power a dozen low-tier formation arrays so it was easy to imagine how valuable mid-tier spirit stones were.

In the blue origin planet the value of a spirit stone was as follows;

1 mid-tier spirit stone= 1,000 low-tier spirit stones

1 high-tier spirit stone= 100 mid-tier spirit stones

Yang Qing ignored Cheng Yuan's look which looked like he wished he could pull Yang Qing aside by the ear and give him a lecture on the importance of not squandering mid-tier spirit stones. He pulled out a black jade talisman from his robe. The jade was palm-sized and rectangular in shape with a few golden symbols that Cheng Yuan couldn't recognize. From what he could deduce the jade looked like a special kind of storage treasure.

"Deduct 2,500 spirit stones from here and the balance Dai Chen will cover it," Yang Qing said as he pointed behind him. Cao Ying nodded as he took the black jade and went over to Dai Chen's table where he was given a similar-looking black jade talisman by Kang Huilang who was grieving as he handed it over. Cao Ying then disappeared to a room upstairs then came back and handed the talismans to Yang Qing first and then to Kang Huilang. As Cao Ying was passing by to head to the kitchen Yang Qing called him over and handed him 10 mid-tier spirit stones which caused Cheng Yuan to almost rupture the capillaries in his eyes.

"All the best as you return to the institute Cao Ying," Yang Qing said as he patted his back to which Cao Ying responded by smiling and offering a bow of gratitude.

"I guess I'll have to go to the institute and tell them to send the kid my way when his work experience period comes up." Yang Qing silently thought to himself as he prepared to get up and leave.

"You couldn't be thinking of leaving without saying hi, young master Yang Qing?" a short stout man with brown short hair and a gruff beard said as he came out of the kitchen.