

Daily life 731

Chapter 731 Settlement (1)

Following Wang Siyi's statement, Yang Qing waved over one of the staff members to make the order. He ordered a few dishes and wine and even made a point to order the 'Golden Lotus Delight'. It was one of the better cakes made by the restaurant and packed with flavors too. It was made from layers of delicate sponge cake infused with golden lotus flower essence, sandwiched between layers of light cream, and at the top were a few edible sweet sepals from the golden lotus flower.

With the Zou siblings coming over, the flavors of the cake could help them adjust from the trauma and shock long enough to string a few thoughts and sentences together.

"What happened to the head of the Flying Serpent gang and any other remnants, oh and yeah the blood fiend cultivator, Ling Shi.." asked Yang Qing.

Wang Huiying took a brief moment to collect her thoughts before she said,

"The head of the Flying Serpents Gang and the other surviving members of the gang were scooped up by your branch at the Yellow Plains County.

Once we reported the presence of blood-fiend cultivators in Purple City, the City Lord and us agreed it was better to involve you as we didn't know what those blood-fiend cultivators were after in Purple City in the first place.

We did also inform the Emperor, but he was otherwise preoccupied with other matters.."

Wang Huiyin and her husband gazed meaningfully at Yang Qing as she said this and Yang Qing could guess why. Previously when he had been at their restaurant he had casually asked them about the identities of the few people he had fought with as they tried to kidnap Ellie. One had been the child of one of the leaders of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, while the other two, one had been the former emperor of the Red Maple Empire, and also the present Emperor's grandfather, Duan Hou. At the same time, the third culprit had been the branch leader of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion branch within the Empire. He was called Yao De and he was sworn brothers with Duan Hou.

After the fight, Yang Qing had the three held for questioning at the branch in Yellow Plains County. Their wanton disregard and attempt to kidnap Ellie despite knowing she had a partner made Yang Qing assume it wasn't the first time that the three behaved that way. The former emperor, Duan Hou, and the branch leader Yao De catering to the demands of the arrogant and spoiled Lin Duyi, who was the only child of Lin Guiren, one of the domain experts and leaders of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.

From the little bit of research, he did before and after he visited Purple City, he knew the Red Maple Empire, more so the royal family was backed by the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, which was why most of their subsidiaries could be seen densely spread about through most of their prosperous cities.

Yang Qing didn't know the exact details of their partnership, but he felt it was more of a subordinate than a partner when it came to the two. The reason for this discounting the strength of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, the Empire's enemy, the Five Clover Kingdom was backed by the rank 2 Clan, the Zou family. The only way the Red Maple Empire could contest against the Kingdom was if they had a backing at the same level as the Zou family, which they did in the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.

With such a relationship, it wasn't strange that the young scion of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion behaved as he did, and why the former emperor behaved as his lackey. The scion's behavior and the Empire's attitude toward him made it highly likely for similar incidents to have occurred and covered up.

Yang Qing left the leg work to the Yellow Plains County branch and would likely be able to dig up more than an inquisitor from the main branch, while Yang Qing would handle the case if they indeed found something to his suspicions. However because the case potentially involved the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, it needed a domain judge to be involved. Luckily for him, there was one within their ranks who had some history with one of the founders of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion. It was a domain inner court judge by the name of Hou Dehui.

"I think Branch Chief Luo Xiaofan should have already gathered everything by now. I should give her a call after this...Maybe senior Yu Gen and Xia Ting already have the information.." thought Yang Qing before he pulled his thoughts back to the case.

Unwilling to divulge too much about the state of the former emperor and the rest, Yang Qing diverted attention as he asked about the blood-fiend cultivator by the name of Ling Shi.

"I don't know whether it was out of desperation or due to the suddenness of the attack or something else, but she ended up using one of the escape routes of the Flying Serpent Gang. We managed to catch her in time before she disappeared. We assumed her abilities would more or less match the other blood

fiend cultivator who displayed the abilities of someone who was at the middle stages of the core formation realm but we grossly underestimated her abilities.

The fourteen guards we sent after her while we mopped up the rest were annihilated despite them all being in the core formation realm. It was only thanks to that kid, Duan Kong, the captain of the Purple City Guards, putting his body on the line managed to hold her back a little, which bought us enough time for me and my wife to rush over.

I may have grown rusty over the years, but even with me and my wife working together, it still took everything to contain her, despite her only being at the eleventh stage of the core formation realm. It was only thanks to the timely assistance of the owner of the Earthvine Restaurant did we manage to break the stalemate and injure her.

I always knew there was more to that owner than met the eye.." said Wang Siyi as he stroked his beard with respect shining in his eyes, only to be elbowed by his wife for digressing.

Coughing in embarrassment, he added.

"After we gravely injured her, she used the little energy she had to execute a secret art that she used to destroy her own body and soul.

I can't help but wonder did she take her own life to avoid the fate that would befall her if she was captured, or if was it because there was something she couldn't risk being obtained, and taking her own life was the only guarantee of keeping it a secret.

Now that I think about it her behavior was suspicious.."

"Suspicious how?" asked Yang Qing.

"As a blood fiend cultivator, it is reasonable to assume for her to survive as long as she did, or for any blood fiend cultivator to survive, they need to be continuously alert, keeping their guards up at all times, suspecting everyone and everything, and for her, she managed to blend in perfectly in Purple City, so other than being alert, she has to be good at reading people..." Wang Siyi paused as he thanked the staff who had just brought the wine and dishes.

"As the host, please let me.." Yang Qing said as he took the wine jar and poured it for the couple first then him.

"Thank you.."said the couple as they waited for Yang Qing to take the first sip before they could proceed to take theirs.

After Yang Qing took his sip, Wang Siyi took a sip of his narrowing his eyes as he savored the smoothness and chilly richness of the wine as it rolled down his tongue. He would have lost himself to it had it not been for the angry glances his wife had been throwing at him.

Yang Qing couldn't help but smile as he appreciated at least the couple seemed freer with him around than the first time.

"Sorry for that... Now as I was saying, for someone capable of surviving in a place bustling with cultivators, surely she needed to be good at reading others to avoid any mishap of being discovered as a blood fiend cultivator and also blending in seamlessly.

How could someone like that not know the character of the head of the Flying Serpents Head and how he would react if he were ever caught?

If she had to escape why would she use the routes that the head would know or other members of the gang? If she did use them, she would be putting herself at the mercy of their discretion and loyalty, which they definitely don't have.

It's safer to create her contingencies and from the admission of the head, she had been with them for 150 years which is more than enough time for her to make them. Yet, she chose to use an escape route that someone from the gang would know.

It's highly suspect. Next is how little Duan Kong managed to contain her. He may be more talented than most, and his royal bloodline affords him a body that has high vitality and regeneration, but fighting Ling Shi, we saw for ourselves how terrifying her abilities were, Duan Kong should not have been able to hold her back for as long as she did, let alone even survive, but he did, which some part of me thinks... It may have been deliberate on Ling Shi's part.."

"You suspect she wanted to lure you all over?"

"I think so... I don't know maybe to divert our attention and create an opening for another blood fiend cultivator to escape, or maybe something else, but whatever it is, it was well worth it for her to sacrifice her life for it.." said Wang Siyi with a grim expression.

"Only time can tell, hopefully, my colleagues from Yellow Plains County might have some answers for us.." said Yang Qing with a sigh.

"But for now, the only matter we need to focus on is your settlement. Speaking of which they are here.." added Yang Qing with a smile.

Chapter 732 Settlement (2)

The couple hurriedly looked around with excitement clearly showing on their wrinkled faces as they looked around them before their eyes narrowed to two figures walking slowly outside the window being held by the hands of some youth who looked to be in his late teens.

Their excitement quickly turned to frowns then worry the longer their eyes fell on the two figures and they couldn't help but turn to Yang Qing with eyes that seemed to ask,

"What happened to them? Why are they like that? Is that really them?"

Yang Qing's only response was a smile followed by him sampling the dishes on the table and encouraging the couple to try some, who did not, as their eyes were glued to the stairs that led to their floor.

"They're okay.." Yang Qing softly added as he chewed on a star lobster.

He could see the anxiety and worry growing in the couple with every millisecond that passed by. Yang Qing's words did little to alleviate the worry. They had seen what they had seen, and that was the farthest thing from okay.

Refusing to blink or even move their eyes from the staircase, the object of their attention appeared, and their pupils couldn't help but tremble as they saw the two figures finally appear, slowly by slowly revealing their entire bodies.

Wang Huiyin who looked to be at the edge of her seat hurriedly lept up as she ran over to the two figures almost tripping over Wang Siyi's chair, who wasn't far behind as he too stood up and headed in the same direction as his wife.

"Yi'er! Liqin! Is that you?!" worriedly asked Wang Huiyin as she appeared like a phantom at the stairs directly in front of the two figures.

"Yi'er..Liqin.." Wang Siyi gently called out with worry and uncertainty when he saw the lack of reaction from the two figures who seemed to be in a daze.

He and his wife knelt beside the two figures as Wang Huiyin asked,

"What happened to them?"

Her tone was rife with worry, anxiety, and a little bit of anger.

The youth who had been holding the hands of the two figures smiled politely as he gently unclasped the two hands from his and motioned for the couple to bring out their hands to take over.

Wang Huiyin held the other hand of the figure on the left, while Wang Siyi held the hand of the figure on the right.

"Forgive my wife's tone, but please can you tell us what happened to them?" asked Wang Siyi adopting a more polite tone with the smiling teen who had a cultivation base that was in the early stage of the core formation realm wearing the same orange and black robes as the two figures.

"They survived the baptism and I'm honored to call them my brother and sister.." said the youth still wearing the same polite smile.

The couple wore bewildered expressions at the response but they were too preoccupied with worry to spare the answer much thought. Out of worry, the couple wanted to carry the two figures only to be stopped by the youth who said,

"Let them walk on their own two feet, they can.."

Just as Wang Huiyin was about to let out a retort, Yang Qing who suddenly arrived where they were, spoke,

"He is right, just walk with them .."

"Zou Yi, Zou Liqin, congratulations, you did well.." added Yang Qing with a gratified smile as his gaze fell on the two figures who looked to be walking husks. One look at them and one would think they were seeing calcified corpses. The two were nothing but bones with their skins hanging on their bones.

Before, when he met them in Purple City, while they looked slightly emaciated from not eating the nutritional amount and quality required by bronze-stage cultivators, their bodies still looked somewhat sturdier and healthier than a mortal's, but now, they looked like even a slight breeze would topple them over, with their robes hanging loosely over their bodies.

Their skins looked dry and slightly cracked, with their mouths heavily perched like that of someone severely dehydrated and malnourished. They had sunken cheeks, and one could see the ribs of their chests showing from within their robes which seemed to be heavy for their twig-like limbs. Their bodies kept spasming, as their eyes darted all around the room almost as if in anticipation that something would jump at them.

However, despite how broken their bodies seemed to be, there was a strength within them, a strength that had been lacking when he met them, or when they took their test and when they finished it. The skins, though parched, dry, and cracked, would glitter slightly with a golden hue, evidence that their bodies were in the gold body stage.

Such a body hid a strength that was capable of shattering elephant-sized boulders into dust, punching through iron or steel as if it were made of rotten wood, skin so tough that natural fires and lightning strikes would leave it unblemished. The spiritual qi in the surrounding area was constantly flowing into their bodies like a river flowing into a sea.

Yang Qing could feel the fruits of all that they had endured during the past few months as there was a sharpness to them that wasn't there before.

The couple who had been too startled and worried at first to notice the changes, had changes in their expressions as they felt the transformation of the siblings and the power stored within their thin frames. They couldn't help but look at each other with surprise on their face before they turned their gazes to Yang Qing and the teen youth next to him.

As seasoned figures, they knew how difficult it was to achieve a gold body much less in under four months. When the siblings left, they had been in the bronze stage, but only three months later they were already in the gold body. They could count on two hands the number of cultivators they knew who had reached the gold body but none that reached it in such a short period. The results shown by the siblings completely overturned what they knew.

Today was the day they truly caught a glimpse of how powerful the Order truly was.

Yang Qing turned to the youth as he said,

"You must be Mu Gao, thanks for bringing them.."

"I'm honored to have been the one to bring them, Judge Yang Qing, just as another senior helped me back then when I was in their position, and I didn't mind the merit points offered.."the teen answered with sheepish smile.

"How much did the instructor offer?" Yang Qing curiously asked.

"Four.." answered Mu Gao with a bit of awkwardness.

"Figures as much. They've always been the stingy sort.."

"That they are.." answered Mu Gao as both smiled wryly.

Yang Qing fished out a wine jar from his storage ring which he handed to Mu Gao.

"For your troubles and also as a gift for your coming graduation. You can share it with the rest.."

"Thanks, and Instructor Huo said they have three days, after that they would have to go back and complete their reconditioning before they can come back again. They'll be given two weeks then.."

"I'll tell them.." Yang Qing said as his gaze fell on the couple that were walking the siblings like they were newborn deer.

He exchanged a few more words with Mu Gao before they parted, and he joined the couple in the slow walk.

Chapter 733 Settlement (3)

Even though it was just a few steps away from the staircase, the journey to their table almost seemed like they had taken a one-kilometer trek, with the couple slowly holding the siblings afraid that they would trip and break every bone in their bodies while the siblings on their part, they paused with every step as they surveyed their surroundings with excessive scrutiny, unhinged and on guard towards everything.

Yang Qing seeing their reactions felt an odd sense of comfort well up within him as he remembered how unnerved he had been in the weeks that preceded his entrance test. The wind, a fly on the wall, a sudden laugh, a low or high tone voice, everything would make him jump as he half expected something to jump out at him.

Seeing someone else go through the same motions made him feel that all was right with the world. Fairness was really an understated virtue at times and it was one of the few things he rather appreciated about the Order. When it came to giving out torment, they ensured all the students got equal amounts, with none missing out.

"Sorry, Zou Yi, Zou Liqin, but this will be the new normal for you for the next four years.." thought Yang Qing as they finally reached their table.

The couple sandwiched the siblings in between their seats as they hung at the sides. Yang Qing had offered to get them extra seats but they refused.

They looked worriedly at the siblings who seemed to be regaining some clarity in their eyes as they finally stopped frantically scanning their surroundings long enough to notice where they were.

"B..brother Yang Qing?" asked Zou Yi doubtfully as he saw Yang Qing seated across from him.

"Liqin, you're seeing him too aren't you?" he warily asked as he stretched his hand to touch his sister's maybe out of fear, or to confirm he wasn't hallucinating.

Zou Liqin nodded her head with the same doubtful expression with countless emotions flashing in her eyes. She was afraid, expectant, and doubtful as she looked at Yang Qing.

A few seconds passed by with the siblings warily staring at Yang Qing. The Wang couple wanted to speak a few times and make their presence known, but they seemed to be plagued with the same hesitation and wariness the siblings had. Only Yang Qing seemed at ease amongst them.

"You've grown..." Yang Qing said with an admiring smile.

The body of the siblings stiffened as they flinched slightly. The next second, Zou Yi smiled before the smile devolved into bleak laughter.

"He Shan was right, the test isn't over, whatever we were seeing the past few days was nothing but some hallucination. We must have triggered some array, or are in some spirit beast's territory, or maybe under the effects of some illusory plant. We did pass by some dreamshade hydrangas at some point, at least I think we did.."

"Brother, you think we are still in there.." Zou Liqin frightfully asked with tears forming at the rim of her eyes.

Zou Yi smiled bitterly as he said,

"What else could this all be if not an illusion? Big brother Yang Qing is here, look even Grandpa Wang and Grandma Wang are all here, look even how they're seated, almost as if they're sheltering us to give us the illusion of safety so we can let our guards down.

And the cake..."

Zou Yi stretched his hand out to the Golden Lotus Delight that was at the center of the table. He used his fingers to pinch a piece of it, which he ate, after.

"It's even able to create a heavenly taste.." Zou Yi said with a smile filled with despair.

"He Shan wasn't lying when he kept insisting we were in some illusion for the past few days. I hope my real body isn't being eaten by some spirit beast like he suspected. I thought we could survive to the end.."Zou Yi paused briefly as he stared at Yang Qing, then the Wang couple before it fell on his sister.

Zou Liqin lowered her head in shame as she softly muttered,

"I dragged you all down.."

"What are you saying Liqin, none of us would have survived as long as we did in that place without one of us being there. Not Lai Rou with his saber sense, not He Shan with his hunter's intuition and skills in alchemy and herbology, not Yu Mei with her skills in parsing through hidden traps and alarming dangers, or me or you, we all needed one another there.

Not even the monsters who finished in the top places in the first test could have survived there alone. Do you remember what Instructor Huosaid before he threw us in there?" asked Zou Yi to which Zou Liqin nodded her head as she answered.

"Less than five people since the founding of the Order could survive such a place alone, and even then, it wouldn't be unscathed..."

"Right...With the amount of talent we have seen, it's amazing that we managed to hold on as we did, and it's because we all did what we needed to do. Take pride in that.."said Zou Yi as he held his sister's hand.

"If this is an illusion with no way out, if I'm being eaten, I might as well make the most of it instead of worrying.." Zou Yi added with a carefree laugh as he reached out for the cake before he hesitated as a cunning idea flashed in his eyes.

"Since this is an illusion.." he muttered with a laugh.

"Brother Yang Qing could I have the best wine you have, and call me big brother from now on.."

"Yi, what are you doing?" frantically asked Zou Liqin with worry in her tone as she stared at Yang Qing half expecting him to smack Zou Yi on the head for his audacity. Her gaze even drifted to Grandma Wang who forbade them from having wine, till they reached the qi refinement realm.

"What are you worried about Liqin, it's an illusion.." Zou Yi said with a smug expression.

Now that he had given up all struggle, he could feel the tenseness disappear from his body as relief washed over him, making him daring. If he couldn't break out of the illusion, then he might as well indulge. Luckily the illusion wasn't a scary one aimed at breaking his spirit and mind, but one meant to have him drop his guard by offering many allures. He might as well taste wine which hopefully will taste as good as the sponge cake on the table infused with golden lotus essence.

"Here, this is Harmony plum bossom wine, that has been aged for 17,000 years. I would be honored to share a cup with you, big brother.."

"See.." Zou Yi smugly saidwith his eyes shining as he saw Yang Qing take out a white ornately crafted wine jar and open it to pour some on one of the wine urns.

"Liqin you should have some too.."

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Zou Liqin hesitated slightly before she meekly and softly said,

"Okay.."

"Good... little brother Yang Qing, one for my sister.." Zou Yi roguishly said before his body suddenly shivered. His eyes narrowed as he knew that feeling all too well. Living at the edge of death since he was eight, and the four-month experience in that hell they called the Golden Twilight Forest had engrained in his body the ability to sense dangerous situations and right now every bone in his body was wailing, telling him that something was coming for him.

He tightened his fist, as he prepared himself to retaliate. Even if he had half given up, he wasn't going out without taking a swing even if said swing would amount to nothing more than an ant facing off against an elephant. Out of principle or petty vengeance for all he had endured, he didn't want to be defeated without getting at least one shot in.

"Liqin, you ready.." said Zou Yi as he stood up in preparation, however, his expression froze over when he saw Zou Liqin innocently nibble at a piece she had sliced from the Golden Lotus Delight cake.

"I know I said make the best of the illusion, but an attack is coming, is this really the time?" he bitterly thought.

He had just turned when the attack he anticipated coming, finally struck, and it struck true.

"Who's your big brother?" a calm voice muttered as Zou Yi felt like a mountain had flicked him on his forehead, with the resultant shock traveling all around his body, with his legs giving out in the process that he found himself slumped on the seat as he grimaced at the hot searing needle like pain on his forehead.

"Yi'er you sure have a lot of guts for disregarding my words on not drinking until you were mature enough.."

Zou Yi didn't have enough time to process the pain before his body tingled again warning him of something ominous coming his way. Before he could register what was coming, he felt a searing hot sensation coming from his ear lobe.

Out of ingrained reflex, he yelled,

"Grandma Wang I was wrong! I was wrong!."

It was only when he uttered those magical words did the searing pain coming from his left earlobe stop.

With some sense of calm, Zou Yi was able to look around him. He saw Yang Qing smiling dangerously at him, Grandma Wang sending him threatening glares with her fingers in a claw-like grip as if she was about to strike again, and Grandpa Wang was shaking his head, as for his sister, she wore the same befuddled look as he did, with her mouth and eyes wide open, with the piece of cake she had on her hand almost slipping out.

"B.b.brother Yi, is this... is this still an illusion?" she warily asked.

Zou Yi smiled miserably as he looked around the table before he finally asked,

"Is it?"

"What do you think?" snidely asked Grandma Wang with her dagger eyes still locked on him.

Zou Yi's shoulders slumped as he replied.

"I hope it is.." Which drew laughter from Yang Qing and Grandpa Wang.

"Dear, stop tormenting him, he has been through enough. See you're even scaring Liqin.." said Grandpa Wang.

"Liqin is always the most behaved.." Grandma Wang said as she jumped to embrace the confused Liqin.

"You look amazing, child.." she added as she separated to give Zou Liqin a once over.

"This is real.." Zou Liqin with a shake in her voice.

"It is.." Grandma Wang answered with a warm smile.

Zou Liqin buried herself into her embrace as she said,

"Good.." over and over.

"So we passed?" Zou Yi said with half relief and half disbelief in his tone.

"You did, splendidly at that. Welcome to the Order, you two.." said Yang Qing to the two who couldn't help but cry at the remark.

Zou Yi tried to hold them back, and when that didn't work he tried to quickly dry them and erase all evidence of his crying as fast as he could, he only let himself go when he saw Grandpa Wang smile gently at him with a few tears of his own rubbing his head as he said,

"It's okay, this is worth shedding tears for. You and your sister did great, and you will be great, your grandmother and I are honored to be along for the ride.."

Grandpa Wang's words seemed to have been a trigger as Zou Yi's tears fell like a broken dam. It took a while before the emotions of the two siblings settled down.

"When did you come?" asked Zou Liqin in between snuffles.

"Today.." said Grandma Wang as she gently stroked her hair.

"Will you live with us?" warily asked Zou Yi. Everything still seemed so surreal for him, from the moment he met Yang Qing to now. He couldn't quite believe it was all real. Since their arrival, he had taken to pinching himself a few times to confirm it wasn't all an imagination.

"If you still want to have us.." said Grandpa Wang.

"We would!" the two siblings answered in unison almost as if afraid that if they delayed, the couple would change their minds.

"Good.." said the couple.

"The cake is yours.." said Yang Qing as he used his chopsticks to point to the cake.

"But not the wine.." he added with a smirk, which made Zou Yi's cheeks redden in embarrassment, drawing laughter all around, even from his sister.

The mood turned jovial, with the siblings bombarding the couple with questions about their journey, while also telling them of the various interesting things and experiences they had since they came to the Order, with hours quickly flying by without them realizing it.

The siblings seemed relaxed, better than they were earlier, however, they would still flinch at the occasional sudden reactions from the customers within the restaurant, and they also seemed constantly on guard with their bodies in a state where they could react explosively if need be.

The couple had been slightly worried at first, but with time, they were okay with it and even appreciated the sense of hyper-alertness exhibited by the siblings. With the experience they had as warriors on the battlefield and from being hunted by assassins, they knew the importance of being constantly vigilant. It was the difference to whether you survived or not, a thin thread constantly separated the two sides, and constant vigilance tilted the odds ever so slightly toward survival.

After they were done with their meals, and catching up, Yang Qing led them to the resettling department of the Administration Hall. The branch had its offices a few steps away from the Flaming Goose Restaurant. Once there, the relationship between the Wang couple and the Zou siblings was sealed by a saint-grade.

The artifact had a grand dao binding oath ability to it. The couple were officially recognized as the guardians of the Zou siblings and had access to said privileges as a result of it one of which was a place to stay.

They were given a long list of courtyards to choose from, to which Yang Qing guided them to the ones suitable to a small family as theirs, but even then, the size of it left the couple wide-eyed as even land for a small family was 1,000 acres and one rich with spiritual qi measuring to the standards of a top tier rank 3 organization. They had doubts if the treasured ground of the royal family of the Red Maple Empire was as good, let alone as large, and now it was all theirs.

After they made their decision, the staff from the settlement department along with Yang Qing led them to the place. The courtyard itself was on a plain with beautiful scenery. It had a few trees, a forest, a shallow stream crisscrossing around the plain, and wild vegetation with the least being at the middle tier of earth grade, with the bulk being at the top tier of the earth rank or low tier sky grade with a handful even being at the middle tier of the sky grade.

The courtyard was the standard design, being three stories high, with all the necessary requirements fit for a courtyard that would be used by cultivators. It had a few meditation chambers, an alchemy chamber, a smithing chamber, a training ground, store rooms fit for storing all manner of cultivation resources and maintaining their efficacy, a library though it was empty, a kitchen, living rooms, and personal quarters for seven people.

They had more than ample room and designation for all whatever needs they may have, and if it was missing, the Order would happily retrofit it to their specifications at a huge discounted rate for their first time, the next after that would be at cost with a little discount here and there.

The siblings and the couple were all wide-eyed when they saw the area, more so the siblings who despite coming from a rank 2 family and living in luxury during their earlier years, but after the death of their parents, and their banishment thereafter, slept in caves, trees, exposed to the elements and all manner of privation.

For all those years sleeping within a structure with four walls and a roof was a luxury they did not have but now they had more than that. Yang Qing could understand a bit of the emotion they had as they saw the courtyard and the compound that was now theirs indefinitely. While Yang Qing may not have had quite the same struggles as they did, when he got his first courtyard, there was that sense of safety, comfort, and exhilaration of knowing that this is now mine, especially after enduring the hellish torture of the entrance exams.

The courtyard was a form of validation, a place that says I see you, I commend you, now rest and take it all in. Yang Qing figured those intense emotions were the reason why most chose to stay in their first courtyards same as what Yang Qing was doing, and even those that move on, few choose to relinquish it. Such was the romance of the first courtyard.

Chapter 735 Ma Yuan's efforts

The administrator of the settlement department left soon after when he had made sure he had made all the necessary arrangements and provided all the relevant information. The courtyard was still not covered by a protective array nor was the courtyard fitted with any. The couple was advised that someone from the formation hall would come shortly to fit them and they all needed to be present so they could be handed the command tokens for those arrays and be guided on how to use them.

The couple had been worried at first about the maintenance of those arrays as they figured it would be of a high quality, a blue grade at least and something like that would require a lot of spirit stones, but lucky for them, their worries were misplaced as Yang Qing informed them the arrays, all the arrays around the Order draw their strength from the surrounding vein. All the courtyards were not constructed at random locations but in locations that were above rich spirit veins that would be able to meet the needs of the arrays and courtyards indefinitely, and should there be a problem with said spirit vein, the Order would be the one to handle it.

While they wouldn't provide other resources to the families, they would provide the accommodations and everything it entails.

The couple kept thanking Yang Qing profusely as they struggled to believe that all this was real. It took a moment before they felt they were not dreaming. Yang Qing stayed a bit before he left and let the couple and the Zou siblings enjoy the moment together. It was their start of living as a family and the start of a new life, a new beginning of sorts for all of them.

Before he left, he did tell the siblings and the couple about the timed visitation the siblings had which was only three days, and when it lapsed, someone from the Institute would come to pick them up for them to resume their reconditioning phase while also undergoing orientation at the Institute.

With all the arrangements in place, Yang Qing made his way to his parents' home to deliver the scallion pancakes he had promised to deliver whilst also checking in on them. It was already close to dusk by the time he separated from the Wang couple.

When he arrived at his parent's home, oddly enough he was surprised to find his father present. Usually, the person in question would do everything to avoid coming home all to avoid Yang Qing's grandfather, especially recently with his grandfather's admittance about working on a potion that would help temporarily suppress one's cultivation base a major realm below it, Yang Qing was sure his father would never be seen again.

So seeing his father at home and calm at that was rather surprising for him. Yang Qing couldn't help but wonder if his father had finally gone through with all the crazy ideas he had formulated against his grandfather, one of which was to jump his father, seal all his acupoints and cultivation base, and feed him a sleeping potion that would leave him asleep for at least two years.

Yang Qing feeling suspicious of his father, not that he would mind if his father actually went through with the plan, covertly asked his mother where his grandfather was. Her response illuminated his father's sudden bravery. As it turned out it wasn't that his grandfather was sleeping off somewhere from his father's doing, but that his grandfather experienced a sudden epiphany during his experiments and inadvertently triggered a tribulation for the core formation realm and had no other choice but to go with the breakthrough.

Yang Qing couldn't help but smile at the news, especially when he saw his father laughing every few seconds as he muttered something to himself. Yang Qing had no doubt he was gloating about his grandfather's misfortunes. To others, breaking through to the core formation realm was a worthwhile celebratory moment, but to someone obsessed with the body refinement realm that he wept months when he had to break through to the qi refinement realm, and wept longer when he had to break through to the foundation establishment realm, he could only imagine what breaking through to the core formation realm would do to him and seeing his father's gleeful look, he knew he was hoping it hit him heavily.

Yang Qing would be lying if he said some part of him wasn't celebrating the torment his grandfather would be in after he completed his breakthrough, stabilized his realm, and the reality of being a core formation expert hitting him.

"Have I become more sadistic since coming to the Order?" Yang Qing worriedly thought before he pushed those thoughts to the back of his head when he saw his mother bring food over.

He joyfully gorged himself with his mother's cooking. His brother and sister-in-law only arrived later in the evening. After the meal, he shared the transformations of his physique had undergone with his father and brother. Even though his father wasn't as fanatically devoted to the body refinement

physique as his grandfather or the other old codgers of the clan were, even his grandfather had to admit his father's natural talent and comprehension on the matter was one of a kind.

His father only managed to achieve the gold body stage, but his grandfather often said it wouldn't have been impossible for him to reach the diamond body stage or even the peerless jade physique, had he not chosen to break through to the qi refinement realm immediately after, just out of spite.

Their discussion went well into midnight with Yang Qing once again reaffirming the belief that one's insight and breadth of wisdom had little to do with their cultivation base. There could be countless cultivators out there with a lacking cultivation base but have unique insights on certain matters that others with a higher cultivation base might lack.

While he wasn't any closer to unraveling other mysteries of his physique, the discussion helped solidify his understanding of what he knew and discovered over the years. His father and brother also reaped a few rewards from the discussion with the former even getting more ideas to refine a few body refinement techniques he had and further lower the threshold of reaching the gold body among cultivators.

Yang Qing left soon after, leaving his father and brother to exchange thoughts and ideas on their various research while he made his way to his abode to have a good rest before the next day's events. Given only three days at the library, he intended to make it count. For the next three days, he would not take a single step outside the library, he therefore had to get as much rest as he could, which he strongly hoped he could given how excited he was at visiting the library.

"I should visit Hao Da before I go to the library.."muttered Yang Qing as he made his way into his abode.

Once inside, he couldn't help but widen his eyes in amazement at the transformation in his abode. What was once an untamed wilderness filled with vegetation growing wildly everywhere all owing to Yang Qing's yin-yang jade nature physique now had some rhythm and order to it, while still maintaining a bit of the free-spirited charm of the wild.

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"Ma Yuan really went all out. Did he even rest while I was away.." Yang Qing muttered with stupefaction and admiration at the evidence of Ma Yuan's tireless efforts in revamping his abode. He could hardly recognize it.

Yang Qing's expansive abode had been transformed completely. What was once uncharted wilderness had been infused with harmony and purpose. As Yang Qing was walking slowly, carefully taking it all in, his sights fell on certain trees, trees that had not been part of the collection before he left. His eyes glittered with excitement when he saw those trees. It was something he had told Ma Yuan he wanted, and Ma Yuan had faithfully executed it.

Orchards burgeoned with plum, peach, and apricot trees, their branches heavy with ripening fruit, while clusters of fragrant citrus trees dotted the landscape, their vibrant hues adding splashes of color to the verdant scenery.

Yang Qing could hardly believe it took only four months for the trees to reach the heights they had reached, or to bear fruit. Even if their growth seemed to have been accelerated slightly, with Yang Qing's natural affinity with all manner of life, he could sense each tree had achieved optimal growth. Vibrant and full of life, lacking in no way including even its fruits. Nothing seemed to have been sacrificed for those trees to reach the levels they had reached. It was all the work of a skilled herbologist and farmer in Ma Yuan whose meticulous care could be seen all around.

Drawing upon his expertise in herbology and cultivation, he introduced a diverse array of medicinal herbs and aromatic plants, their potent essences infusing the air with rejuvenating fragrances. Among them stood patches of ginseng and goji berry bushes, their roots delving deep into the fertile soil, and clusters of lavender and chamomile, their delicate blooms swaying gently in the breeze.

While Yang Qing had no use for medicinal herbs owing to the high-speed regeneration and vitality his physique afforded him and if he had a need for it, the green flame tree was more than enough to meet all his or any other person's needs. In terms of restoration, it rivaled even his abilities. But he nonetheless appreciated the herb's presence, especially with the aesthetics it added to the place, and some could even be used as ingredients in cooking like the goji berries.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh when he saw another one of his ideas birthed to life. A few steps from him he could see lunar light bees buzzing from flower to flower, aqua flow butterflies fluttering their delicate wings leaving a trail of blue drops as they moved from plant to plant, sapphire scarab beetles producing a delicate shine that blended perfectly with the flowers around them, and serene vine wasps suckling on some nectar with evident delight.

Under Ma Yuan's skillful guidance, Yang Qing's once untamed domain blossomed into a vibrant sanctuary full of life and activity.

Yang Qing had already sensed Ma Yuan's aura on some part of his abode still hard at work. He made his way to him as he soaked in the transformation of his abode. As he looked around him he didn't know whether it was by design or a happy consequence of it, but his aura had been used as part of the transformations around him, which had in turn been a factor in the healthy growth all around. If it was deliberate, Ma Yuan's abilities were beyond what he expected. He found the man in question hard at work tilling the soil ever so gently mixing it with a solution made of various herbs and ground spirit gems in preparation to plant the sap of the twilight sky locust tree that was next to him.

Even though he was covered in sweat and dirt, his breath slightly labored, Yang Qing could feel how full of energy he was along with a pure carefree smile on his face, which Yang Qing had not seen in him ever since he met him. He seemed free and unfettered like a little kid engaging in a hobby he loved.

Chapter 736 Closing the chapter

Yang Qing stood silently, observing Ma Yuan as he did repetitive tests on the soil and other materials using various techniques that Yang Qing recognized came from the herbal cultivation book that he had given him.

The book was called the 'Elysian Enclave' written by a cultivator who called himself the servant of the spiritual cultivation gardens. The book contains over 10,000 techniques and means to plant different spiritual plants and the nurturing process from start-up to finish. The book was wholesome and extensive as it dealt with spiritual plants that touched upon the different grades from the mortal rank up to the ascendant rank, with the latter only having two entries.

Yang Qing had received the book as payment for a job he did for one of the Instructors who dealt in herbology. The same instructor who had a friendship with the current king of the Summerfield Kingdom and also one of the founders of the Ocean refining crucible pavilion. As a lover and collector of books he readily accepted it, though he himself had little interest in becoming a herbologist, the book contained harvesting techniques, and an extensive list of plants some of which were excellent delicacies.

Since he had already read the entire book front and back a couple of times and mastered everything by heart, giving it to Ma Yuan was no problem for him. Seeing Ma Yuan's excitement, he felt gratified for the choice he made.

Half an hour passed by with Ma Yuan wholly absorbed in the preparation process for planting the twilight sky locust tree. It was only when he was close to the end, where it was just him placing its sap into the soil he had prepared did he notice Yang Qing who was sitting a few steps from him.

He was confused at first, thinking he was seeing things, before the confusion evolved to being startled.

"Jjjudge Yang Qing?!" he said with a gobsmacked expression almost dropping the sap in his hands. Luckily his excellent bodily control as a former core formation expert kicked in and he was able to hold onto the sap while still staring wide-eyed at Yang Qing.

"Ma Yuan.." said Yang Qing with a smile as he cupped his fists in greeting.

"I was surprised when I came. You exceeded my imagination. This place resembles an immortal's garden.." added Yang Qing as he looked all around him with admiration.

"Surely you jest, judge Yang Qing..." Ma Yuan said with a sheepish grin as he reflexively went to scratch the back of his head before he realized he was about to scratch it with the sap of the Twilight sky locust tree he had in hand, which drew another moment of embarrassment from him before he decided to first finish planting the sap to avoid any further mishaps.

As he was planting it, even though the process just took a few seconds, for those few seconds, Ma Yuan seemed to have transformed into a different person. The awkwardness he had a few moments earlier had disappeared and was replaced by an aura that was as stable as an immovable mountain. He was meticulous and filled with an air that made it seem as if he was the earth itself nurturing the plant in his hands.

The moment he was done, as if it was all an illusion, Ma Yuan went back to his earlier slightly nervous and awkward demeanor.

"Have you eaten?" asked Yang Qing as he took out a few of the dishes Shi Hai had made for them as he left the Deer Mountain Range.

Ma Yuan had been about to modestly refuse but his nose twitched, and his stomach started grumbling when the tantalizing aromas of the dishes reached him.

With his cultivation crippled, his body though still regained the strength of a core formation expert owing to the baptism of the tribulation lightning, and he also had firm foundations having achieved a gold body, it now had constraints to it that were not there before when he still had his dantian and cultivation, one of which was he could get hungry.

From the moment one steps into the Foundation establishment, the body's requirement for food is reduced. In the qi refinement realm, one could go a month without eating and when one reaches the foundation establishment realm, that timeline extends to a few years and when one reaches the core formation realm, the body's need disappears completely as they can subsist off spiritual qi.

But now, for Ma Yuan, he was hungrier than usual, even more so than when he had been in the body refinement realm. Even though he still couldn't absorb and convert spiritual qi, his body still craved it and needed it lest his age started showing as it emaciated from deprivation and to curb that he needed to consume foods rich in spiritual qi which didn't need a dantian to convert it to a form that would be readily absorbed by his body.

Unable to refuse the offer with his eyes trained on the dishes, he said,

"I will humbly accept your hospitality, Judge Yang Qing.."

"Just Yang Qing is okay.."

Ma Yuan nodded as he said, "Thank you for your hospitality, Yang Qing.."

"No problem.." said Yang Qing as he divvied up the dishes and took out an ice spirit rice wine to accompany the dishes.

"How is Ma Ling?" asked Yang Qing in between bites and a sip.

Ma Yuan sighed slightly as he took a small sip of his wine.

"She's improving greatly, and even though she is not as averse to me as she was before, it is still disheartening whenever I see her look at me as a stranger.

We do talk here and there, amicably at that, but there is a wall of unfamiliarity between us, which sometimes makes it harder for me some days to go there.."

"Will she get better?" asked Ma Yuan with clear worry in his tone.

"She will.." Yang Qing firmly said as he stared at Ma Yuan whose tenseness eased a little when he sensed the certainty in Yang Qing's tone.

Yang Qing looked around him once more before an idea struck him.

"You could bring her here.."

"Yes?" asked Ma Yuan with a confused look on his face.

"Your daughter, Ma Ling. You could bring her here sometime to see your work and see what you have done with the place. Visiting her at the Medical Valley can't be easy for either of you, maybe a change of scenery might benefit you both.

As you are waiting for her previous memories to come back, you can create new ones here, who knows the wall between you may grow thinner.."

Ma Yuan fell into silent contemplation as he envisioned the scenario Yang Qing described and he couldn't but feel hopeful and slightly excited at the concept.

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"You're sure it's okay.."

and slightly excited at the concept.

"You're sure it's okay.."

"Mmmh, it is.. You look happy doing this, and who knows maybe her seeing you in your element will ease you both.." answered Yang Qing.

"So what do you think?"

"I would love that.." Ma Yuan hurriedly said.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you for all you've done.." added Ma Yuan with a smile.

"I'm doing it for me too. With two more hands, I can only imagine how much more amazing this place would get.." Yang Qing said with a cheeky laugh, masking his true thoughts.

He still had his guilt for failing to save Ma Yuan's wife in time, even though there was nothing it could change, the guilt though wasn't as heavy as it was at the start, was still there. Helping Ma Yuan did indeed help him too as it eased the burden of the guilt in his heart.

The two ate, and drank while sharing conversation, which was mostly Ma Yuan excitedly explaining how wonderful the book Yang Qing gave him was, with Yang Qing asking a few questions here and there on how Ma Yuan transformed the place. When he met the man, he didn't seem like quite the talker, though granted Ma Yuan had a lot on his mind at the time, but Yang Qing still felt that in general, Ma Yuan wasn't a talker, but when it came to herbology, and farming, he would talk endlessly with enthusiasm.

Slowly a few hours passed with the two engaged in easy conversation before Yang Qing had to call it a night and went to the nest of the celestial nesting weaver. He had told Ma Yuan he could use one of the rooms in his courtyard, but Ma Yuan felt uneasy about imposing and opted to sleep outside.

Seeing he would not budge on it, Yang Qing suggested if he was to sleep outside then at the very least it should be at the spot below the green flame tree where a hundred or so leaves of the tree had accumulated. The leaves themselves were soft and the tree had restorative properties that would boost

Ma Yuan's vitality and body condition. It wasn't hard to guess that Ma Yuan worked himself ragged, barely sleeping and eating, and Yang Qing could do little to dissuade him from it, the best he could do was have the green flame tree keep his body healthy.

After the duo reached an agreement, Yang Qing exhaustedly made his way to the nest. Though he would not admit it to the insufferable bird, one of the reasons he was in a hurry to come back was the nest. The whole nest was expertly built to provide the ultimate comfort and rest, something he was always in desperate need of. After a verbal spat with the celestial nesting weaver that proceeded to a short fight, Yang Qing slept officially closing his chapter as a branch chief.

Chapter 737 Meeting With Hao Da

Yang Qing woke up the next day feeling renewed, refreshed, and reinvigorated. Normally he would wake up groaning and moaning from dread as he imagined what misery the day promised as another menial worker, but today it was different. It was the first day of his leave, he didn't have to deal with any case, he didn't have to see old fiend Lei's face, and he would be visiting the library today and going to a floor that countless had dreamed of.

He couldn't wait, but first, he had a few loose ends to tie down, one of which was checking in on Hao Da with the other visiting the auspicious wood grove tree to see if there was any way of helping Meifeng to send her clones over long distances.

As he had expected, it didn't take long for Meifeng to call him to pester him if he had found any solution. Luckily she had called when dawn was just arriving, giving Yang Qing ample time to enjoy his sleep. Knowing she would likely continue asking about it, Yang Qing decided he might as well sacrifice a few minutes of his allotted library time and find out if the auspicious wood grove tree had a way to help her.

...

Medical Valley, Crystal Lake Pavillion.

"How was it being a branch chief?" Hao Da asked with a carefree smile with his eyes closed seated in a lotus position while absorbing the pure milky white mist coming out from a lake. Seated next to him was Yang Qing chewing on some fried sunflower seeds.

"You didn't tell me you were making so much money. Hao Da, I thought we were brothers, after all the scallion pancakes and the crimson hogs I shared with you, I'm hurt.." Yang Qing said with an aggrieved tone as he angrily munched on a few more sunflower seeds.

"The scallion pancakes that Aunt Mei asked you to share with me, or the crimson hogs that were being thrown out. I'm glad I didn't eat that thing considering what happened.."

"Their origin doesn't matter, it still doesn't detract from the fact that I SHARED.."

Hao Da knowing where this was headed, and the likelihood that the shamelessness of the person seated next to him wouldn't stop, sighed as he said,

"Fine, before I leave will buy a whole buffet from the Thousands Flavor, and should you decide to come to the Three Fires Empire, I will sponsor your food tour.."

"I knew you were good brother.." Yang Qing excitedly said before he added with some solemnity in his voice,

"Remember, no going back on your words, lest you suffer the wrath of the heavens. As cultivators, our words are as heavy as the heavens.."

Hao Da couldn't help but break his meditation as he glanced sideways at Yang Qing with a strange look. He couldn't believe the shamelessness of Yang Qing when he was the biggest welcher he knew.

"What?" Yang Qing asked as he cast a suspicious glance at Hao Da before his expression soon turned smug as he said,

"I know, I know, I've noticed it too.. I've been looking more and more like a banished immortal lately, I was even able to make a sacred flame swan propose to me. She couldn't withstand my charms.."

"You've always been shameless, but I didn't think you'd be this shameless. A sacred flame swan proposing to you? Did she have corpse poison in her system?" Hao Da said with clear disdain in his tone.

"You!! You!! .." Yang Qing said with shaky hands almost choking on his sunflower seeds.

"She proposed.." he added vehemently.

"Sure she did, same as all the other millions of cultivators who claimed to have married a sacred flame swan.." said Hao Da, clearly not buying it.

"I am not lying, she proposed. She offered to be my dao companion.."

"Yes, yes, she did.."

"But she did.." Yang Qing said with a defeated tone. The one time he wasn't bragging shamelessly and was actually being truthful, but he wasn't believed.

"I should have recorded the whole thing.." he added bitterly prompting Hao Da's eyes to twinkle as he asked,

"Supposedly where did you meet this swan?"

Yang Qing instantly perked up, seeing this as an opportunity to redeem himself.

"You would never guess.." he said with a mysterious smile.

"At the Deer Mountain Range. Can you believe it?" he excitedly said.

"How come you've never told me there was an inheritance ground in that place?" asked Yang Qing.

"With how averse you are about leaving the headquarters, would you have come to see it, even if I'd told you there was one?"

"Maybe I might have.." Yang Qing muttered lowly unwilling to be rebuffed.

"You met her there? How did you even know about it?" suspiciously asked Hao Da. He was sure Yang Qing would spend his entire time as the Branch Chief completely sequestered at the branch instead of wandering around considering the amount of dangers hidden within the range.

Yang Qing went on to describe the case of the Hua Clan, Xin Clan, Flowing Fist Sect, and the Moon Essence Cauldron Sect and also the ensuing aftermath.

Hao Da sighed when he heard the complete story. He said,

"The Hua Clan leader has always been ambitious to the point of being reckless, while the Xin clan leader, has always been a sycophant to people he thought were stronger than him, dubbing it as being flexible. He would have done anything the Hua Clan leader told him, same with the sect leader of the Flowing Fist Sect. Though he wasn't as subservient, he still deferred to the Hua Clan leader.

The Moon essence cauldron sect is the surprising one. Even though their martial strength wasn't high, they had a lot of connections both within and outside of the range. The Hua Clan couldn't force their cooperation even if they were marginally stronger. They likely offered something substantial to gain their cooperation.

The price of greed huh.."

"But a celestial sacred swan...I always knew the range hid countless mysteries and secrets but after spending countless years there, I would have never guessed they had a sacred flame swan among those mysteries.."

Chapter 738 How Would You Do It?

"You have no idea.." said Yang Qing when he remembered the thirteen perilous zones, the shady undercurrent within the Deer Mountain Kingdom, or the mysterious man he and Meifeng stumbled onto. The range was anything but simple.

Yang Qing's response drew a curious glance from Hao Da.

"It seems you had quite the tenure as the branch chief.." Hao Da meaningfully said.

Yang Qing sighed as he stared ahead with a forlorn look.

"It wasn't deliberate, it just sort of happened. Hao Da..."

"What?"

"Do you feel like a storm is coming?"

Hao Da's pupils flickered with a strange light as he asked,

"I don't know...Why do you ask?"

"Something Gu...I mean something the sacred flame swan said made me question a lot of things. There have been a lot of strange things happening all at once, that some part of me feels it's not a coincidence.."

"Like the attack on Lai Lei.." said Hao Da, before he added,

"and us.."

"In part, yes. Before I chalked up it all to the organizations being discontent with our presence. I assumed it was those organizations trying to reduce our so-called authority so that things could go back to the way they were.

But I don't know.." Yang Qing said as he scrunched up his brows.

"That strange figure in the Deer Mountain Kingdom, appearances of blood fiend cultivators in Purple City, the happenings of the Ice Emerald Sect, and the owner of that abyssal thorn tree, the alliance between the Golden Bamboo Pavillion and the Maple Leaf Manor... I don't know, it almost seems like.."

"Like what?"

"Like they're all gearing up for something. It's like they are all trying to prepare themselves so that whatever it is they're expecting comes, they'll be ready.."

"Don't you think, you're being too paranoid?" asked Hao Da with a dubious expression.

Ever since they were small, Yang Qing had always been conspiratorial about a lot of things which always landed him in no small trouble with the Instructors as they were usually the core of his conspiracy theories back then.

There was even one that managed to gain a lot of traction in which Yang Qing kept saying that the Institute was built atop a massive graveyard and the Instructors were malevolent spirits who inhabited that graveyard and had been unable to move on because of their deep-seated grudge and obsession that still anchored them to the land of the living. The reason they were so vivid and lifelike was because they belonged to some pretty powerful cultivators who were able to retain a bit of their sanity even after so much time had passed by.

Yang Qing had managed to convince a lot of the students back then, with himself being one of them. At some point the more he thought about it, the more it felt plausible that the Instructors were vengeful spirits, and the students were in some sort of test.

He and a couple of others ended up devoting themselves to learning all sorts of techniques on how to purge vengeful spirits. It was one of the few times, Yang Qing ever devoted himself to something so deeply. It was only after he failed severely a couple of times did Yang Qing finally realize his guess was way off the mark, but by then it was too late. He was tortured by the Instructors for a couple of months and was even sent to a cursed battlefield filled with vengeful ghosts and spirits, so he could properly hone the purging techniques he had studied and deepen his understanding of what vengeful spirits look like.

Hao Da couldn't help but think that this was another one of his crazy speculations. Yang Qing knew the thoughts that were running through Hao Da's head. He didn't explain further. He hoped it was just him overthinking things, and it was his life-honed paranoia getting the best of him, but if it wasn't, he couldn't help but wonder what it was they were preparing for.

Was it the destruction of the Order? Or was that a phase of the plan?

Yang Qing's brain buzzed as he remembered something. It wasn't too long ago that a strange fern was found in the body of an unassuming cultivator which ended up triggering Yang Qing's physique for some reason which landed him in a coma for a few days and unable to use his physique for a month.

From what the Valley Master told him, that fern was specially engineered by combining two saint-grade materials which were both geared to ensure the fern remained undetectable with parasitic abilities. But undetectable until when? The when didn't even matter, as the fact that they appeared in the Medical Valley, it was certain their target was the Medical Valley.

"Hao Da, if you were to attack the Order, how would you do it?"

"What are you talking about now?" Hao Da said with exasperation.

"I am serious...if you were to attack the Order how would you do it?"

Seeing Yang Qing's serious look, Hao Da sighed as his look turned pensive.

"If I was to do it, well first, I wouldn't do it alone. Not even the two holy lands would dare attack the Order alone.."

Yang Qing nodded at the statement before he remembered the Hua Clan and the other three organizations in their coalition.

"What if we had something so valuable that it would make one of them willing to take the risk? Something that they wouldn't want to share with others?"

"It would have to be a pretty precious something, but even then, they'd need to confirm that something is indeed with the Order, for them to be willing to make the sacrifice, and the best way to confirm it, is if they had someone on the inside.."

Yang Qing frowned as he said,

" A traitor?"

"Even the Order isn't infallible, Yang Qing. There are bound to be those whose hearts are elsewhere. Besides you've heard the same rumors as I have about the dragon pillar at the Requiem and those who are housed there..." Hao Da somberly said.

"I know but still..." Yang Qing said as he shook his head. He didn't want to believe that the Order would have traitors in as much as it was pragmatic for him to expect, after all, even though it was purely hearsay, in Requiem, one of the pillars, the dragon pillar was rumored to house former members of the Order who had betrayed it. Though the rumor was unproven, most who heard it believed there must be some truth to it, including Yang Qing himself.

"But a traitor isn't the only way.." said Yang Qing, drawing a curious glance from Hao Da.

"Someone with personal connection or history with that something could very well discern its existence. We know certain connections or karma transcend lifetimes, and with the various means cultivators have, while it might be a bit difficult, it's not entirely impossible for them to discern its existence or true location even if it's hidden within the Order. .." added Yang Qing.

Hao Da stared meaningfully at Yang Qing for a few seconds before he said,

"That may be true.."

"So after you get like-minded individuals, what next?"

"I would not attack directly, I would create a network and study the movements of the employees of the Order, from those in the branches to those at the headquarters. Their routine, the missions I could deduce like the evaluations, create cases that prompt their immediate action.

I would do all manner of things to lure more employees outside, and once outside, I would kidnap some and secretly investigate the others, some with the hopes of turning them into traitors, while others just to understand the abilities of the Order.

I would probably spend at least a hundred years on this to learn as much as I can about the Order from the random administrator to the up-and-coming students, to the judges across the different courtrooms, to the inquisitors the normal, roaming, and special inquisitors.

Everything and anything I can find, I will dig into, so when the time finally comes to strike, while you can't prepare nearly enough, having enough information will reduce the likelihood of hesitation..."

Yang Qing stared pensively at a sunflower seed that was cushioned between his thumb and index finger. He put a little pressure on it, grounding it to dust.

"How would you attack?" he asked.

"Probably attack all the branches simultaneously, along with any other known facilities the Order has outside the headquarters, and for good measure I'd destroy a few organizations outwardly known to have a good relationship with them to deter others from acting.."

"That's pretty ruthless.."

"We live in a ruthless world Qing.."

"That is true .." said Yang Qing with a sigh.

"Attacking the branches, huh..." added Yang Qing as he stared at the reflections showing on the lake.

Silence ensued in the area, with Hao Da seemingly in silent meditation and Yang Qing still munching on his sunflower seeds with his thoughts seemingly elsewhere.

Such was the norm of the interaction between the two, one minute they'd be talking, and the next it would be silence, with each lost in their own worlds. They had grown to enjoy it that way.

After close to an hour had passed by, Yang Qing broke the silence as he asked,

"When are you leaving?"

"In 13 days.."

"Isn't that too soon?"

"Most of my injuries are completely healed

Well more or less ..." added Hao Da when he saw the look Yang Qing was giving him.

"You really don't like being at the headquarters do you?" asked Yang Qing.

" Not that I don't like it, it's just that I enjoy the branches more.." said Hao Da with a carefree smile.

"Can't say I don't see the appeal..."

"Oh, are you thinking of taking the jump? I could get you a job as the librarian at the Three fires branch. I heard they have a good library there. What do you think? Good pay, no responsibilities. It's the perfect job for you.."

"Have you been talking with the seniors from the Judicial Review Committee?" Yang Qing suspiciously asked.

"Nothing like that...I just think Branch life would suit you just fine.." Hao Da said with a laugh.

" Who knows, when I finally get my revenge on the Order and Old Lei, I may take you up on the offer. I'm just not sure you'd be able to afford my services at the time?"

" Well luckily it's not me footing the bill.."

"That is true."

Hao Da and Yang Qing burst into laughter.

"Find me for a drink before you leave, will you?"

"I will.."

"Glad to see you're okay, Hao Da.." said Yang Qing as he got up to leave.

"You too, Yang Qing.."

..

After leaving Hao Da, Yang Qing passed by the Serenity Lotus Pavilion to check on Ma Yuan's daughter briefly before he made his way to the lair of the Auspicious wood grove tree.

The meeting was buried as he didn't want his library time to be cut into. He had already spent two of those hours conversing with Hao Da, and almost twenty minutes checking in on Ma Ling.

Not to seem impolite but still within reason, Yang Qing spent close to half an hour with the Auspicious wood grove tree. While his ability to travel distances with his clone had more to do with his innate abilities that could control void energy, he had learnt a few techniques over the years that could help Meifeng increase the travelling distance of her clone. One of those techniques was the cerulean small dipper star gate technique, an art created to mirror the space traversing abilities of the subspecies of the tree folk called the stargaze tree folk.

With it, Meifeng could warp through established fixed points that mirrored specific stars in the sky. The points were fixed not allowing much flexibility but with it she could expand the distance she could cover. The art was extremely demanding of the cultivator's comprehension as it touched on major laws of the world, celestial and spatial laws being one of them. Luckily, Auspicious wood grove tree offered to send one of his clones to guide her through it. Yang Qing had inadvertently revealed about his interaction with the mysterious figure which drew the curiosity of the wood grove tree.

With all pending matters handled, Yang Qing excitedly took out black shell filled with countless runes. He triggered one of them which warped him to his next destination, the Grand library of the Order.

Chapter 739 Visiting The Library

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh at the sight before him. He had been at the library countless times but every time he came by, he would be struck by the same look of awe every time his gaze fell on it. Even though it didn't exist in a separate space and shared the same ground as the Institute, its presence always made it seem like it existed in a separate dimension.

Yang Qing slightly craned his neck as he looked upwards. The building before him was in the form of a dome that seemed to touch the sky. Its size was so huge that it made it seem like an eclipse had arrived.

The building itself was made of gold silk living dao sand, which made it seem like a waterfall of gold sand that released an ethereal light and sound. One could feel the voices of sages of countless eras coming from each of the grains of the gold silk living dao sand. It was one of the unique features of the sand. The sand contained countless laws and profundities that made up the world, and it could echo them to the world in a perceivable form.

Countless meditation mats could be seen outside the library, and the reason for that was the unique feature of the gold silk living dao sand. There were countless cultivators, some from the Order, and others from outside who had obtained the opportunity either through the token allocation system and had come to the Institute as students, or through a merit conversion system. This was where the outsiders who completed the missions assigned by the Order could choose to convert the payment into a meditation spot outside the Grand Library.

Meditating next to the library while hearing those voices was similar to being preached to by a senior who knew their way around countless different types of dao. While it wasn't guaranteed you would harvest anything from meditating there, those who had high comprehension were almost guaranteed to reap countless benefits from meditating next to the voices contained within the sands. Some gained deeper understanding and clarity into their own cultivation arts because of those voices, while others found a new path entirely, with others receiving the slight nudge they needed to step onto a wide path.

Yang Qing himself had been one of those who occasionally meditated outside on those mats, especially in his first and second years as a student. Meditating outside always helped him string countless thoughts and ideas he had. The voices had a way of helping him separate the useless stuff from what was important. It helped narrow down his focus. He made leaps and bounds in his understanding of different cultivation arts because of it. He only stopped the meditation when he got into the superior core court and had his library privileges raised.

While meditating to those voices had countless benefits, inside was way better, especially the higher the levels one went. Comprehending the dao was easier inside the library than it was outside.

Wasting no time, Yang Qing walked to one of the entrances of the library. Yang Qing did not need to walk that distance, as he could teleport to whichever floor he wanted with the black shell in his hands, but he nonetheless wanted to enjoy the feeling of walking a bit of the journey.

Inside the library was like he had stepped into another realm. The first floor, also known as the common sense general floor, stretched as far as the eyes could see, filled with countless rows of shelves filled with scrolls, old tomes, books, talismans, reading tables, meditation stones, and mats, spread all over. The shelves seemed to extend to the skies.

Yang Qing couldn't help but smile when he saw the scenes happening around him, especially above him when he saw probably first years at the Institute, outside cultivators some looked to be part of the token system with others here as a result of merit exchange, but regardless of their identities, based on their faces, they all had one thing in common, it was their first time at the Grand Library, and it was the first time they used the Starry sky scroll carpet.

Carpets that looked to be made of some kind of golden brown parchment with scribblings that glittered like stars crisscrossed gently around the library like a piece of paper gliding with the wind guiding its trails. The carpets had cultivators sitting atop them and from the look on their faces, one could easily distinguish those who were used to it, from those who it was their first time. The latter all had looks of excitement, coupled with fear for a number of them who kept looking down as if afraid they would fall.

The scroll-like carpets were artifacts used to not only facilitate movement around the library but they serve as cultivation and meditation mats. Saying the library was huge, was an understatement, as just the general floor itself, Yang Qing couldn't completely sense it all with his palace sense. As a student, he had once tried to see how large it really was as a bet hinged on it, and he found out it was about the size of a prosperous city of a rank 3 empire, something like the Purple City of the Red Maple Empire.

Moving around a place that large would be as easy as a palace realm cultivator who could fly at great speeds and cover great distances within a short period, but expecting a qi or even foundation establishment cultivator to do the same, would torture them. They were liable to get lost in the place, or not find what they were looking for. That was where the Starry skies scroll carpet came into play. They were artifacts that helped the cultivators get around the library. They were sentient and also had countless arrays inscribed on them that eased the library experience for all.

Said artifacts could only be used if one had a library token, which served as the key to activating and accessing them. All the artifacts had the collection catalog of the entire library stored in them, and one could access that information by pouring their spiritual essence into the artifact via their library token. The catalog of information they had access to was restricted to the clearance levels afforded to their tokens. Once they had access to the information, all they had to do was think of it, and the artifact would transport them to the designated area with the specified information. And if the user had nothing specific just general for example they were interested in sword arts, the artifact would provide a list of all sword arts within that floor, arranged categorically either by elements or other factors along with a brief description that can assist the cultivator to decide.

Down below at the tables, there were spirit thought transmission balls that had a similar feature. However, even with the spirit thought transmission balls, one would still need to use the starry skies scroll carpets to collect them. It was only on the blue-grade floors that things were different. There were celestial flow orbs that would instantly transmit whatever scrolls, jade talismans, parchments, or other items of information from a single thought from the cultivator, and unlike the general floor, which had a communal sense to it, the blue-grade floors, even the top tier orange grade floor had private chambers for reading and cultivating.

Yang Qing used his token to call for a starry skies scroll carpet. Reading the unique signature of his token, a single-person carpet came to him drawing envious looks from the cultivators around who recognized the carpet as a floor-traversing carpet. Yang Qing ignored the curious glances around him as he closed his eyes to meditate slightly in an effort to calm his rapidly beating heart as he willed the artifact to transport him to the low-tier gold-grade floor. He could have flown there himself or even used the token to immediately teleport there, but using the artifact suited his needs perfectly. He was too anxious to fly by himself, and he also wanted to savor the moment of reaching there which an instant teleportation would deprive him of. He wasn't sure when he would get such an opportunity, but while he could, he would make it as memorable as possible, which included taking the scenic route to the floor.

The artifact went through special channels, moving from floor to floor, ascending to Yang Qing's target location, the low-tier gold-grade floor. He intentionally slowed down its pace, which was why it took

almost twenty minutes before he reached it, and when he did, he knew the place would shock him to no end, but even then he had underestimated how much.

Yang Qing's eyes were wide open in disbelief as he felt like he had been transported to some immortal's lair. Even though he knew he was indoors, he could see purple-gold clouds above him, surrounded by rainbow lights and rays filled with auspicious lights. Hills stretched as far as the eye could see, each hill releasing an ancient aura like it had born silent witness to the rise and fall of countless eras and epochs. Yang Qing's eyes went wide when he sensed thousands upon thousands of dao markings, lights, and charms being released from tiny cracks that had formed on those hills.

Between the hills was a meandering river that was ethereal and mysterious. In Yang Qing's eyes, it looked no different than the river of destiny as the water that comprised it seemed to contain countless profundities and laws, with the river being its source as it transported it all around the place.

"Is this still the library?" muttered Yang Qing when he saw the dense rich spiritual qi that was infused with the power of dao transform into different auspicious beasts such as the vermilion bird, the phoenix, the Qilin, the dragon tortoise among others.

Where were the books? the shelves, the cultivation chambers, furniture, and other facilities he had expected to find.

Chapter 740 Voices Of The Past (1)

Yang Qing remained stupefied unable to tear his eyes away from the sight before him. He kept pinching his thighs a couple of times to confirm that all he was seeing wasn't an illusion. Despite its stingy nature, he was constantly reminded of the Order's accumulations. Just sitting there on the carpet scroll, he could feel his essence, qi, and spirit being renewed, strengthened, and transformed by the second. He felt like his mind was being expanded, with his thoughts becoming clearer and sharper.

The voice being produced from the stream below, or the auspicious beasts above affected his palace realm, as it seemed to tremble with excitement and hunger. The ocean within his palace realm churned, the sun blazed with more intensity, the moon released a gentle brilliance and the green flame tree at the center vibrated with vibrancy as a blinding verdant light was released from every part of his body.

The voices produced outside by the living dao gold sands were like a candle flame when compared to the effects Yang Qing was feeling at the moment from this immortal-like lair.

Yang Qing was pulled from his daze when one of the auspicious beasts above him which looked to be the Xuanwu black tortoise sauntered its way to him. From the stories he had read and a few accounts here and there, the Xuanwu tortoise was said to be as big as an entire ocean but the one headed to Yang Qing was about the size of a regular tortoise, however, its presence made Yang Qing feel small in front of it. It was like an entire planet was headed towards him. Its pressure and presence were suffocating and overwhelming.

Yang Qing found himself igniting all the runes within his physique on reflex before he forcibly calmed himself down, but even then, he felt slightly unnerved as he stared at the Xuanwu slowly making its way before him. The unnerving feeling wasn't out of his regular cowardice and apprehensions, but out of a more primal signal like he was facing heaven's mandate. The beast before him didn't feel like the Xuanwu, while it did look like one, what Yang Qing was seeing, what was making him feel the way he was, was the profound law within it, something within it felt primordial and old, like something that was birthed during the foundation of the world. That law could suppress and contain everything from the skies above to the earth below.

Just as Yang Qing was wondering why the Xuanwu was headed to him, he felt his token tremble as it released a gentle heat. It escaped Yang Qing's clasp and floated gently toward the Xuanwu while releasing an ethereal light that came from all the runes and ancient writings on it being activated at the same time.

Yang Qing felt relief wash over him as the overbearing pressure of the Xuanwu, disappear. The ethereal light from his token seemed to have formed a bubble of protection around him.

Once the token was a few inches from the Xuanwu, the Xuanwu paused its steps and disintegrated into a golden auspicious light that made it seem like a golden milky way of stars as it flowed into the token. The token buzzed with a strange resonant sound as the golden light fell on it, and a few seconds later it trembled and morphed into a palm-sized Xuanwu.

That Xuanwu now felt like a real Xuanwu to Yang Qing even if he had never met one. However, he had heard that the Xuanwu was a master of all forms of the water element. It could flood the planet with one limb and encase it completely with ice that would never melt for eternity with the other. Everything that touched on water, it was a paragon existence that embodied it all.

If he was to have a special physique based on a mythical being, Yang Qing never wanted a phoenix, dragon, white tiger, vermilion bird, Kunpeng, or any of the others, ever since fear and self-preservation became his close companion there was only one mythical being he truly wished to share a bloodline with, and that was the Xuanwu tortoise. The reason for that had nothing to do with the mastery over all

the laws of water but more to do with something he had read about how those who were lucky enough to have a contract with it or its bloodline, would have an inexhaustible lifespan, absurd vitality and sturdy defense that was able to defend against almost anything under the sun.

It was the perfect physique for him. Sometimes he wondered if that was why he ended up with yin yang nature peerless jade physique. Was the physique an embodiment of his strong desire? He often wondered that because the physique more or less gave him some of the features that were common with the Xuanwu, like his high vitality and regeneration, and also the enormous amount of qi he had. It was rumored that a single droplet of qi from a Xuanwu would fully fill the dantian of several thousand peak-stage core formation experts.

While Yang Qing's spiritual qi capacity wasn't as exaggerated, he always had more in his reserve than those of the same cultivation base him, and that capacity has been growing during his recent breakthroughs with his physique. The only thing he was lacking was the sturdy defense, though if one wasn't completely technical about it, one could argue his physique granted him some defense, especially with his immunity to countless toxins and curses.

The only place he was lacking was the lifespan. His physique, coupled with his foundation as a purple core expert did grant him more lifespan than most in the same level, such as, as an early-stage palace realm expert, a normal one would have a lifespan of 15,000 years, and if they had a purple core when breaking through, they would have 20,000 years but Yang Qing could feel his lifespan would hit 30,000 years as things stood which already exceeded the limit of a regular peak stage palace realm expert who would have 25,000 years on reaching the late stage of the palace realm. Even though he had some advantages in that regard, it could not beat having an inexhaustible lifespan like the Xuanwu.

"Come to think of it can the Xuanwu be considered an Ancient because of its absurd lifespan?" wondered Yang Qing as he recalled the description Dean Zhu Lao gave of those beings, monstrous beings known for having long lifespans and being the progenitors of mythical creatures like dragons and phoenixes.

However, Yang Qing pushed those thoughts behind him when he heard the palm-sized Xuanwu suddenly talk when it perched itself on his shoulders. The voice though gentle, contained boundless and unfathomable power. Yang Qing felt that its voice contained a mysterious power that was able to influence the fabric of the world, collapsing oceans, calling stars into existence, and raising and falling mountains.

"You have 69 hours left on your access to this floor. While here, do not leave the confines of the scroll carpet. With your cultivation base, there are things here that would drive you to madness maybe

temporarily, maybe permanently. Whatever you do, please don't leave the confines of this carpet, even when you hear a voice telling you to do so, don't do it. If you do, you may end up getting lost here forever, or worse, you may end up as one of the objects of wisdom in this place.."

Yang Qing hurriedly shrunk back when he saw the miniature Xuanwu smirk ominously as it said those words.

"With your accumulations and foundations, mmh, it might not be a bad thing to have all you know permanently absorbed into this place and add to the collection..." added the Xuanwu.

"S..sorry senior, but I doubt I have any accumulations. I barely know anything. It was because of my inadequacies that I even got sent here in the first place. I would likely give out heart demons and qi deviations if I were a scroll. I don't want to ruin the lives of promising talents.." Yang Qing said with a slight stammer as he swore to not take a single step outside the carpet. Not even an immortal feast would drag him out of the carpet.

The Xuanwu stared at him meaningfully while wearing a playful gaze before it said,

"Fine.. The usage is similar to the other floors. You only need to think of the books you want and they will come to you. I don't need to say this, but your access is restricted within certain sections. This is the list of information you have access to from this floor.."

The Xuanwu placed its palm on Yang Qing's forehead. A pale blue glyph appeared on its forelimb which pierced into Yang Qing. A flood of information was gently poured into Yang Qing's mind.

The information was the books, scrolls, and jade scripts he could access with his temporary clearance. It was as the seniors from the Judicial Review Committee had said, Yang Qing could only access information that related to the history of the Deer Mountain Kingdom, those that touched on the Bi Xie Empire which was the former owner of the territory of the Deer Mountain Kingdom was built on top of, and lastly a curated list of cultivation arts, spirit beasts, plants, treasures, and organizations known to have aspects that projected the characteristics the sacred flame swan had said she felt when the mysterious presence was outside the graveyard or torch or the personal account of the lunar fury crane that the sacred flame swan helped him get via her art, the urn of legacies.

"You can also access any information you may require from the floors below, once again you only need to think of them or access the catalog via the scroll carpet. You will probably need this to process the information from this floor.." said the Xuanwu as it waved its limbs. A blue veil filled with complex glyphs appeared which then covered Yang Qing's entire body before it concentrated in his eyes.

Just as Yang Qing was wondering what the veil was for, he saw the sight before him change. The hills transformed into orange shelves surrounded by auspicious lights and these orbs were covered by complex runes that seemed to contain something calamitous within them.

He could finally see the scrolls, and books within those hill-

sized shelves and the meadows below. As for the river, while it remained a mysterious river that looked to be the source of all profundities contained within it, Yang Qing could feel his ability to separate and identify those profundities rapidly increase. It was no longer just voices but he could trace the countless lines of profundity that were flowing within the river.

"Make the most of the time you have.." said the Xuanwu as it retreated into its shell.

"What should I start with.." muttered Yang Qing with his heart rapidly racing quickly forgetting the fear that had assaulted him a few. He mulled over for a couple of minutes before he finally settled on his starting point.

"The Bi Xie empire it is.."