

## Daily life 691

### Chapter 691 Leaving The Graveyard Torch

"It's still too soon for me to be thinking about these things. Just the peak of the palace realm is already quite some distance, let alone the soul formation realm.."

Yang Qing quickly extinguished his excitable thoughts as he guided his attention back to the scarlet crystal grove tree.

The soul formation realm might as well be some outlandish prospect to him at the moment. Him fantasizing about it was no different than his dreaming about one day stumbling across a mysterious realm made entirely of delicacies of all kinds.

He could think about it all he wanted, but it remained to be seen if he would ever reach such heights. Some argued that the core formation realm was the first watershed in cultivation that separated the mediocre from the rest.

Those who made it to the core formation realm showed they at least had a modicum of ability to cultivate and from within that group those who managed to reach the palace realm showed that their abilities were standouts from the rest.

With great comprehension and talent, one could reach the realms of the palace realm and below, but when it came to the domain realm, things were vastly different. Talent and comprehension weren't enough. Luck and resolve came into play.

Everyone who was able to survive the tribulation of the domain realm showed that they were geniuses amongst geniuses, a one-of-a-kind talent who appeared in 100,000 years, and it wasn't only just that, it also showed they had an unshakeable resolve and indomitable will capable of weathering through any and all tribulations. The world would end, and they would remain calm.

It was widely accepted that the tribulation leading to the domain realm was the deadliest, and such a statement was supported even by figures who had reached the soul formation realm. They all agreed on that one fact, beneath the tribulation of the domain realm, it didn't matter whether you were from a prestigious background, or lacking of, you were all equal beneath that death-reaping lightning.

Every domain expert was special, it didn't matter whether they were at the first stage or the peak, being a domain expert made them stand out, not because of the monstrous abilities they had, but because they survived that treacherous tribulation.

But as huge as that achievement is, those monstrously gifted and resolved domain experts, not many of them reach the soul formation realm. Resolve and talent are not enough. Yang Qing heard that every breakthrough to the soul formation realm was unique to the person, you could never be trained or prepared for it, and when the moment was ripe, you would just know.

Yang Qing knew he was a long way away from the domain realm let alone the soul formation realm. He had only begun taking the step to scale up that peak, and he wasn't sure he would be able to reach it. No one could guarantee that he would reach the soul formation. There were already members of the Order who had stagnated in that realm.

The members of the judicial review committee were prime examples of it. Other than Long Enlai, none of the other members had reached the soul formation realm, despite all being from the same era. Maybe Yang Qing and his group of friends may end up the same way, with only just one of them reaching the soul-formation realm while the rest forever languished in the domain realm.

He had already made some sort of peace with it, well a bit of it. He would only be at peace with it if Kang Huilang wasn't the person who reached the soul formation realm, because if it happened, he was sure he would develop heart demons from Kang Huilang mocking him endlessly for thousands and thousands of years without pause.

"I can't let that bastard show me up, I must reach the soul formation realm. I can't risk it.." muttered Yang Qing as he clenched his teeth with staunch conviction.

He liked pulling down Kang Huilang a peg or two, but Yang Qing couldn't deny, among their group, the one person he thought had high odds of reaching it was that yellow-haired bastard.

Zhang Qinggee may be one of the youngest palace realm cultivators at the Order and has terrifying combat abilities, but Yang Qing and even their circle knew, Kang Huilang was something. He would have broken through to the palace realm much much earlier than even Yang Qing, had he wanted to. He only delayed for so long because he was playing around with different types of intents to try and find out how many he could blend without risking a backlash.

Cultivators could spend thousands and thousands of years and never catch a whiff of any type of intent. They could sacrifice everything to the last drop including even their lives, and never achieve it, but when it came to Kang Huilang, he had been playing around with it since he was 12 and it wasn't just one type of intent.

Yang Qing didn't know what the special requirements for triggering a breakthrough to the soul formation were, but he felt a bastard who was able to blend three different types of intent together had a high chance of triggering them eventually.

Yang Qing felt stifled at the thought before he said,

"At least I'll reach the domain realm earlier than him and my chances of survival are higher.."

He could feel the resplendent power of the vitality dao coursing through every corner of his body from his essence, his qi, his spirit, his tendons, organs, and blood, everything within him had been coated by a sliver of power of the vitality dao which brought numerous benefits to him a few of which were resilience and regeneration.

While he couldn't reform his body from a single drop of blood yet, he faintly felt the deeper he understood the vitality dao, the closer to realization such a feat would be, but even without regeneration from a drop of blood, his body's ability to reform had increased astronomically.

Anybody below the domain realm could forget about killing him in one blow. With the changes in his body, his ability to heal, reform, and restore was likely higher than the destructive power contained in a single attack from a late-stage palace realm expert. Provided they didn't use an artifact that was at the ascendant grade and above, they could forget killing him in one strike.

The vitality dao had not only strengthened his ability to heal but other aspects too. His immunity to poisons, curses, and soul attacks had increased too. He was already immune to over 10,000 poisons because of his yin-yang jade bones physique, the deepening of his understanding of the vitality dao and the changes it had brought had only added more to that. The speed with which his spiritual qi was restored also increased along with his qi capacity, and the purity of his soul had experienced an elevation too.

He had experienced a wholesome transformation and he knew the deeper his understanding grew, the more perverted those benefits would become.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh in gratification as he realized one of his life's ambitions was slowly being realized. Other than food, lazying around, people who mattered to him, pulling one over the Lei Weiyuan and the Order, one of the things he cared about most since he was a kid, was his life and ensuring he could increase his ability to safeguard it. With the vitality dao, that life's ambition was slowly being realized.

Filled with emotions of gratitude, Yang Qing turned toward the scarlet crystals. He solemnly cupped his fists as he said,

"Junior Yang Qing would like to thank you seniors for the help you have provided.."

The scarlet crystals flickered with a soft glow while gently swaying to the sides.

Yang Qing smiled with a soft nod as he turned to find Gu Xing staring intensely at him.

"Thank you for hosting me and for the urn, Miss Gu Xing.." said Yang Qing with a polite smile.

"Who are you?" Gu Xing muttered in a daze.

"A human called Yang Qing, just Yang Qing.." Yang Qing answered with a cheeky smile.

Gu Xing froze from the reply before she joined with a smile of her own as she replied,

"Well, just Yang Qing, thank you truly. Thank you for what you have done. I owe you a favor, and should you ever need my assistance, I would gladly offer it.."

"It's okay, I too benefited from the interaction. Though if you want to, it's more of a request really, visit Meifeng when you can.."

"I was already meaning to, even without you asking.."

"I am sure she'd appreciate it. At least I won't have to worry about her constantly calling me every minute... That reminds me, do you have a communication talisman?" asked Yang Qing.

"The senior who took care of me gave me one, but I have never used it.." Gu Xing said as she went over beneath the scarlet crystal grove tree and took out a talisman from a covered opening in its trunk.

"Your senior has good connections.." said Yang Qing as he eyed the communication talisman in Gu Xing's hands.

The quality was the same as his which he was given by the Order. Hers could cover communication around the entire continent just like his.

Yang Qing once tried to buy one out of pocket at White Rose Pavilion. He had assumed it wasn't that expensive and would likely cost maybe 10 high-grade spirit stones at most only to find it was five hundred times that figure. The high-grade communication talisman came at a whooping 5,000 high-

grade spirit stones and that was with him getting a 35% discount.

Since that day occasionally he would get nightmares about losing his communication talisman and the Order, asking him to replace it with his funds. Since then every time he wakes up he has to confirm it is there. He even had it inscribed with a tracking and camouflaging rune just in case.

Yang Qing quickly exchanged contact with Gu Xing.

"If you happen to detect that aura again please inform me, or you can come to this place and tell the person in charge..." Yang Qing said as he projected the location of the branch through a spell.

"I figured you're from there... so you are from the Order.." Gu Xing said as she recognized the area shown by Yang Qing.

Suddenly she frowned as she said,

"Wait, I thought you were close with the Deer Mountain Kingdom. Earlier when I said the eerie figure may have ties with the Kingdom though you seemed shocked, you didn't seem surprised by the guess, and you didn't challenge it either..Is there something wrong with them?"

Yang Qing went silent for a brief moment debating whether to tell her of his guesses or not before ultimately deciding to inform her of it.

"You have to promise, you won't spread it as I haven't confirmed it myself, and is just a case now.." Yang Qing solemnly said.

"I promise.."

Yang Qing sighed as he went on to explain his guess and the foundation of his guess stemming from the fight with the blue soul flame crow syndicate and the obsidian serpents to the leaked information about the graveyard torch and how it might potentially be tied to something that required a lot of lives as a prerequisite and the identity of that person being from the Deer Mountain Kingdom.

Gu Xing's expression turned grim from the flood of information. Everything Yang Qing said supported her worries, especially that foreboding feeling she felt from the moment she stepped onto the range.

"Why don't you attack them? If you wait, won't it be too late?"

"Like I said at the moment it's just a guess. A few of my seniors had investigated the kingdom when they came but they couldn't find anything. If we attack them with impunity, we will draw attention that the Order doesn't need at the moment.

All we can do is pull at the thread and follow it wherever it leads, trying to uncover as much as we can which hopefully will lead us to the right place before the worst happens..." Yang Qing said with a sigh.

"But don't worry, I already informed my seniors of my suspicions. They are more powerful and experienced than I am in digging up things.

If something is going on with the kingdom, they will surely find it, and the urn you've shared with me could help with that.." he added.

"I hope so," said Gu Xing with a grim expression.

"I really hope so.." she added.

"Me too.." added Yang Qing.

He exchanged a few pleasantries with Gu Xing before he left. He made a point of warning her against investigating the Deer Mountain Kingdom on her own lest something happen to her. Turns out his warning wasn't needed as Gu Xing was abundantly cautious of her life just as he was. She had no intention of leaving the graveyard torch. Other than visiting Meifeng, she would stay put where she was. The environment strengthened her ability to sense danger and with the evolution brought by Yang Qing's involvement, it was even more so now.

Yang Qing told her, that if worse came to worst, she could flee to the branch which was about the safest place in the entire range, even more so, once the array covering the entire range was completed.

Once he was done, Yang Qing made a beeline to another location. With his period as the branch chief almost coming to a close, there were a few arrangements he wanted to make before he left.

Chapter 692 I Have A Proposition For You

Yang Qing crisscrossed the forest at rapid speeds as he closely sensed the changes happening to his body. His ability to mask his presence with the aura of the environment had increased. Yang Qing was confident that he would be able to escape the detection of first to second-stage palace realm experts with powerful souls and when it came to those who were at the same realm as him, provided his accumulations was deeper than theirs he would be able to hide from them just as easily.

It was only those who were from the fifth stage and above that he had to be wary of, but even then, they would have to be actively searching for him for them to notice him.

Yang Qing continuously nodded in satisfaction as he felt the improvement. His sensitivity to life had increased. From the plants to the animals and spirit beasts to the rocks and soils, he could distinctly feel

their breadths of life and individuality. A cursory glance was enough to tell their makeup, such as their affinities and even emotions.

At the corner of his eye, he could see a daisy open up its flower to welcome the sunshine that was filtering through a canopy. As the rays of sunshine hit its petals, Yang Qing could sense its intense emotions which were of pleasant satisfaction, and the changes that sunlight was bringing into its body. Because of his physique, he could see the lines of thin yang energy trickling into the petals of the daisy, slowly transforming it. The daisy had not yet evolved into a spiritual plant, but Yang Qing could now tell exactly how long it would take for it to evolve into a spiritual plant.

He could sense things much more distinctly by just passing next to them without even using his palace sense to glean the details.

The strength of his body had improved, along with his agility. While his understanding of the phantom void steps was still where it was, which was the blooming phase, he could feel his execution was much smoother than before, which in turn influenced how much qi he expended, and how fast he traveled.

He was executing the art at maximum capacity, but the cost to his spiritual qi was an eighth of the qi stored in his body, and that expenditure was quickly covered by his body's increased ability to restore qi.

Even without Yang Qing consciously drawing the surrounding spiritual qi into his body, the spiritual qi was voluntarily filling his body like it was being magnetically drawn by some force. The quantity of spiritual qi being autonomously absorbed by his body was enough to offset half the cost of executing the phantom void steps.

"Coming to this place wasn't bad at all.." muttered Yang Qing with a sigh of gratification.

It wasn't long before he had covered 100 kilometers in just under twenty minutes, undetectable to most creatures he passed by. There had been a few spirit beasts whose strengths lay in their senses and had subtle changes in their expressions when Yang Qing passed by their territory, but the presence they sensed wasn't enough to alert them or make sense of it, so they went back to what they were doing.

Yang Qing had gone to the territories of these spirit beasts intentionally to test the innate abilities of his body to meld with his surroundings. He even went to the extent of lowering his speed just enough to



see if those spirit beasts could detect him. He did the test with spirit beasts famed for their high sensory abilities.

He passed through the territory of an iridescent insight jewel beetle that was at the quasi-palace stage. The spirit beast had an innate ability to sense the warm temperature released by a living body.

While cultivators had numerous ways of lowering their temperature to the point they were no different than a corpse or certain physiques that made their bodies lower than normal, the iridescent insight jewel sensed the warmth of the life that coursed through their bodies which was difficult to hide.

The iridescent insight jewel he passed by flickered slightly as if it sensed something but went back to normal when it didn't detect anything even after concentrating within the sphere of influence of its territory. Yang Qing had attuned himself to everything around him making it difficult for the iridescent insight jewel to tell him apart from the plants and even the soil he was surrounded by.

Yang Qing conducted a few more tests with other sensory-

specialized spirit beasts in the area like the Essence echo butterfly and a soul fire resonance scarab till he was finally satisfied that his camouflaging abilities had experienced a significant increase like he had guessed.

Having already had a general feel of the wholesome changes brought to his body from the increase of essence of the vitality dao coursing through his entire being, Yang Qing focused his attention back on where he was headed.

After fifteen minutes, he finally reached it. It was a rocky mountain that at a cursory glance wasn't much different than the other surrounding mountains. If one were to pick something that made the mountain Yang Qing was looking at, different than the rest, it would be it felt slightly warmer than other places, but it wasn't to the point that it was glaring. Only someone who was acutely sensing the temperatures around different areas of the range would notice such a subtle difference.

Yang Qing sighed in admiration as he took a deep breath like he was savoring a pleasant smell as indeed he was. The entire mountain was suffused with the essence of the earth element to the point that Yang Qing could see a gold-orange veil covering the whole mountain. Of course, such a sight could only be

seen by someone in the palace realm whose palace sense was able to see the materialization of an element's essence.

The veil was in the image of golden orange threads that seemed to connect and link everything within the mountain together.

The natural blend of the rich smell of earth and wood reinvigorated Yang Qing. With his robes billowing, Yang Qing flew to the peak of the mountain.

The moment Yang Qing reached the peak, something from within the peak itself spoke. It was an ancient voice filled with vigor.

"What do you want, human?" Yang Qing paused, a soft smile tugging his lips as he cupped his fists in greetings.

"You must be the mountain jade snake.. nice to meet you, I'm Yang Qing, a judge from the Order. I have a proposition for you.."

Chapter 693 No Loyalty

Silence filled the area for a minute before the ancient vigor voice sounded again.

"What proposition?"

The voice was still as stable and filled with vigor as it had been before, but now it had another connotation within it, which was intrigue.

Yang Qing's eyes glittered when he detected interest showing on the mountain jade serpent.

"How about I give your nature jade stone an upgrade in exchange for a small favor?" said Yang Qing.

Immediately Yang Qing finished the sentence, the mountain trembled aggressively almost as if it was beset by multiple earthquakes. It wasn't only the mountain that reacted to the air around the mountain

that seemed to shake along with it, and the earth essence veil that had enveloped the entire mountain as a fog stirred bringing with it many changes.

The movement of the earth essence caused the gravity within the mountain and five kilometers around it experienced a steep increase to the point that the ground and the vegetation around the mountain started caving in under the gigantic force bearing down on them.

Numerous trees suddenly started exploding into splinters from the crown to the stem slowly extending to the ground below, the protruding rocks surrounding the place were ground into dust, while the ground itself was instantly filled with crevices and craters.

The intensity of the damage only seemed to be increasing with the boiling up of the earth essence surrounding the mountain.

"You better leave, Yang Qing. I can tell you are more powerful than I am, and ideally, I am not one prone to engage in fights, especially in ones that are stacked against it, but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't do it if pushed to a corner.

Please do not push me.." said the mountain jade snake with its voice still maintaining the same stability and vigor.

Even with the increase in gravity and Yang Qing being within the sphere of influence, his posture and demeanor were just as relaxed as he had been when he stepped into the area, almost as if the increase in gravity had no effects on him whatsoever.

"This pressure should match the 200th..no it doesn't have that quality yet it should be just below it, at the 190 thereabouts. Aah, this reminds me of the good old days of scaling up the Spirit Howling Mountain, trying to outdo one another on the Spirit Howling tablet.

Since I stepped onto the palace realm, I haven't been there. I should make a point of visiting it and harvest more rewards and probably leave Huilang and the rest in the dust, maybe I could even overtake Dai Chen.." muttered Yang Qing with a gleeful smile as he held his chin in contemplation.

"Are you not leaving?" fiercely asked the Mountain Jade Serpent.

The mountain's peak immediately trembled ferociously like it was separating itself from the rest of the mountain. The mountain that stood at 7,000 meters suddenly shrunk to half that, as it deformed into a tiny hill, while the missing portion morphed into the form of a snake.

A humongous snake the size of a small mountain appeared in the place of the missing peak. It had a smoothened-out earth-brown jade skin that glittered with green. It looked like polished earth with moss growing on it. Its eyes matched its coating, a mix of earth brown and a little hue of green mixing within it.

The earth essence that had filled the area was now congealed around its body making it look like an extra layering of its scales giving the snake an abundant and vigorous aura. One look at it and one would feel like they are facing off against 1,000 mountains stacked together.

Seeing that the mountain jade snake looked just about ready to attack, Yang Qing sighed as he softly spoke up.

"I think you've misunderstood me. I am not after your nature jade stone. To others, it may indeed very well be a precious resource but I don't need it. There's not much it can add to my body than what my body already does.."

Yang Qing with his arms hanging casually by his side, and robes billowing, brought the presence of his entire cultivation to bear. He circulated the universal light resonant art whilst also activating his yin-yang jade physique.

There was no blinding radiance or flashy explosion, just a gentle ethereal light and presence released from his body, but that presence and that light instantly quelled the agitation within the area while breathing life and stability around the area. The trees that had exploded, left with nothing but a stump gained a new lease on life as they regrew their stems, branches, and leaves in the time it took to take a breath.

It wasn't only the trees as different plants instantly regrew like weeds. The ethereal glow flowing out of Yang Qing's body instantly transformed the place like rain heralding the end of drought.

As for the earth essence that was the trigger of everything, it immediately quieted down and became docile beneath the glow released by Yang Qing. It was like a child lowering its head before its parent after being caught in mischief.

The pupils of the mountain jade snake immediately shook when it sensed the changes, especially to the essence of earth. That essence was something produced from the nature jade stone and it had taken it close to five thousand years for it to freely manipulate it to surround its lair, and even then, it had not completely refined it or understood the entirety of its mysteries and was still in the process of comprehending it.

The mountain jade snake's heart trembled with shock as it couldn't believe what it was seeing. That essence, which took it astronomical levels of effort, time, and sacrifice just to understand and assimilate partially, had been subdued in just but an instant by the human standing before it.

It had no doubt in its mind, that if the human willed it, he could take away all the earth essence surrounding its body. Its guess was proven to be true when it sensed the object of its success, the thing that transformed it from a rock python destined to be eaten into a mountain jade snake that was powerful enough to hold territory by itself without disturbance.

However, that object that it had grown to revere, was now trembling with intense excitement looking to escape its body and rush toward the human before it, like a child trying to return to the embrace of their parents.

"Can't you show even a little reluctance? we have after all known each other for at least 27,000 years. I knew this human wasn't simple but this.."

Sighing in defeat, the mountain jade snake finally asked,

"What is it you want?"

Earlier, while it did not think its odds of victory were high, it thought that at least with the assistance of the nature jade stone it could maybe drag things out to the point that both parties would come to an understanding and forego further hostilities, but now, the nature jade stone would likely betray it without a second thought. The mountain jade snake no longer had the heart to fight and by the look of

things it seemed like the human had been telling the truth about not needing the nature jade stone. He could already feel the subservience of the nature jade stone towards the presence of Yang Qing.

Hearing the mountain jade snake's words, Yang Qing dispelled his aura, once again looking like a charming cheeky handsome youth taking a casual stroll in the forest.

"Just so you know, if the request is for me to attack other spirit beasts or something close to it, I will have to refuse you. I am already okay with nature jade stone as is.." added the mountain jade snake.

"I would not ask you to do something like that. If you were the type to agree to do something like that I would not have come here in the first place, nor would I trade with you.." Yang Qing solemnly said.

"So, what is it?"

"It's something small. I'll be leaving soon, and I have a few friends here that I'd like you to check on now and then and confirm they're okay.."

With a confused look on its face, the mountain jade snake asked,

"You want me to check on your fellow humans? Why don't you do it yourself or let others from the Order do it? I've heard other spirit beasts who ventured outside mention how powerful you lot are. Surely you can do a better job than I.."

"My friends are not humans.." said Yang Qing as he went on to describe the restoration oak tree, the aurora azalea, and the verdant glow firefly he had left at the territory of the now defunct Clear Sword River Sect.

After hearing the description of the three figures mentioned especially their abilities, the mountain jade snake couldn't help but look suspiciously at Yang Qing as it said,

"Why do you want me there? By the look of things that place is valuable and we are not that familiar with each other.."

"The parasitic purple flower spore sycamore tree said you could be trusted, and I feel the nature jade stone would benefit much from the three of them just as much as they would benefit from it. The three figures are filled with my aura, and while their strengths are too low to support your cultivation base, it won't always be that way.." Yang Qing said with a smile.

"You know Adler's sister? She's not one to talk to strangers but if she did...."the mountain jade snake paused for a moment and then its body instantly transformed into that of a handsome man in his early forties with a robust build, smooth brown skin, long brown hair and amber eyes that had a tinge of green in them. His aura was one of stability.

"I, Mu Fen, agree.." said the middle-aged man as he extended his hand toward Yang Qing for a handshake.

"Thank you, Mu Fen.." answered Yang Qing as he stretched out his hand for the handshake.

#### Chapter 694 Decision Made By The Judicial Review Committee

With the two of them already in agreement, Mu Fen, the mountain jade serpent opened his other hand revealing a small smooth pebble that was a mixture of three colors; golden brown, verdant green, and deep blue.

The pebble shook as the colors sparkled with more radiance rotating in different parts of the pebble. Mu Fen couldn't help but feel bitter when he saw this. This was the first time the pebble in his hands ever showed such a drastic reaction. The whole time he had it, it was dormant and dull colored almost as if it was in a perpetual hibernation, but now, it was vibrant and full of energy.

He could even feel the concentration of the earth, wood, and water essence being released by the pebble had doubled and was quickly increasing as it exuded a dense cleansing essence. He could feel his blood essence being improved just from the casual contact.

"It was holding out.." he wondered in shock as he sensed the changes. Though the improvement wasn't much, it was still enough to alarm him when he detected the spike. It was like a jolt had been passed through his body.

Choosing to pretend that the nature jade stone didn't withhold its benefits from him and it was maybe his lacking talents that restricted it, Mu Fen reluctantly handed the stone to Yang Qing. His hand shook

slightly as he was handing it over. This was the first time in over 10,000 years that it had ever left his body. It left him out of sorts like he was giving out a part of his body.

Yang Qing nodded as he sensed the energy within the pebble. As small as it was it contained a vast aura of the earth, wood, and water essence, along with a special nurturing energy that made the nature jade stone so valuable to most. That special nurturing energy would refine and strengthen the cultivator's body and soul for the rest of their lives as long as the nature jade stone remained intact.

One would experience the greatest benefits if they used the nature jade stone to lay out their foundations at the beginning of their cultivation. With the nature jade stone's help, one would have one of the sturdiest foundations one could have thanks to its nurturing energy, though the energy took a slow and steady approach towards that endeavor which made it more beneficial to spirit beasts than humans when laying down those early foundations.

Human cultivators preferred using it when they were in the core formation realm by studying the profundities contained within it and making use of its other abilities such as strengthening their souls, clearing their minds and hearts, and sensitizing them to the water, and earth and wood elements. It served as a great cultivation and meditation tool.

Given enough time, as long as one had slight talent, somewhat decent cultivation ground, and resources, with the nature jade stone's help, they would be able to reach the palace realm and if the nature jade stone had sufficient essence, a decent cultivation ground, and resources wouldn't even be needed and they could just subsist of what was being provided by the nature jade stone, like what the mountain jade snake had done.

It was only the area within his mountain that seemed decent in resources and ambient spiritual qi, and Yang Qing could tell that all that was due to the nature jade stone. Its aura had permeated every single inch of the place from the plants to the ground, to the air around it. If you took its influence away, then the quality of the place would be no different than how the territory of the Clear Sword River Sect was.

"Have you always been here?" asked Yang Qing as he looked around him.

Mu Fen looked along with him before he understood what Yang Qing was getting at. With a small smile, he said,



"Yes, I was hatched here, doomed to remain a rock python if I even lived long. Luckily our kind can survive on eating rocks that have a little bit of spiritual qi in them which helped me avoid going further in the range for sustenance.

I spent most of my time in crevices around this place. For the better part of my first 50 years, I didn't know what the sun looked like or the ground above the crevices I hid in. When my body got slightly sturdier I used it to dig deeper pathways that led deeper into the ground and I could slightly manipulate it to hide the entrances..." Mu Fen paused as his gaze turned distant.

"I don't know if other rock pythons are born this way, but I was born timid. One of the very first thoughts I got when I gained sapience was I needed to hide or I wouldn't survive a week in this place which ended with me burrowing holes deeper into the ground and by a stroke of luck, I found it there.

I was too weak to even understand what it was back then, I just assumed it to be another pebble that would serve as my meal for a few weeks, and if I was really lucky maybe a few months..."

Mu Fen stopped as he scratched his beard with a slight embarrassment.

"So I swallowed it..." he said whilst struggling to speak out the words as he warily eyed Yang Qing to see his reaction.

Opposite to what Mu Fen expected, Yang Qing asked,

"How was the taste?"

Mu Fen was thrown off by the question for a few seconds before he finally said,

"The taste was heavenly. I've never been able to stomach another rock ever since..."

Mu Fen's attention was completely grabbed by the memory of that taste so he wasn't able to see Yang Qing's conflicted, slightly gluttonous gaze as it fell on the nature jade stone that was nestled warmly in Yang Qing's hands completely unaware of his designs on it.

Luckily Yang Qing's internal debate was cut off by Mu Fen who managed to tear himself away from that memory.

"It took me two years to finally register that the nature jade stone was unique when even after two years I had not digested it and my body seemed to be satiated and filled with energy. It was a couple of more years after that I noticed it was purifying my bloodline.

My cowardice brought me to it. To this day I still can't believe it. It's the reason I don't involve myself in the affairs outside of here. I am afraid if I do, I will lose what brought me to where I am today if it makes any sense.."

"It does. We call it sticking to your roots. It's one of the ways developed to polishing one's heart.." said Yang Qing with respect.

"I didn't think I'd be complimented for being cowardly..." said Mu Fen with a slight chuckle.

"Well, one would say I'm a bit biased on it as a fellow practitioner of it.." said Yang Qing with a smile of his own.

"Is that so? I am glad to meet a fellow member.."

The two immediately burst out laughing as Yang Qing circulated his universal resonant light art along with activating his yin-yang jade physique and directing the resultant energy and essence into the nature jade stone.

The nature jade stone vibrated as the essence was poured into it before it settled down like it was being lulled into sleep. The color code that comprised it experienced some changes as the shades of gold orange, green, and blue got deeper and deeper, with the addition of a white shade, a yellow shade, and a smidge of purple hue that was almost negligible as it was the size of a pin-sized dot.

Mu Fen's pupils trembled as he sensed the transformation within the nature jade stone. It was denser like four or five times it was before, its essence was purer and more condensed than it was before, though he couldn't tell by how much, and it felt more complete like the missing pieces had fallen in place.

He could smell the scent of pine trees, the ocean, and wet soil, feel the heat of the sun, and the gentle coolness of the moon, and hear the gentle flow of a river joining the ebbing and flowing ocean.

He could feel a cyclic system being established within the nature jade stone. He felt once that system was firmly established and assimilated by the stone, it would be elevated even further.

"I am sorry for doubting you?" Mu Fen said with a sigh when he sensed the changes. The amount of benefits the nature jade stone would give him now was vastly superior to what he was getting. His cultivation base which had stagnated at the first stage of the palace realm was now showing signs of activity when he sensed the profound power contained within the nature jade stone.

"A little caution is understandable.." Yang Qing said with a slight smile as he handed back the nature jade stone to Mu Fen who seemed hesitant to accept.

"Like I said, I don't need it, but you do. I am not exactly being too good here, as the more powerful you become the more at ease I will be with what I have entrusted you with.."

Mu Fen looked at him and the nature jade stone for a few moments before he solemnly said,

"I will keep my promise.."

He took the nature jade stone and stowed it away.

"You can stay there if you want if you're not completely attached to this place.." Yang Qing said as he looked at the barren area around him.

Mu Fen looked around him with a nostalgic expression before he turned to Yang Qing and said,

"It's really hard to find a place this good.."

"Don't worry the place I'm taking you is just as good.."

They both laughed before Mu Fen finally said,

"A change of environment isn't bad and I'm curious to see what your companions will turn into...."

"I only hope I can stay there when they develop, even if it's just for a short while.." he hesitantly added.

"Feel free to treat it as your second home..By the way, this isn't a must but there is someone I met there, I hope you can pour a toast for him when you're there, if you don't mind.."

"I will.."

"Thanks."

After hashing out the details, Yang Qing and Mu Fen left for the former territory of the Clear Sword River Sword Sect.

Both Mu Fen and Yang Qing were surprised when they got there. The source of their surprise was the changes that had happened to the area because of the spiritual rejuvenation oak tree, the aurora azalea, and the verdant glow firefly.

The spirit rejuvenation oak tree had grown to a height of 100 meters with a girth of about five meters, stacked to the brim with deep green and blue colored leaves that dripped with dew that matched the color of their corresponding leaves. Each of those dew was potent with restoration properties for both healing of the body and spirit.

One dew had the same potency as a low tier orange grade potion, which would make it usable by those at the late stages of the foundation establishment realm, and the oak tree was filled with thousands upon thousands of those dew which were just by-products of the properties contained in the leaves themselves which had as much potency as a top tier orange grade potion.

If a severely injured early-stage foundation expert were to take a whiff of the air released by the oak tree, their wounds would slowly start to close and heal along with the restoration of whatever spiritual qi had been expended.

The aurora azalea was still the same height still surrounded by an ethereal glow but despite no outwardly changes it was the prime culprit for the changes in the area as the spiritual qi had gotten at least three times denser and purer than when Yang Qing was here, slowly reaching the effects provided by a high-

grade spirit vein.

The verdant glow firefly took advantage of the rich and dense spiritual qi to promote the growth and propagation of the plants around the area. The number of plants growing in the area had more than tripled since he was last here. Everything from trees to herbaceous plants, to shrubs to flowers, were all brimming with health and vitality.

Everything from their color, size, and internal makeup was at the absolute peak standards of their rank. The area was filled with vegetation that was at the mortal rank but with the energy levels they were releasing and their outward look, one could easily mistake them for earth-rank vegetation, and by Yang Qing's estimates, it wasn't long before every vegetation in the area achieved a collective evolution.

Because of the improvement in his dao, he instantly detected that the vegetation in the area had been maintained at the same standard, none was higher than the other, which was most likely the intention of the verdant glow firefly. Every vegetation was at the absolute peak of the standards a mortal-

rank plant could achieve.

Yang Qing could feel his body relax as he absorbed the harmonious scent of new life being born, something special being created. He couldn't help but sigh in gratification. When he came here, he was lost surrounded by a fog of darkness and self-doubt and in that fog something grew and it had now developed into this paradise nature.

He couldn't help but admiringly say to the three creatures,

"You did a good job and by the looks of it, you're not that far from completely unlocking your sentence.."

He sensed that the rejuvenation oak tree, the aurora azalea, and the verdant glow firefly had already formed embryonic spirits that were at the cusp of breaking out.

"Are you sure I can stay here?" Mu Fen absentmindedly muttered in shock as he sensed the richness of the area. The richness of the area made him even doubt whether he was still in the Deer Mountain Range. He could even feel the energy within his nature jade stone swirl actively from the moment he stepped into the area.

"If you don't find it beneath you, I would like it if you stayed to safeguard them.." Yang Qing said as he pointed to the three figures who had already been reacting with joy at noticing Yang Qing's presence.

"I feel like I've used up several lifetime's worth of luck..." said Mu Fen still in disbelief.

Yang Qing smiled as he guided him around the area, which wasn't much as he had only cordoned the area around the building of the former sect master of the Clear Sword River Sect.

After he had shown him around, Yang Qing also handed him the token that handled the formation he had laid in the area whilst also introducing him to the three figures. Even though they had not unlocked their intelligence completely, because they had evolved from Yang Qing's essence, they could understand him easily.

After he was done, Yang Qing decided to cultivate in the area for a short while in a bid to help the three organisms achieve complete sentience. After four days, they had all unlocked their wisdom and finally stepped on the cultivation path.

Yang Qing left after, much to their reluctance, leaving them in the care of Mu Fen who had already made himself comfortable despite his earlier reservations.

Yang Qing soon made his way to the branch, where he found Administrator Mo Guang waiting for him.

"A decision has already been made on what will happen with the branch..."

## Chapter 695 Changes To The Branch

"That's faster than expected.." said Yang Qing.

He had four more days left before his tenure as the branch chief of the Deer Mountain Branch was over. He had expected the Judicial Review Committee to come to a decision on the last day, or have him extend his stay while they deliberated on who the next replacement would be.

"The call is being held at the communication nexus room I take it?" asked Yang Qing as he made his way into the branch.

"Yes, considering the confidentiality of the matter, it's the only place we can guarantee the conversation won't be eavesdropped on," administrator Mo Guang said as he led Yang Qing to the designated communication room which was stacked with antiscrying arrays and other features that prevented one from being spied on including even isolating karma.

One could consider the room one of the most expensive and important places in the whole branch. Things of utmost importance were done in that room which was usually the receiving and sending of important information and even the receiving of strategic resources.

There was a transportation array in the room that worked similarly to teleportation arrays except it could not support living organisms passing through it. Despite its apparent limitations, any array that touched on the elements of space was difficult to lay down and consumed a lot of resources both to lay it down and operate it.

The transport array was considered a strategic resource that the branch would only use in dire circumstances, for example, if they were besieged by an enemy they couldn't escape, and the protection array in the branch wasn't enough to contain the enemy long enough for help to arrive.

In such a scenario, they would relay their current state to those at the headquarters in charge of handling such situations, who would then provide the necessary expedient assistance. That assistance usually came in the form of sending an artifact or a talisman of varying abilities which was dependent on what they were dealing with.

Yang Qing knew they were different grades to the transportation arrays. The grade was dependent on the level of danger in the area where the branch was located, the distance from headquarters or major branches, and the strength of the personnel within that branch. The one at the Deer Mountain Branch was a top-tier blue-grade transportation array that could handle the transportation of top-tier monarch-grade artifacts, but with the dangers around the place, Yang Qing didn't know if they would elevate it to the gold grade.

But with a kingdom-wide array being laid down on the range, Yang Qing felt it was less likely. The Order was pretty frugal in how they used their resources. With a whole continent to cover, they never had enough.

It wasn't long before Yang Qing and Administrator Mo Guang arrived at the communication and transportation room. They both stood before a bamboo pot with a young bamboo shoot growing out of it. Yang Qing took out his branch chief token and muttered an incantation that triggered a reaction from the token as produced a silver drop that contained an ancient-looking glyph within it.

The drop trickled down the bamboo shoot making its way downwards to the soil and leaving a trail of silver runes that combined to form a silver swirling entrance.

Yang Qing and Administrator Mo Guang walked into the silver swirl, appearing in a tiny courtyard with small bamboo shoots that had concentrated to the point they looked like verdant grass, a small pond, and a five-meter wooden bridge that led to the lone building in the area. The building was a thatched bamboo hut.

The area looked simplistic and tranquil and despite its minimalistic look, the resources used to build the area were more than the total spent on the rest of the branch. Just the bamboo alone was worth an entire mountain of resources in the branch. The bamboo growing about was a spatial shield bamboo which was used as a spatial node that anchored the courtyard to the rest of the branch, as the courtyard was an artificial mysterious realm built from tearing space and stitching a portion of it.

Yang Qing made their way into the hut which was just as simplistic as it looked. Inside were smooth wooden floorboards and mats that looked like had seen better days and at the center of the room was a bowl with crystal-clear water.

Both Yang Qing and Mo Guang took seats directly opposite each other while encircling that bowl. Yang Qing used his index finger like an inscription pen as he inscribed something on the surface of the crystal



clear water. With every movement, ancient-looking gold-grey scripts appeared on the surface of the water.

When Yang Qing wrote the last script, a gentle light was released from the crystal clear building, with its gentle crystal glow covering the entire building, changing the scene along with it.

In a few seconds, the walls, the roof, and the floor of the bamboo hut disappeared, and they were within a different courtyard that looked somewhat similar in that it had bamboo plants growing about except this time they were mature.

"Greetings, seniors.." Yang Qing said as he cupped his fists to the four figures leisurely sitting across from him with genial smiles on their faces.

"We heard you took to your role quite well, Yang Qing...We could give you the post permanently if you want it.." said one of the figures with a teasing smile on their face.

"Surely you jest, Senior Long Enlai, without administrator Mo Guang's help or the rest, I'd be fumbling about.." said Yang Qing, using a humble way of saying he did not want the job.

"Are you sure?" asked Long Enlai with a meaningful look.

"The pay is not bad, the environment will be safe once the array is completed, the caseload isn't that high, the pay is better, kind working hours, and because of how good you are, we could be amenable to adding another chef to your retinue here..

What do you think?" added Long Enlai.

Yang Qing's face went pale as every word spoken by Long Enlai felt like a soothing voice guiding his soul to the paradise of his dreams.

He could feel an enthralled voice within him whispering take it, take it, take it, this is what you have always wanted, take it.

"I am sorry Senior, I think I still have much to learn before I can take on such enormous responsibilities.." said Yang Qing with heavy panting almost as if he had come from the greatest fight of his life.

It took all he had to not say 'yes', he had to dig deeper into his inner coward for him to resist the temptation. He also had an unresolved battle with Lei Weiyan that fueled his will to leave the same as his fears.

"Stop teasing him, Enlai.." softly said the single woman from the group of four. It was Xu Biya another one of the members of the Judicial Review Committee.

"I told you he wouldn't agree. I expect that 20,000-year-old ancient pine breeze wine when we are done here.."

"He was close, a few more seconds and he would have caved in.."

"Seniors, can't you be serious? You even made bets? How unprofessional....wait, shouldn't I be entitled to a part of the winnings? It is about me after all..that 20,000-year-old ancient pine breeze wine, I wonder how good it is.." Yang Qing greedily thought as his gaze fell on the two gamblers from the Judicial Review Committee.

One was Jiang Chen who had won the bet, while the loser was Jia Bohai.

After a minute, the mood instantly turned somber from the lightheartedness and this was due to Long Enlai's announcement.

"Yang Qing, your predecessor, Branch Chief Li Wan has chosen to resign from his post and will be taking a break to decide what he wants to do next, though by his admission, he has said he would not be considering a return to a branch chief post even if it's to a different branch.

Along with him, Inquisitor Ye An chose the same. She too has permanently resigned from her post as an inquisitor and will not be doing so for the foreseeable future. She has decided to transfer to the Talisman Refining Division.

As for Chief Inquisitor Hao Da, as you know he was due to be promoted as the next branch chief of the Three Fires Branch. He is still willing to take up that post and will be taking up that role in two months after his treatment has been completed.

And lastly, the previous administrator, Administrator Su Cheng while he has agreed to retain his job as an administrator, he has requested to be posted to a different branch, which we will agree to.

Ideally, we would have sent him to the branch Hao Da was going to, being former colleagues and all, but his current cultivation base would make him ill-suited for the role, and the current administrator of the branch made a request to remain at the branch as he already has family there, from his wife's side. Relocating him would be a bit improper..." Long Enlai said.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh at the announcement. While he had expected some to refuse to come back, considering the experience they had, all of them refusing was a surprise though not too much of a surprise when one considered they had lost two members.

If he lost members of his team, Yang Qing felt he would likely make the same choice as the previous branch chief and resign his posting and do something else.

"Who will be their replacement?" asked Yang Qing with a somber sigh.

Chapter 696 Best Suited For The Role

On reaching this point, it was the purple-haired gentle looking Xu Biya who stepped in to answer.

"Because of the unique state of the area and what happened, we decided to go with a roaming inquisitor by the name of Fang Wen.

She has been a roaming inquisitor for the past 300 years and is at the peak stage of the palace realm and not far away from realizing her path to the domain realm. She is already at the quasi-domain stage. This factored as one of the reasons we thought the post would be good for her despite never having been in a similar post before.

With how volatile things are, we can't risk the life of a potential domain expert, we need all the domain experts we can get, to cover more ground.."

Yang Qing nodded in understanding. A single domain expert was worth over a hundred palace realm experts. As humbling as it may be, no matter how talented he was, his cultivation base as a third-stage palace realm expert though could be considered decent, it was not enough to shoulder the true weight of the Order, but a domain expert even a quasi-domain expert was a different case.

Just because of her cultivation base and the critical juncture she was at, Fang Wen taking the role as the next branch chief made complete sense. Being a roaming inquisitor was one of the most volatile jobs out there on a normal day, let alone now that massive undercurrents were floating around the continent.

Being a branch chief was relatively safer, especially in the Deer Mountain Range. Barring the return of the fire adler bear's master, Fang Wen and the fire adler bear would essentially be the two known figures with the highest cultivation base in the range, and biases aside, Yang Qing didn't think someone who has been a roaming inquisitor for 300 years, seen and survived it all in that role, would lose out to someone of the same level.

Those from the Order were required to be a cut above the rest. It was a requirement for the inquisitors and even the judges that they needed to be able to fight above their cultivation base, losing to someone who had the same cultivation base as you was intolerable. It was only palatable if the person you lost to was someone from the Order.

It was why during their institute days, even as qi refinement cultivators, their death duels with the inmates from the requiem usually involved those who had at the very least reached the middle stages of the foundation realm, and even then, they needed to have firm foundations and fighting capabilities that made them stand out from the rest.

Such a training regimen was given to students after they graduated, specialized combat groups such as the different types of inquisitors, the gold eagle guards, and the shadow hawks, those who joined these organizations underwent specialized training when they joined to increase their odds of survival as much as possible.

The Order's role was like going against the heavens. When it was established, it was out of dire circumstances that threatened the continent's survival, especially with outside forces dipping their toes into the chaos.

When the Order was established, it was essentially created as a stop-gap measure. Their role essentially was to be some tree that would provide shade and nutrients to the seedlings below who were struggling

to survive against the elements. Even though it wasn't mentioned, most organizations in the southern continent did not think the Order would last or become what it became, nor did they want it to.

What they needed was for it to buy them enough time by acting as the binding line to the different organizations around the continent. It was the binder that acted as a show of a unified force to the outside world. To give the continent enough time to recover and once the recovery was done, those seedlings would grow and steal away the tree's nutrients and dry it out.

But that tree that they saw as nothing more than a fertilizer for their growth, that tree they had written off as an object created solely for their use, whose existence was to be based on their whims, had grown vastly beyond their expectations to the point it could now dictate their existence.

It had grown so vastly out of their control that they could not see its top, as it seemed to cover even the radiance of the sun. That tree now decided what nutrients would get to which seedling, and if one acted out of line, it would be pulled out.

The Order was valued at the beginning when the continent could barely hang on, but as time went by, and the Order grew beyond their expectations, that sentiment turned to fear and dissidence. The Order was now no longer seen as a protector of the continent but as a thief who was stealing the fortunes of the continent from the rest, stifling them as a result.

Such thoughts were shared by a few in the beginning but now, it had spread like burning wildfire. Right now you could visit an inn and hear bards tell the tales of how glorious the continent was before the Order was established, about how the continent was filled with dragons among men and phoenixes among women, spiritual herbs grew like cabbages that even mortals could eat their fill every day, middle-grade spirit stones filled the roadside like common rocks, villages filled with the same auspicious qi as prosperous empires, where the road of cultivation was smoother and wider.

They even touted the southern continent as the strongest continent among the five continents which was why it could incite their greed to the point they dared come to their backyard traversing across the dangerous waters that separated their continents.

The reason why those foreign organizations felt confident to venture this far into their continent was glossed over or intentionally ignored altogether, with the primary focus being on the southern continent's 'glory days' and how since the Order was established, those days were lost and the continent was no longer prosperous.

Some even purported that the Order's existence had angered the heavens, and the continent was being punished because of it and would continue to be punished until the Order was completely removed.

'For the sake of returning the continent to its glory days, the Order had to be disbanded, or removed by force if they refused' was the slogan being spread, and slowly supporters of that slogan had been growing in number from well-established organizations that were using it as a knife to gut the Order, to the young organizations and mortals who were sold the dream that the reason they're not soaring in the skies like dragons is because of the Order.

The bloodied past that almost wrecked the continent apart was slowly being pasted over by the tales of the Order being the enemy. The irony was, because of the Order's presence and the support it provided through various means such as enrollment slots at the Institute, countless organizations were able to rise from it, and it was these young organizations that were easily swayed by those tales.

Their history was too short for them to have been present during those dark days. They had no idea how bad it was making it easier for them to be sold on the dream of the prosperous era. As for the organizations that were present during that era, they had already recovered and no longer needed the Order, in fact, the Order was a thorn in their side as its presence restricted them. They would have long swallowed these young organizations had the Order not been presented.

The Order now had growing enemies everywhere both from the past and the present, and with that growing enmity, the Order was extremely sensitive to the survival of its members. Every loss was treated as that sword hanging above its head coming ever so closer which was why the loss of the two inquisitors from the Deer Mountain Range hit every member so hard whether they knew it or not, or why they went out of their way to celebrate whenever they graduated from the Institute or recently when he got promoted to the palace realm. Every improvement strengthens the Order against the sword above them.

"But just because she is about to reach the domain realm, is that really a sufficient reason for her to be given this post? Ideally, her being stationed at the headquarters makes so much sense as it usually happens.."wondered Yang Qing

Seemingly reading Yang Qing's thoughts, Xu Biya said,

"The other reason we chose her for the role is she's a spirit beast herself and she struck a friendship with a spirit beast from there when she was searching for a culprit that had escaped in the green fog region. The search lasted for two years and in that time she ended up striking a partnership with a metal moon tornado lynx. They saved each other's lives in there.

She was all too willing to take up the post because of it. With the whole thing that happened with the obsidian serpent couple, because of her background and history, it's easier for her to accept the conclusion we came to than most. With how fragile things are, she is definitely the best for the role.."

Chapter 697 Administrator Mo Guang's Choice

"No wonder.." Yang Qing said as he nodded his head in realization.

Fang Wen being a spirit beast definitely put her at an advantage over the rest as the next successor as the branch chief of the Deer Mountain Branch. While the information about the obsidian serpent couple being spared wouldn't be revealed to the Deer Mountain Kingdom, it was not a guarded secret within the walls of the Order.

Whoever took the mantle of the branch chief of the Deer Mountain Branch would definitely know that the couple was alive somewhere. Despite their innocence, it would be heavy for anyone who took up that post to understand it, despite the verdict being a reasonable one.

Yang Qing assumed that whoever took over would be affected just as he was. The reason he didn't like to walk around the branch and just settled in predetermined locations such as by the lotus platforms by the river to meditate was that his mind would wander to the two inquisitors who died.

He could feel their traces all around the branch, which was understandable considering both had spent close to a decade in the area. The branch had been a home to them for so long, and now they were dead, with one of them dying at the hands of one of the female obsidian couple who ate him after killing him. He struggled with that image especially the period when the couple was here.

He always felt guilty, like that inquisitor who had been eaten was looking at him and asking why didn't he seek justice on his behalf. Why was his killer allowed to live? Didn't the Order promise to avenge the fallen, no matter who did it, the Order will always strike back several times over. That was a promise the Order made to its members, but the obsidian couple was allowed to keep their lives after what they did.

Even though Yang Qing, understood why they needed to be spared and supported the decision, especially after hearing their story and the daughter they lost, but his heart struggled with the judgment despite being in full agreement with it, a part of him was always conflicted about and that was something he had a feeling the next branch chief would struggle with.

It was, for this reason, that of the people he thought would choose not to return, the previous branch chief was high up his list. If Yang Qing struggled this much, he could only imagine what it would be like for the previous branch chief. Fang Wen as a spirit beast herself and a member of the Order was uniquely positioned to deeply understand both sides, so the burden on her would likely be lighter.

"What kind is she?" Yang Qing curiously asked.

"She is an ethereal swiftlark.." answered Xu Biya.

Yang Qing nodded in contemplation as he tried to recall any information he knew about the spirit beast. From what he could remember, he knew they had tremendous speed capable of even bypassing a cultivator's palace sense and protective mechanisms as though there was no one there.

The ethereal swiftlark's speed rivaled even that of a cloud-swallowing kite like Ellie. Yang Qing could only imagine how fast Fang Wen was at the quasi-domain stage. If she was to attack him, he had doubts about whether he would be able to sense the attack, his only hope of survival was relying on his body's regeneration and ability to take a hit but even then, his chances of surviving that first attack were slim to none, let alone a follow-up.

His thoughts of his sound defeat at the hands of his successor were immediately interrupted as Xu Biya announced the rest of the team.

"As for the rest of her team, replacing and moving about four inquisitors is liable to affect the operations around, we thus settled on sending the top four trainee roaming inquisitors.

The exposure and experience there will do them some good, especially under the guidance of one of their own..." said Xu Biya.

She paused slightly as her gaze fell on Mo Guang with a slight smile on her face.



"As for the administrator, Administrator Mo Guang has volunteered to continue his stay there, for which we are immensely grateful Administrator Mo Guang. I know the promise you made. You decided to settle back at the headquarters for stability for your wife and son. We are thankful for that.." said Xu Biya.

"We are thankful for your sacrifice.." said Long Enlai with his sentiments being echoed by Jiang Cheng and Jia Bohai.

"Thank you, but it's not much of a sacrifice, really," said Administrator Mo Guang with a genial smile.

"My wife is already in seclusion, who knows how long that will be, and my son already has a life of his own now after he graduated. It's only me at home, a little excursion would do me some good, and being here.." Mo Guang paused as he turned his gaze around with a nostalgic sigh.

"Being here made me realize how I missed this. As I said earlier, I will at most only be able to stay for three years which by my estimates should be how long Meilin's seclusion will last. After that, no matter how much I love being an administrator, I will have to leave.

She gave up a lot for me to pursue my heart's desires, and I want to do the same for her..." added Mo Guang with a tender gaze as he recalled that gentle-looking lady who despite her desire to work as a herbologist at the Medical Valley and how good she was at it, decided to shelf everything for almost 400 years as Mo Guang became a rotational administrator moving from branch to branch as per need basis.

Mo Guang always had an adventurous spirit and liked experiencing every thing under the sun. Before he joined the Order, he had been a rogue explorer of the Horizon Odyssey Guild, however, with a lacking background and training, he discovered how difficult it would be to travel around with his abilities, thus his paths led him to the Order.

The Order became a chance for him to realize his adventurous dreams. He had decided he would be a roaming inquisitor, but alas, his abilities couldn't match it, and he therefore settled for the next best thing, a rotational administrator which just like its name was an administrator who was sent from branch to branch to fill in.

Through various circumstances such as breakthroughs, reassignments and such, administrator posts in various branches would be left temporarily empty and it was the job of the rotational administrator to fill those gaps. Mo Guang got to visit different places because of it, and his wife went with him till eventually he made a promise that he would seek reassignment back at the headquarters once he hit the 400th-

year mark.

That mark came sooner than he expected, and no matter how reluctant he felt, he could not bring himself to deny his wife the chance to explore her dreams. It has been 30 years since, and even though he missed being out and about, he was glad he got to keep his word and his time at the headquarters was relaxing and entertaining as he got to instruct potential branch administrators.

He jumped at the opportunity to be a temporary administrator of this branch to scratch the longing itch that he had, and even though it felt just as good, being here made him realize how much he loved the job but also how much he ended up enjoying being still as an instructor, a husband and a father at headquarters.

Being here, helped him gain some clarity and peace of mind. At least now after comparing those two feelings, him here at the branch and him at home, he didn't feel like he was losing out or wasting away or settling for less.

Chapter 698 Sacred Flame Swan Lineage

"Don't undersell yourself, administrator Mo Guang, three years is more than enough for us, even just one year will give us enough time to train up permanent replacements for the branch. The array would have made significant progress in a year or so, which should give us enough leeway in who we choose to come here and you volunteering even if it's just for a short while helps us a lot.. " said Long Enlai

"I owe the Order a lot, I am glad to help in any way that I can.." answered Mo Guang.

Yang Qing wasn't all too surprised about there being a potential change in personnel in the future. Fang Wen was stationed here to take her out of the front lines and her identity as a spirit beast would be enough to steward the branch in this shaky period, but after that, she would have to leave.

Roaming inquisitors needed more domain experts than branch chiefs, there was no way she would be permanently stationed here as for the four trainee roaming inquisitors, eventually, they would be recalled back too when they were judged to have gained enough experience.

There just weren't enough inquisitors in comparison to the workload waiting for them, therefore the Order could not spare even a single one. They would only do so if it was at the express request of the roaming inquisitor and most rarely did, and those that did would be requested by the Order to take up posts as instructors at the Institute. A bulk of the combat instructors were former roaming inquisitors, with even a few special inquisitors mixed in with them, rarely would they be posted at the Branch.

With the succession of the branch already laid out, Yang Qing asked,

"When is senior Fang Wen reporting? By my count, I still have four days left..."

"Don't worry, you will still get your entire dues even if you leave several days early. We will not deduct it, and considering the work you have done while you were there, we may add a few gifts here and there in appreciation for your efforts.." said Long Enlai.

"I am only but a humble servant of the Order trying to do my part.." Yang Qing unabashedly said despite his true thoughts seemingly seen through.

"It is our fortune to have you, Yang Qing.." said Jiang Cheng with the rest of the judicial committee members smiling along with him as they looked at Yang Qing with the gaze of a grandparent finding amusement in the antics of their mischievous grandchild.

"You should expect her early morning on your last day, whichever day you decide you want to depart. Of course not today as she has a few loose ends that need closing, but from tomorrow onwards she will be available.." said Xu Biya.

"I think I'll complete the four days and close a few of my affairs here.."

"The affairs don't have anything to do with the chef do they?" asked Jia Bohai with a teasing smile.

"In part, yes.." Yang Qing said as he coughed in embarrassment trying to avoid the gaze of the four elders who seemed like they could read his inner thoughts.

He always prided himself as some sort of enigmatic figure but his interactions with the seniors of the Judicial Review Committee led to him to have doubts, the same doubts he had in his first year as a student at the Institute when he tried to take every class and course that was given out.

He had automatically assumed he was a prodigy in everything due to his cultivation talent, which was how he foolishly tried to enroll himself in every course he could think of, only to get overwhelmed and perform poorly in a bunch of them which left him at the brutal end of the vicious instructors and a cautionary tale for the rest.

Pushing those dark thoughts aside, Yang Qings said,

"I also met a sacred flame swan.."

"Ooh, where?" asked Long Enlai with a look of interest. A sacred flame swan was a rarity to even them.

Yang Qing went on to describe his meeting with Gu Xing and his interaction with her, the information she shared about the eerie figure she had sensed back then, and her suspicions of it being someone from the Deer Mountain Kingdom. He also disclosed the foreboding feeling she had when she came back to the Deer Mountain Range.

Yang Qing also explained his thinking on the matter which was in support of Gu Xing's guess. He revealed the offer made to the Hua Clan and the rest by someone pretending to be the Imperial Secretary of the Deer Mountain Kingdom and his suggestions that they use the inheritance blood crystals from the graveyard torch to improve their odds of reaching the palace realm.

Yang Qing explained his suspicions that the goal of the ploy may have something to do with a ritual or something that needs a lot of bloodshed to trigger.

The four members had solemn looks on their faces along with Administrator Mo Guang who was only now hearing this for the first time.

"I once met a sacred flame swan by the name of Gu Lao about 12,000 years ago. You said her name was Gu Xing?" asked Jiang Xiang as he furtively stroked his willow white beard.

"Yes," Yang Qing answered with a nod.

"Then she must be the baby sacred flame swan he had said he was caring for back then. Sacred flame swans adopted one of our ways when it came to names. While sacred flame swans are all interconnected and closely tied together to the point they can know when one of them is born or in grave danger or dying, even if they're continents apart, they use names to offer a distinction amongst themselves.

The nurturer will give their first name to the baby swan being nurtured. This practice has been going on for quite some time which by Gu Lao's estimates is for more than a million years. The tradition led to the creation of lineages based on those names, like he and Gu Xing are from the Gu lineage of the sacred flame swans.

There should be four other lineages apart from that one. The number was meant to match the five continents. I don't know much other than that, but I think there must be more to it than just using names to serve as a distinction, but that's beside the point.." Jiang Cheng as his look turned graver.

"Back then, he had said the exact words as Miss Gu Xing. He could feel something brewing within the continent, and a thousand years later, continent-wide bloodshed soaked this continent, after that, invaders from other continents smelling blood, came over.

Most think that it ended with them coming over and the two holy lands reacting to their presence and sending them packing but it couldn't be further from the truth..." Jiang Cheng said with clear disdain in his tone.

#### Chapter 699 Deducing The Identity

"Those 'holy lands' the so-called saviors of the continent only acted when those invaders had made significant inroads to the continent.

Yes, back then countless sects, clans, empires, kingdoms, and other factions had fallen to each other's hands, but others had fallen to the invaders who destroyed them root and stem while pillaging them.

Countless legacies missing today are in their hands. The two holy lands only stepped in when the other big players of those continents walked in and set their sights on them, but by that time, the damage done by those invaders was already extensive, and the little scuffle after between the holy land and them, only added to it.

Though Gu Lao couldn't have expected the gut feeling he had was a continent-wide war, that even managed to draw in foreign forces, his feeling was right on the mark. I think it may have ties to how sacred flame swans come to be, with their ties being in the origin dao, they're sensitive to certain changes even if they can't make clear sense of them, especially dangerous ones.

It is how they have been able to keep themselves alive for so long, despite being actively coveted all over the world.

You are right, Miss Gu Xing's feelings, cannot be ignored.." solemnly said Jiang Cheng.

"Enlai, you'll have to inform the spirit council..Elder Han Guo will have to be appraised of this so he can keep a close watch on them as he lays down the framework of the array there.." added Jiang Cheng.

"Ideally it would have been easier if we had the special inquisitors permanently stationed there.." said Jia Bohai with a sigh.

"It can't be helped with how many fires they are sent to around the continent, they can hardly keep up as is to the point that the gold eagle guards have to deployed along with them.." said Long Enlai with a stern consternation.

"If someone from there is plotting something, it means they have the confidence of hiding their tracks, even from us. I doubt karma deduction will work but with the manpower shortage we could try and see if we could glean anything from it.." said Xu Biya.

"I don't know if this will help, but Gu Xing did give me something. It's an account of one of the spirit beasts that may have had contact with the figure. Maybe the description he gave could help .." Yang Qing said as he took out the urn of echoes of legacies.

He poured a bit of his qi into the urn and activated it releasing the voice of the lunar fury crane that had fought against the eerie figure about 38,000 years ago.

As the recording was playing the four seniors all had furtive looks on their faces as they tried to pick something from the clues provided.

It was only after the recording had finished playing did they voice out their thoughts.

"A glance that can erode the mind of a spirit beast that was in the palace stage and one skilled in soul attacks at that. It could be a powerful soul art, or a bloodline technique, or some artifact..."

"Mmh, I think so too. When it comes to soul arts, the eye of the dark gulf of nightmares comes to mind. Those who master it are capable of eroding the minds of cultivators who are in the same realm. It's one of the few arts I know that is capable of working even against an early-stage soul formation expert..."

"I don't know, while the art is indeed capable of such a feat, don't forget its stringent requirements. The creators of the art, the Stygian Purgatory Sect had an elder in the peak stage of the domain realm succumb to madness when he tried to cultivate it to perfection. He wrecked the sect, and killed a lot of disciples and elders before he was finally stopped, and even then he couldn't regain his mind and had to be killed.

While it is likely that the copies of that art might still be in circulation despite the destruction of the sect itself and leading organizations going to extensive lengths to destroy traces of that art, the dangers and stringent requirements of cultivating the art are still there.

Its risks aside, it was still a top-tier gold-grade art that was already touching the domain of purple-grade art, and unlike other gold-grade arts, the failure of cultivating this one is having your soul consumed by the art itself. They would need a powerful pure yin treasure that is at the very least at the ascendant grade to even begin to attempt learning it, let alone successfully cultivating and executing it.

If the figure was capable of passing those hurdles, there is no way the lunar fury crane would have lived to tell the tale.."

"Makes sense. What about dark entropy distortion gaze, wail of the damned art, dreadbane art, aeon blight essence art, soul dessecation mutterings art..."

"Let's not forget physiques too. The nocturne echo soul physique, the hollow shadow will devouring physique, the oblivion veil soulbane physique, the cimmerician light reaping physique to name a few, are also able to cause the same effects.."

"We also need to consider acquired physiques. There are spirit beasts with those attributes which could be passed down by one who has made a contract with them.

Duoji the harbinger of fiery disasters the red-eyed white-tailed wolf comes to mind. Then there is also the dark ember sparrow, the grim whispering snake, the Gudiao that human baby shrieking condor, Chongming Niao the double-irised vulture of destruction, the malediction void raptor...

While the voice helps narrow down what to look for, the list is still ultimately too big.."

"We can only pull that thread, see where it leads for now with the special inquisitors digging on the Blue Soul Flame Syndicate route, maybe that figure and them have overlapping history. We could try and find a nexus there.."

The discussion among the four seniors went on for a while before finally they regained their senses. Yang Qing couldn't help but admire the breadth of their wisdom and experience. They had discussed over a thousand different scenarios, bouncing ideas and probabilities off each other, sieving down through them, slowly creating a guiding path.

Yang Qing could only make sense of about a third of what they were discussing. When he went back, he decided he would focus on that a third along with any ideas he may come up with.

#### Chapter 700 Receiving Good News

"Gu Xing told me the Deer Mountain Kingdom was built on the remains of some ancient empire called the Bi Xie Empire. The seniors may know more about it than I do. Could that eerie sensation have something to do with some artifact or anything that the Empire had owned?



I don't know much about its history, but I have read about artifact spirits becoming deranged like wraiths from the loss of their owners and some fiend organizations have created arts that harness that resentment. Maybe someone from the Kingdom may have done the same.." said Yang Qing.

"While that is indeed feasible, the Bi Xie Empire has been gone for too long now. Artifact spirits could be considered immortal. As long as their main body remains intact, they will continue to exist no matter how much time passes by.

It is only when they receive substantial irreparable damage to their bodies do they become mortal. Artifacts with spirits can self-repair, especially if they have an accompanying cultivation art.

It's rare for them to get substantially damaged but when they do, it's usually extremely difficult to undo it. The difficulty is the same as trying to repair a damaged dantian. Depending on the severity, the damage can either be a foregone conclusion as being permanent, or it can be temporary, but even with the latter's case like it was for Lai Lei, it needed incredible skills and resources to prevent the damage from being permanent and eventually restoring it.

Extensive damages on artifacts that have borne a spirit are rarely reversible as anything that can effectively damage it to that extent is assumed to be extremely powerful. It will take the hands of an extremely gifted artificer and astronomical resources to try and restore it, but even then, the artifact will never be the same and it will never be improved.

Most of the deranged spirits out there are a by-product of damaged artifacts. The Bi Xie Empire is from over 100,000 years ago. Any deranged spirit would have likely wilted away by the time the founders of the Deer Mountain Kingdom fully settled here, and even if one did stubbornly hold on, the spirit beasts here would have likely been aware of it before them.

Deranged spirits are hardly subtle, and if one has enough awareness to hide and survive the baptism of time, it would certainly be more powerful than the founders of the Deer Mountain Kingdom. It would be hard for them to contain it long enough to refine its resentful qi.

But, who knows, nothing is absolute. When you come back, I will have all the relevant information about the Bi Xie Empire sent to you.." said Jia Bohai.

"Thank you, senior. Also, could I have detailed information on the history of the kingdom, from the founders, the four great clans along with the other aristocratic clans from back then.."

"I will have it sent to you along with the Bi Xie Empire information.." said Jia Bohai as he turned to face Long Enlai.

"We can also have his clearance level at the library elevated to low gold grade, what do you think Enlai?" asked Jia Bohai.

"Considering he has been digging around on his own for this, no harm in letting him continue. What do you think, Yang Qing?" said Long Enlai with a mysterious smile that left Yang Qing shivering for some reason.

Ignoring that sensation, Yang Qing excitedly replied,

"I am willing! Thank you seniors for this opportunity!!"

He bowed with his child-like excitement showing in his demeanor. His current clearance was at a low blue-grade tier which meant he could access everything that fell within that range from cultivation arts to potion recipes to refinement techniques across the different schools of cultivation, to information that had been graded to that level, along with accessing library training facilities that were at that level.

The library at the Insitute was like a world in and of itself. It was a behemoth that seemed to have no end, with each level being like a world of its own. The library had 14 levels, with the levels being tiered according to the color grading given to foundation establishment pillars. It went from the white level to the purple level. It was only the white level and the purple level that had single levels within them, while from the red, orange, blue up to gold had low, middle, and high minor levels within them.

Yang Qing's level was at the low blue grade level. Improving one's access level was a tedious process as cultivation level had nothing to do with it, but it was all dependent on your merit points and graded contribution and station to the Order working hand in hand.

It was why Chief Song Chuanli despite being at the peak of the core formation realm had a clearance level of middle gold tier while Yang Qing had a low blue tier clearance level.

"Don't get too excited, the increase is only temporary, and even with our intervention we can only guarantee it for two months alone and your access will be restricted to things supporting the investigation you were conducting here. We can't guarantee anything outside of it..." said Long Enlai.

"Getting to breathe in the air of the low gold-grade floor is already enough for me.." Yang Qing eagerly said. He was not kidding about it either. Other than a difference in what was contained in those levels, their environment was also vastly different from each other.

The environment of the low gold grade level was no different than Yang Qing visiting the dark valley, the home of the domain experts. The level was suffused with dense and rich spiritual qi that was similar in quality to what one would find in a mature dragon vein. Whispers of different kinds of dao were entrenched in every inch of the floor, and it was packed with ascendant-grade resources and gold-grade arrays that were meant to support all who walked into that floor to make full use of everything within it, especially when it came to comprehending cultivation arts.

Even with restrictions, Yang Qing was sure to gain a lot from just being there. For him to reach the requirements of accessing the low gold grade level at the very least he needed to be a domain court judge which was so far away that he could only fleetingly daydream of what the gold grade levels were like, but now thanks to four elders, he could see that blessed ground.

His heart was racing with excitement at just the thought of it. He couldn't wait.

"After you come back, you will also be getting a month off to rest before resuming your normal duties.." added Long Enlai, which only increased the smile on Yang Qing's face that stretched from ear to ear.

Realizing how wide he had smiled, Yang Qing sheepishly said,

"Thank you seniors for your kind consideration.."

He bootlicked a few more times, before finally, the communication between the two sides ended, with Yang Qing as chipper as he could be as he even started whistling off-key.