

## Daily life 831

### Chapter 831 Sentence Given (8)

After her brief explanation, Mei Xiling picked one of the potions she bought from the Red Flaming Lotus Pavilion and poured half of it on the sacred cleansing sunflower, while the remaining half was given to the bleeding petals devouring venus flower that seemed all too eager to sample as its petals rubbed together in apparent excitement.

True to what she had said before, the moment the potion came into contact with the sacred cleansing flower, the light released from it turned from ethereal and calm into an intense volatile brilliant ray of light that looked like it wanted to eradicate everything in sight.

The potion poured on it was instantly vaporized and what was left in the aftermath was a blood fog that got expunged by the light from the sacred cleansing sunflower before it even reached the jade table.

As for the bleeding petals devouring venus flower, it made a human-like expression of deep satisfaction as crunching sounds like it was eating up the muscles and bones of a living creature were produced by it as it 'chewed' the potion. Seconds later, red droplets that had an eerie similarity to blood down to even the metallic smell of blood were produced from its pristine white petals.

On seeing the results unfolding before him, Song Ba was tempted to speak up, desperation seemingly clear to be the cause.

The means Mei Xiling had used were not secret techniques that only the Medical Saint Garden had, they were well-known techniques. Every alchemist or merchant with a little bit of know-how would know to use the sacred cleansing sunflower and the bleeding petals devouring venus flower the same way she did.

Most alchemists had even tweaked their usage of the sacred cleansing flower and exploited its inability to tolerate impurities to root out the level of toxicity in their potions.

It wasn't just the alchemists who did that, merchants who dealt in potions would have a sacred cleansing sunflower or two hanging around to evaluate the quality of potions they were buying.

Someone like Song Ba who was both a seasoned alchemist and merchant would definitely know about the sacred cleansing sunflower and how damning the results before him were.

It was because he knew what it meant that he reacted the way he did. His eyes were darting all around as if he was looking for an escape route, his forehead was visibly perspiring, his hands could be seen trembling. He kept trying to clench it with force as a means to contain the shaking, but it all seemed to naught.

Even without his shaking hands, everyone with an eye could see how unnerved he was and that sense of nervousness and fear only grew the more potions Mei Xiling tested out.

Every single potion on the table produced the same results. When it came to the sacred cleansing sunflower, they were vaporized the instant the potion left the vial, releasing a bloody mist in the process and scattered by the sunflower soon after.

For the bleeding petals devouring venus flower, it gorged itself with ecstasy showing as it did.

Even its look changed as a reflection of it as it turned crimson red with a thin baleful mist appearing on one of its petals. It also grew in size.

Before it was about the size of half of Yang Qing's arm in length while its flower was half his palm but after consuming all the potions bought from the Red Flaming Lotus Alchemy Pavilion and the ones collected from the storehouses of the Chen family, its length had grown to about a meter. The sizes of its flowers were about the size of a fully grown pawpaw. Every time it opened its petals to gorge itself on the potion, with every potion it devoured, a portion of its petals would calcify. Now as a result of it, those calcified parts made it seem like it had teeth, razor-sharp teeth that were dripping in the same red liquid that was constantly produced from its petals.

It looked like a true fiend, and such a change would only happen from consuming the essence of cultivators be it blood or flesh. It was closely approaching essence frenzy which was a common occurrence with them.

Consuming the essence of a cultivator always strongly triggered its devouring ability, throwing it into overdrive, pulling it into a frenzied state where it thought of nothing other than consuming every cultivator present to satiate the all-consuming desire it had to devour them.

It was what made them so dangerous. When in such a state, a bleeding petals devouring venus flower would massacre countless cultivators in its path to fulfill that devouring desire but the problem was, it would never get satisfied, hence the name, essence frenzy.

The more essence it consumed, the more frenzied it became as that insatiable devouring desire grew, but the problematic part was, it grew more powerful with every cultivator it consumed. The baleful mist bleeding petals devouring venus flower produced every time it consumed a cultivator's essence had a natural corroding ability that could eat away at hardy surfaces, tough skins, and materials, and eventually it could even break down the forces of cultivation arts or techniques which would then be converted into fuel by the flower.

The bleeding petals devouring venus flower had an innate understanding of almost all of the elements which is how its able to reproduce refined elemental essence crystals.

This was what made it such a terrifying opponent to face. Provided you were at the same level or weaker than it, it would grind away at your attacks whilst strengthening itself in the process leaving you exhausted and helpless as a lamb at the end.

The bleeding petals devouring venus flower Mei Xiling was already at the palace realm, they didn't have to worry about it completely falling into a frenzied state. It has a strong spirit and self control as a result of it and the essence it consumed were of cultivators who had not even stepped into the core formation realm.

Its excitement was probably due to the test rather than the quality. That was proven when it went to its docile look from before the instant it was done consuming the last potion.

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" With this, it's proven beyond reasonable doubt that the potions were brewed using the essence of cultivators.

Thank you for your time.." Mei Xiling coolly said as she cupped her fists to Yang Qing before joining Xu Yuan at the side immediately after.

"Thank you for your assistance, daoist Mei Xiling.." said Yang Qing as he cupped his fists in gratitude.

"Brother Xu Yuan, I already have all I need, you can continue with their treatments.."

Xu Yuan nodded gratefully to Yang Qing as the latter used his medallion to activate the teleportation rune in the courtroom transporting Xu Yuan, Mei Xiling and the former human cauldrons and pill slaves back to the Medical Valley.

"There's one more account we will hear before I leave the floor to all of you to make your cases.

Senior Yu Gen, could you bring him, please?.."

The roaming inquisitor nodded, as he flashed and disappeared from the courtroom only to reappear a second later with someone else in tow.

The person standing next to him wore loose black robes that revealed his chest that was covered with sword scars, had a scrawny build, curly long flowing black hair, blind in one eye and blue eye in the other, a devilish charm to him, that even his clear fear couldn't mask and looked to be in his late thirties.

When he appeared, a few of the elders of the Chen family looked apprehensive each with different degrees of severity.

Yu Gen brought him to the center of the court before stepping back to join Xia Ting who seemed to be no more than a spectator in this whole thing.

The loose-robed man bowed subserviently to Yang Qing as he said,

"This lowly one greets the court."

"Your name is Shen Mu, the leader of the Black Scorpions Gang, right?" Yang Qing said as he addressed the man.

"I am.." said the man as he bowed his head ever so lower.

"What say you to the terms offered to you by my colleague?"

Shen Mu inadvertently shivered at the word terms.

"I agree to it and thank the Order for extending its grace and mercy to me, and giving me the chance to turn a new leaf.."

"Good, then we will keep it brief. You will just need to point out those here you had direct dealings here and what you did for them. That's all..." said Yang Qing.

"But if I detect any hint of falsehood or avoidance in you, then your fate will be far worse than what you would have originally got. Is everything clear?" sternly asked Yang Qing.

"I W..ould not D..are"" Shen Mu said with a slight tremble and stutter.

"Good, you can begin.."

Were people to see Shen Mu's cowardly display, they would not believe he was still the same vicious scorpion head of Purple City. His reputation was that of a ruthless and cunning person.

Both commoners and even the nobles treated him with caution and the reason for that was his strength as a peak stage core formation expert with an embryonic form of saber intent already formed which gave him strength that was a cut above even heads of the peak clans of Red Maple Empire like Chen Zian.

He was both strong and ruthless in how he conducted his affairs. Be it facing an ant or an elephant, he would use all cunning and ruthlessness he could muster making the Black Scorpion Gang one of the most feared organizations in Red Maple Empire.

The thick coat of baleful murderous qi surrounding him was proof of the countless lives he had taken. He was surrounded by a thick dark smog-like aura filled with viciousness and the unrest of those he had slain.

Such a thick stench and aura could only be found on those who had slaughtered hundreds of thousands. The feared reputation he had created was not undeserved. Just his presence alone was enough to strike dread to even the most battle-hardened soldiers but alas he had the misfortune of falling under the Order's radar.

Investigation into the Chen family unearthed his relationship with them which in turn revealed a slew of other things and eventually, he became a person of interest.

With the number of bodies he had on him, one of the palace realm inquisitors of the Yellow Plains Branch, who caught him, beat him, healed him, made him fight with all he had every single time, only to beat him after, ruthlessly at that, heal him again and repeat the whole process over again.

That process went on for four days, and the result.. It was the broken man before them.

#### Chapter 832 Sentence Given (9)

Shen Mu took a deep breath in a bid to exorcise the torture he had endured the past few days. He didn't start out wanting to be the leader of some gang. When he was young, just like every other impressionable young kid, he wanted to be a virtuous cultivator and sail the skies of the world. He was well on his way to doing exactly that.

He wasn't born into a well-off family. He was from an indistinct village, born to a father who was a hunter and a mother who was a blacksmith. He lost his father when he was young. He died in an accident during one of his expeditions.

As for his mother, she wasn't originally from the village and had only stayed on account of his father. When he died, she wanted to leave and asked Shen Mu who was twelve at the time to leave with her. Shen Mu afraid to leave all he knew behind, decided to remain in the village.

His mother eventually left, but not before leaving him with a foundational technique whose grade he didn't know at the time and only came to discover later that it was a top-tier orange-grade technique. She also left him with a few cultivation resources and an amulet that she exhorted him to keep on him at all times. After that, she left.

Shen Mu rapidly improved with the resources left to him. The village also took great care of him, though materially it was small, but in terms of helping fill the void left by his deceased father and his mysterious mother who had left for parts unknown, they filled that void perfectly which in part was why Shen Mu was able to make rapid improvements in his cultivation.

He eventually left the village when he broke through to the qi refinement realm, in search of a sect to help guide him in the next part of his cultivation journey. He only took with him the amulet his mother gave him, handing out whatever resources he had left, to the village, which included the top-tier orange-grade cultivation art his mother had given him.

Even after discovering the true grade of that art later in life, handing that cultivation art to them was something he did not regret. It was the one thing that helped preserve the person he once was.

With his talents, it wasn't hard for him to gain admission into one, though the sect didn't have a palace realm cultivator, it was a sect with a long heritage, having been around for almost 30,000 years. It was filled with over a dozen core formation experts, controlled territories, and resources that rivaled those of well-established kingdoms.

He was in disbelief when he gained admission into the sect, and even more so when he caught the eye of one of the deacon elders who wanted to accept him as a disciple. In his excitement, he quickly accepted, a choice he soon came to regret.

With considerable resources, a deacon elder for a backer, his talents shone through like a tiger that had grown wings. In two short years, he was already one of the standouts among the outer disciples; be it in terms of combat or cultivation speed he was leading the group, as he became one of the earliest to attempt his breakthrough to the foundation establishment, gaining quasi blue grade pillars in the process.

Thanks to the quality of his pillars and his skills with the saber, he managed to garner the attention of the big figures of the sect as he was quickly promoted to inner court disciple. But he soon came to realize how different the world of inner disciples and core disciples was when compared to the life he had as an outer disciple.

When you're an outer disciple you are all at the same starting line, all striving with single-minded devotion to improve yourselves and show your value to the sect. The competition was fierce and chaotic

at times but it was pure. Those who rose above the rest rose through their strength and even though the competition wasn't bereft of schemes at times, most times confrontations were direct, schemes having little to no impact on the final results.

But, when it came to the domain of the inner disciples and core disciples, things were different, the rules were different. Having strength wasn't enough, for one to wade through those waters with just strength alone, it had to be strength that was enough to suppress the entire sect, not just your fellow disciples. It had to be strength that was capable of making everything else orbit around it, anything less and it wasn't enough.

Without that type of strength, to survive there one would need a different type of 'strength'... connections and backing were the faces of that strength which Shen Mu was severely lacking in, when he stepped into that world. He went in with naivety thinking his talents would be enough to give him a footing in such a place but without tall trees to shelter a young sapling from the storm, no matter how full of potential that sapling had, it would be blown away effortlessly when the storm came and that was what happened to Shen Mu.

His talent though decent, wasn't a complete standout, and the backing he thought he had in his master who was a deacon elder, his master was the first to sever ties with him when he angered one of the core disciples when he refused to bend the knee.

In a single leap, the sect that he saw as the land that would nurture his dreams, only nurtured nightmares that have continued to haunt him ever since. He was thoroughly suppressed to the point that he would have lost his life had the amulet his mother had given him not activated to save him from the killing blow from his own master who had come for his head when he was out for a sect mission all to curry favor with that core disciple.

Filled with fear, anger, and distrust at everything around him, it wasn't long before he turned into who or what he was today. He betrayed without a second thought, killed without a second thought, used cunning to the extreme to both protect himself and torment his victims, fawned over those he needed to, exploited those he needed, and destroyed those he needed.

There was not a line he would not cross and nothing he would not do as long as it guaranteed his well-being. It was why despite being stronger than most of the heads of the so-called 'noble' families of the Red Maple Empire, he would always don the servile persona.



If there was one thing that sect taught him in the end it was how to throw the luxury that was pride as a cultivator and adjust to circumstances. Be a lion in front of mice, and be a mouse in front of dragons. Those heads might be weak, but their heritage wasn't. It wasn't something that a peak core formation expert with pseudo-saber intent could contend against.

He became a man of many faces because of it up until a week ago when that fear he felt as a disciple finally came flooding back and then some. As he was punched with a force that could pierce even through to the heavens above, he finally realized that everything was immaterial in front of strength. That truth was something he had realized during his years as an outer sect disciple, but it somehow got lost in the fog of time.

"That is a strength I don't feel regret or shame bowing down to.." thought Shen Mu as he fixed his gaze on those he had colluded with. He couldn't help but chortle as a childish thought surfaced in his mind.

"Maybe I still have the chance to be that hero I always wanted to be when I was younger.."

Something seemed to have shifted in him as he completed that thought. Ever since he fled that sect and the path of slaughter he chose to go in, he always felt like a snake was constricting him, tightening itself ever so tightly around his body, and soon he couldn't even breathe under that mounting pressure and suffocation brought by that constriction.

Everything within him was smothered, his bones quaked, and he always felt this vivid sensation that the snake was getting ready to swallow him, leaving him always on edge. The thing that kept him slightly sane was the amulet his mother gave him which was still as mysterious as ever. Always stepping in when his life was in danger.

However, even with the amulet's intervention, he was still greatly affected and it wasn't just his mind, even his cultivation base had been greatly affected too.

Most in the Red Maple Empire knew him as the leader of the Black Scorpion Gang who was a peak stage core formation expert and had pseudo saber intent. What they did not know was, that Shen Mu already had these results close to 1,000 years ago, 997 years ago to be exact. His cultivation halted at that time, which coincided with the first time he ever spilled an innocent's blood. The time when he had the luxury of knowing and feeling guilt.

1,000 years passed by, and his cultivation base didn't so much as budge an inch, no matter how much effort he put in, all the resources he used, it wouldn't move, and the path ahead became vaguer and vaguer and before he knew it, he couldn't see or sense it at all. He became desperate and was driven to near madness as a result, doing everything and anything to try and get it to budge including taking jobs he would never have considered taking all for the sake of trying to get his cultivation to move even a millimeter, but it was all for naught.

What he got for his efforts was a snake that grew in size every day, suffocating him each day, and eventually..over the past four years he had this premonition it wasn't long before that snake devoured him.

But now, he could feel a glowing warmth spread around his body, massaging every part of his body, healing the strain left by that snake. He closed his eyes in comfort as he felt his body lighten feeling the greatest relief and release he had ever felt.

His eyes suddenly widened when he felt that gentle warmth that was freeing him from all the torment he had endured suddenly transform into a sharp force that instantly spread all over his body slicing the snake that had enveloped him before finally dealing with its head as it did, he felt something that had long stagnated move.

"This?!" he muttered in disbelief.

"True saber intent, interesting.." muttered Yang Qing as he saw the resplendent light surrounding Shen Mu like it was cleansing him. His thoughts were immediately cut short when he sensed undulations of energy produced by the wood amulet Shen Mu wore.

Shen Mu whose emotions were all over the place, halted in even more shock when he sensed the movements coming from his amulet. Just when he was wondering what was happening to it, the amulet released an ethereal earth red glow that materialized into the silhouette of a person.

On seeing that person, Shen Mu's eyes widened as his lips trembled.

"Mother?"

The silhouette was of a woman in her early forties, with brown hair freely flowing that matched her free spirit.

"I am glad I didn't have to take the life of my own child.."

Chapter 833 Sentence Given (10)

"Life?!"

Shen Mu was hit with shock that he struggled to follow what was happening around him.

Just the other day, he was beaten within an inch of his life, then the cultivation base which had not moved in close to a thousand years finally moved and in the process, his saber intent grew from its pseudo phase to a fully mature saber intent and the impetus of it all turned out to be his conscience which he had long abandoned, leaving him with only one lingering regret in life, his mysterious mother and now here she was.

The shock of seeing her after searching for her for so long and failing left him at a loss for words and thoughts.

The lady sighed as she saw Shen Mu's reaction, her gaze turning tender in the process, as she extended her hand to ruffle his hair before pausing her movement halfway, returning her hands to her sides.

Shen Mu who noticed her movements had his gaze flicker in disappointment before he asked the one question he had always wanted the answer to all this time.

"Where are you?" he asked, chalked full of emotion.

The figure stared at Shen Mu for a bit, her true thoughts masked behind her calm demeanor. A few seconds passed without a response from her, Shen Mu growing more nervous as the silence continued.

"I should not have left you behind. I should have left with you, maybe then you would not have gone down the route you did.." the figure said with regret in her tone.

Just as Shen Mu was about to press more, he paused when he saw the silhouette of his mother turn solemnly toward two new guests. One of them was a middle-aged man with a stern expression, silver hair, and silver pupils; Next to him was also another man, middle-aged, with short black hair, however, he had star-shaped irises with five pupils in each iris, four were at the four cardinal points of the star-shaped iris and the last one was at the center.

The two men appeared in the courtroom without presence, with only a few noticing they were there. On seeing them, Yang Qing stood up to greet them.

"Greetings Supervisor Lei Weiyuan, Domain Judge Hou Dehui.."

"Yang Qing, your case seems to have dragged in a surprised guest.." leisurely said the middle-aged man with star-shaped irises, his eyes lingering curiously at the lady.

"I hope I am not being too forward here fellow daoist, but would you care to introduce yourself? Rarely does the imprint belonging to a domain expert appear in this type of court.." added Lei Weiyuan.

The reason for their appearance was precisely because of her. Lei Weiyuan as the supervisor of the core and palace courts was always constantly monitoring the happenings in those courtrooms, in part to ensure the judges and the inquisitors were doing their jobs as they should, but another reason was because of the possibility of what was happening right now to happen, where some powerful figure appeared where they should not be.

Over the years there have been numerous cases of cultivators sneaking into the courtroom using esoteric means such as hiding in a cultivator's soul, and transforming their spiritual will into clothing among other means and they do that for a number of reasons; like getting vengeance for a sentencing or capture of someone close to them that the person was not happy with, another reason is they sneak in to try and change the sentencing by covertly beguiling the mind of the judge, while others are more direct and try to pull off breakout.

It's easier to try a breakout in the courtroom, at least there you know where the cultivator of interest is rather than try and do it after they get sent to the Requiem, a place where not even those who belonged to the Order knew where it was.

Years of experience had left the Order to expect sneak-ins into the courtroom and one of the measures they put in place other than the powerful arrays and hidden treasures in every courtroom that are capable of assailing a middle-stage domain expert, is having a domain expert supervise those courtrooms which was why Lei Weiyuan despite being a late stage domain expert, was the supervisor of the core and the palace courts.

As for why Hou Dehui was here with Lei Weiyuan, Yang Qing guessed it was because he was technically involved with the case since it had an overlay with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, with Red Maple Empire having a partnership with them, and a few of their subsidiaries like the Red Flaming Lotus Alchemy Pavilion being caught up in the case also, and that was discounting the fact that the son of one of the founders was also involved too.

"Forgive me for my lack of manners for intruding like this, it wasn't my intention. I had a dormant will imprint embedded in the amulet I had given my child which I had set to trigger under certain conditions, one of which was a monumental point in his cultivation such as an elevation of his spirit which he did when his saber intent matured..." solemnly explained the lady.

Hou Dehui's irises produced a golden glow creating the look of a true star, as his pupils lit up with the color of the five elements. He placed his hands on his chin with a look of interest as his eyes fell on the amulet.

"An amulet made from 50,000-year-old galaxy sands, expertly embedded in the wood from a silver dragon gourd tree. Beautiful craftsmanship.. approaching the realm of returning to one's root, hiding the extraordinary in the mundane.

Chief Song would like you.. What do you think, Lei?"

Lei Weiyuan stroked his beard, his gaze too on the amulet.

"The blend is seamless, and the properties of both monarch-

grade ingredients have been used to their full efficacy. The array work is amazing too..." Lei Weiyuan paused as he switched his sight to the lady.

"The aura of your imprint is that of peak palace realm expert, though... " his eyes shone with an ethereal light as threads that looked like they were the fabric of the world appeared flashed in his eyes.

"You've already broken through to the domain realm. Mmmh, based on this product, you must have just recently reached the gold tier in your craftsmanship abilities..mmh, I did hear Divine Armament City welcoming a gold-grade craftsman and a domain expert about three years ago, is that you?" asked Lei Weiyuan.

The lady's eyes flickered in surprise as she answered,

"Yes, I am. My name is Tan Lanfen. Once again, I would like to offer my apologies to the court, and .." she paused as she turned to face Shen Mu.

"I had been at the peak stage of the palace realm for over five thousand years, and though I already had the qualifications to break through into the domain realm, I was too afraid to take that leap and thus decided to wander the world, to try and clear my head, and then when I had just about fifty years left, I would make the attempt.

It was in the wandering that I ended up moving into that village and with the thought that I might die lingering in my head, even though it wasn't in my plans in the beginning, as time passed by with me closely approaching my limit, I thought it wouldn't be a bad thing to have a child.

At least then, even if I did end up dying to the tribulation, at least some part of me would still be alive.

On a whimsical fate, the person I decided to have a child with ended up being your father..

I would not be here today if it wasn't for you both. The time I had with him and you was what got me over the line.."

Shen Mu with a lost look, hesitantly asked,

"If you were such a powerful cultivator, why didn't you save him? Surely as a palace realm cultivator, you had the means to prevent his death.."

Tan Lafen sighed as she said,

"It is still one of my greatest regrets, but I couldn't prevent it. Had he lived back then, I would have still left. Closer to his end, I was finding it harder and harder to suppress my cultivation realm. I used a technique to seal my cultivation base completely to the point I was no different than a mortal. If I used my qi even slightly, the tribulation would have fallen.

I.... " Tan Lafen paused as she tightly clenched her fists.

"I wasn't ready to leave you both, so I wanted to prolong that stay as much as I could and your father died as a result of it... After his death, even though I had not planned it, out of guilt I asked you to come with me.

I never wanted you to see me die, which is why I wanted to leave in the first place when the technique to seal my cultivation base stopped working, but seeing the toll your father's death had on you, I waived, but when you said you wanted to stay, I was relieved, which is why I didn't insist on it, and just left you those resources and the amulet..."

Chapter 834 Sentence Given (11)

Shen Mu pressed his lips together which spoke of the myriad of emotions brewing within him. There was relief and joy from finally realizing his mother was alive. Then there was the surprise when he realized his mother was a domain expert, not only that but a gold-grade craftsman too, and from the Divine Armament City no less. Even though she wasn't a member of the Divine Armament Sect, her identity as one of the craftsmen in the City it controlled and being a gold-grade craftsman to boot, already showed how powerful her identity was.

That realization unearthed other emotions in him which boiled down to frustration and anger. The explanation she had given on why she couldn't help his father made sense and even some part of him was relieved she did so, at least because of it, he still had one parent alive rather than risk losing them both.

His time as the head of the Black Scorpion Gang had left him exposed to quite a lot of information, especially with the contacts he made in the process. When his cultivation realm completely stalled, he spent a lot of resources digging up information related to all things cultivation, especially breakthroughs to the next realm.

Amongst the pile, even though he didn't have much hope he would ever reach it, he had read a few accounts related to the domain realm, and how terrifying its tribulation was.

There were confirmed records of certain peak palace realm experts that had the most stable foundation one could ever have, met and exceeded all the qualifications to reach the domain realm, despite all these, those experts chose not to go through with it, choosing to exhaust their lifespan and live out the rest of their days as palace realm experts.

That fact showed how terrifying the tribulation of the domain realm was, so to Shen Mu, his mother's choice was the most sensible but the suddenness of it all still hurt. Every time he broke through, he would think to himself,

"If I had this level of strength, maybe I could have saved father.."

And now finding out his mother had a strength that was a million times more than what he ever had, some part of him felt indignant, like she was selfish, though it wasn't purely the loss of his father that made him feel that way. The resources she left him, while precious, other than the amulet whose glimmer was hidden, about the only thing else that was of value was the top-tier orange-grade cultivation art.

Discounting his mother's present achievements, back then she was a peak stage palace realm expert and a blue-grade craftsman whose abilities were already approaching the levels of a gold-grade craftsman, and a resident of Divine Armament City, with her titles and achievements, a top tier orange grade cultivation art was nothing but scraps to someone of her stature. As for the other things she gave him, all the resources she left him, none was above the middle tier of the earth grade.

Wasn't it too underhanded of her to hand her only child resources that he could have gotten in a prominent rank five sect.

Her not helping his father on account that she had suppressed her cultivation realm to the mortal realm, that he could understand, but what excuse did she have for being stingy with the resources, especially when she wasn't sure she would survive the tribulation?



The part that left Shen Mu unreconciled wasn't her apparent stinginess but rather the possibility that his life would have gone to a different line if she had been even a tiny bit generous.

If she handed him blue-grade cultivation and maybe a few sky-grade resources then he would have not needed to seek out a sect. He would have been self-sufficient.

And if he didn't need to seek out a sect then maybe his life would not have turned out as it did.

Maybe he would not have become the cold-hearted monster he had become. A monster who kidnapped, stole, blackmailed, terrorized, massacred innocents, or associated with those who made even him seem like a saint when compared to them.

He wouldn't have suffered as he did if she had helped him a little bit more, but as he looked at her, whatever anger he felt seemed to dissipate.

She still looked calm, and a presence worthy of a domain expert who could overturn the skies and the oceans with a turn of the hand, but beneath that exterior, despite never having seen her for over a thousand years, Shen Mu, as her child, he could tell she felt guilty. Her countenance was unchanged, but he could tell, having seen it on his mother all too often from his mother when he was small whenever she would be preoccupied for days on end crafting something to the point of forgetting her surroundings, which included Shen Mu and his father.

When she was on those benders, no matter how much he tried to grab her attention, she would not as much as spare a look his way. It was like he never existed. He used to cry as he hated that feeling, that feeling that she cared more about what she was crafting than him and if he was being honest, that feeling had been one of the reasons he didn't choose to go with her back then when he offered. At least when his father was alive, he would comfort him whenever she was in one of those phases, but without him, if it happened again... He didn't want to go through that pain again, and alone at that, thus seemed easier for him to remain in the village.

Whenever his mother came out of the stupor and saw the crying Shen Mu, she would always have the same look she had at the moment. Her face and demeanor wouldn't change much but her eyes would tremble faintly, and her two index fingers would move almost as if she was chiseling at something using them. Having trained as a hunter thanks to his father, he prided himself in his observation skills, and being around her, he noticed that habit of hers, he wasn't sure she knew it herself but every time she felt guilty her pupils would tremble slightly followed by the movements of her index fingers, which usually lasts for two seconds before she turns back to normal.

Despite himself, he couldn't help but smile as a warm feeling coursed through his body while his mother looked at him with a look of confusion which only made Shen Mu feel better.

"It's not fair to blame her. The choices were mine to make and I made them. I am glad to see you haven't changed even after all these years. As adept as you were with your tools, father was right, you were always clumsy when it came to these things.. "

Shen Mu flashed a childish smile at his mother as he said,

"I am glad you're okay..." he paused as he bowed.

"I am sorry our reunion has to be under these circumstances. I haven't been good for a long time and have shamed you and father with how I have lived, but, I am glad I got to see you on the day I decided to give it a go again. I am really glad you are here, mother.." he added, his voice shaking, his eyes reddened with tears.

Tan Lafen looked at Shen Mu, confusion evident on her face. She could tell Shen Mu had been angry with her a moment ago, and as bad as she was with people, she could understand why he was angry with her.

When she left, she could have left Shen Mu with better resources but she purposefully didn't and the reason for that was to protect his life. Without sufficient strength, giving Shen Mu more quality resources than she did was subjecting him to disaster.

One of the greatest dangers for cultivators was possessing a treasure that they couldn't protect. That treasure might as well be a noose around their necks. Fathers could betray sons, and vice versa for a tempting treasure, siblings could quickly turn on each other, and long-time friends who had survived life and death together would quickly turn on each other for a treasure, and a saint would quickly turn into a devil for a treasure.

Tan Lafen had seen such things happening around her, and she wasn't about to subject her only child to such a fate, thus she gave him enough treasures to support his cultivation base to the foundation establishment realm. The resources were not precious enough to incite greed, and when it came to the villagers, she was sure none of them would realize the value of the things she left behind for Shen Mu

and even if they did, she had left enough means to guarantee Shen Mu's life against them, after all, the strongest person at the village had only been at the qi refinement realm.

As for the top-tier orange-grade cultivation art, it was one of the best cultivation arts she had come across when it came to laying down foundations in the body refinement to the qi refinement realm. Its proficiencies matched even that of blue-

grade cultivation arts. But no matter how good it was, its only use was in the body refinement realm to the qi refinement realm, past that, it was useless, so Shen Mu's life would not be in danger for possessing it.

She had it all planned. Shen Mu would use the orange-grade cultivation art supplemented by the resources she left him to build him sturdy enough foundations that would grant him entry to any reputable sect, and in case he met with any danger, the amulet would help resolve it provided it was deemed as a fatal threat to his life, other than that the amulet had another person. It was a key to her legacy.

She had placed a dormant imprint in there that would be activated under two circumstances. One of those circumstances was Shen Mu touching on the doors of the palace realm would trigger it, which was why it activated now. With a mature saber intent, Shen Mu was already halfway there.

At that level, Tan Lafen judged he would be able to handle the weight of her treasures. The imprint would activate, and guide him to her abode in Divine Armament City along with other locations around the continent that had her resources which also included the favors she was owed which might be of benefit to Shen Mu.

The other trigger was her death. Had she failed her tribulation, the imprint would have activated, a few seconds before her death, and imprint everything into Shen Mu's mind.

But alas things ended up different than she planned. While she was alive and Shen Mu had gained saber intent, ultimately whatever plans she had would have to be scrapped seeing him in the hands of the Order, and over the years, though the imprint was dormant, she felt what Shen Mu had been up to, the life he led, and using the amulet, she sealed his cultivation realm, and if he continued, she was ready to use the amulet to end his life.

Luckily it didn't reach that point, but even if she wasn't forced to take his life, current circumstances were not any less difficult when compared to what she had resolved to do. With what Shen Mu did, the repercussions were sure to be steep.

"I couldn't help him or Gu'er back then, maybe I can help him now.."

Chapter 835 Sentence Given (12)

Once she had come to a decision, Tan Lafen turned to face Yang Qing, though her attention was on the two domain experts present in Lei Weiyuan and Hou Dehui.

"Might I say a few words?" she asked solemnly.

"If it's anything related to the case in any way, then we all defer to him. As for me and Lei here, we are nothing but guests and observers.." said Hou Dehui, still casual and relaxed as when he appeared.

"The court welcomes what you have to say.." said Yang Qing when the attention was on him.

"Thank you for your consideration and tolerance... I may have not known the exact particulars of what my son has been to all these years, but through my imprint, I had some ideas, and now seeing the dense haunted slaughter qi around him, his crimes must be egregious and unpardonable.." Tan Lafen said as her gaze lingered slightly on Shen Mu before moving back to Yang Qing.

In her vision, Shen Mu was surrounded by a baleful mist of blood, and within that mists were mournful wails and faces filled with grief and anguish all clambering in desperation as they tried to use the cloak of baleful mist surrounding Shen Mu as a pathway to reach Shen Mu himself and claim what they owed him.

The life of cultivators wasn't devoid of bloodshed, even saints had a little blood on their hands. That was how combative and chaotic the world of cultivators was leading to some developing a variant type of aura and qi around them like slaughter qi.

Long-time combatants like generals, and veteran soldiers, the longer they remained in combat, inevitably their qi would change into a slaughter qi to adapt to the lives they led. The slaughter qi they acquired could be considered a natural adaptation they got so they could survive in the environment they were in.

It was almost guaranteed for every soldier to acquire it the longer they remained in a combat-rich environment. It wasn't just soldiers, those who lived in an environment where they had to fight with their lives on the line every single day would end up developing slaughter qi.

The slaughter qi they get is to augment and assist them to survive in such an environment as much as possible. It would make their attacks sharper and deadlier; It was much more explosive compared to regular qi and it would continually strengthen their bodies in terms of vigor and vitality.

Slaughter qi would continue to grow in strength and purity the longer one lived in such an environment, which was the reason most generals would never leave the battlefield or cultivators who chose to continue living in a perilous environment despite the apparent dangers to their lives.

The more developed their slaughter qi became, the more the harvests they would gain from it such as refining a pure killer intent that functioned similarly to saber, spear, sword, or fist intent. Of course, despite its apparent advantages, it was still risky to improve oneself using slaughter intent, other than having constantly risking your life to improve, the biggest issue when it came to slaughter qi was its volatile nature that eroded the user's mind the more powerful it became.

Without sufficient willpower, slaughter qi would eat away at the mind of the user essentially transforming them into a frenzied being that existed purely for slaughter absent of any form of rationality. It was why many empires and kingdoms devised meditation techniques and other means that made up for that weakness.

But what Shen Mu had was something different. He had slaughter qi around him but it was deemed impure and that impurity came from slaughtering innocents, those weaker than himself and those without karmic entanglements. To the natural dao, this was an unrighteous slaughter and would not give its stamp of approval. If it wasn't for the amulet Tan Lafen had handed him which kept it at bay, without a fiendish art, Shen Mu would have soon been swallowed by the baleful haunted qi around him and be subjected to the greatest torment he had ever endured as those resent filled specters tore away at his mind and flesh in a bid to possess him while subjecting him to the greatest torment unimaginable.

Luckily he came to his senses and birthed a saber intent which not only strengthened his cultivation base and spirit but was also able to keep that baleful qi at bay.

..

"I may not know what he did, but his crimes are not light.... You see, whoever he became, he wasn't originally that way.. As a child, he was a kind and considerate child who dreamed of protecting and taking care of his parents and the entire village up to their old age..

Tan Lafen paused as she cast a tender gaze at Shen Mu, seeing the little child who would swing a wooden saber she made him, with a righteous aura around him as he said he would defeat the evils of the world with that saber.

She sighed in regret, as she turned to face Yang Qing once more, leaving the guilt-ridden Shen Mu.

"Whatever he became, I'm to blame for it.."

"No, you are not! I made those choices... all because I couldn't handle the weight of being weak... It wasn't your fault.." vehemently said Shen Mu.

"If I didn't leave you behind, you would have never had to do what you did. So, of course, I am to blame. The sins of the parent are not the sins of the child but in certain aspects, the sins of the child are the sins of the parent.

I know and I have seen personally how unforgiving this world truly is and yet I left an eight-year-old child to fend for himself in that world. I was too focused on my affairs that I handled everything poorly, there was a lot I could have done differently and because I didn't, here we are.

What's done is done, the past is gone, all I can do is try and affect the present...

Judge, I am not asking for his crimes to be forgiven but I am begging for you to leave him a path to life. I am willing to do anything to that end including donating my entire fortune and myself to the Order to use as you will.

All I ask ....and beg is you spare my child. Please!" Tan Lafen said, her emotions showing clearly on her face for the first time.

"Mother.." tongue stricken, whatever retort Shen Mu had evaporated on seeing his mother pleading for him.

"Your son will not be executed and it's not because of the offer you have made. If we changed our rulings based on such offers we would lose all credibility of impartiality. So, please don't make such an offer again.

Your son will live, he may never see the light of day again until his last breath, but he will live and the price of that is him sharing everything he knows. That is more than enough.." Yang Qing gently said.

"H..e is going to live? Mu'er?" Tan Lafen muttered in surprise. She had expected for her offer to be rejected with her son's fate all but sealed for execution. Such a thick baleful mist surrounding him, she expected death for his crimes. Him being spared of that was a surprise to her and to a deal he made no less.

Smiling, Shen Mu said,

"Thank you for shielding me, Mother, but let me handle it from here. It's my mess to clean.."

Tan Lafen absentmindedly nodded, still slightly dazed from the whole thing. Then when she came to, she requested Yang Qing to allow her to be there for the proceedings, which he agreed. With her presence, Hou Dehui and Lei Weiyuan remained.

#### Chapter 836 Sentence Given (13)

Shen Mu quickly showed why his testimony was worth being spared execution. Tan Lafen's assumption had been right. Shen Mu's crimes were as bad as they could get. Though in terms of bad, while they were irredeemable, they were not to the point of no return like it would have been had he been a blood fiend cultivator.

If evidence had shown that Shen Mu sacrificed people like blood fiend cultivators did, to try and improve his cultivation, then no matter what he offered up, he would still be tortured for a decade for all the information he had, specifically, ties to a blood fiend cult, and then after they had gotten everything they had on him, he would be burned in the chaos yang river of retribution. The river was a saint-grade natural dao treasure that had the purest yang flames Yang Qing had ever seen, even purer than what he produced.

Those flames were the absolute bane of everything touched with yin energy, and it was especially, ruthless against blood-fiend cultivators who were covered in resentment and all manner of baleful qi. That river would cleanse them into nothingness, and that cleansing was slow, subjecting them to the most unimaginable pain they could ever imagine.

The tenth finger of the Scarlet Blood Ghost Hands syndicate who was captured by the Order didn't flinch at anything the special inquisitors did to him, but the moment he was dipped into the chaos yang river of retribution, he resisted for a month before he started spilling and this was a hardened middle stage domain level expert who had experienced the winds and rains of the earth, but even he, could not endure the baptism of the chaos yang river.

Shen Mu was spared that fate for two reasons, his crimes though atrocious, he was flirting just at the extreme edge of that line, and the other reason was the sincerity in his willingness to divulge anything.

After the beating, they didn't even need to threaten him or promise him that much to get him to agree, he volunteered it, and it wasn't just his testimony that he volunteered, the paranoid person that he was, he went to extreme lengths to record everything. Every deal he made was recorded; every conversation he had, was recorded; every meeting he had was recorded; every trade was recorded; anything and everything that could be recorded was recorded by him both visually and auditory.

Considering who he was dealing with, his lack of clear backing, and even though those he dealt with didn't explicitly tell him what those kids he supplied them with over the years were for, as the leader of a nefarious organization, he had educated guesses that were not far off the mark.

He spent a fortune in getting talismans and artifacts to get those recordings undetected. Even with his strength and reputation, considering the dealings he had with those parties, in his mind, he felt it was only a matter of time before they decided he was a liability they could not afford to keep around, and when that day came, he had expected to use those recordings as bargaining chips or tools of causing chaos as he made his getaway.

While the recordings weren't exactly his escape ticket, they did in some way do what they were purposed for which was to preserve his life.

Using the recordings, he fingered every person he dealt with as he provided damning evidence to accompany it.



Of the four counties, Blacktear County was the one that had the highest dealings with Shen Mu.

Spiritwood County and Misty Caldera County were strategically important to the Chen Clan because they were originally part of the territory under the direct control of the red maple spirit and were thus of significant quality, however, when it came to size, the Blacktear County was the largest county amongst all counties under their control. It was four times the size of both Spiritwood and Misty Caldera County combined, and the bulk of their produce for sale came from Blacktear County which had a lot of farms.

Despite how profitable it was, from the information provided, the clan patriarch had little oversight and control of it, and it wasn't out of choice but rather he couldn't. Like most large clans, the Chen Clan wasn't without its fair share of feuds and internal competition and one of the largest competitors to Chen Zian for the post of clan patriarch was one of the elders who happened to have heavy influence over the county. That elder's name was Chen Bo.

Be it in terms of aptitude and cultivation realm, Chen Bo and Chen Zian were neck and neck, and ultimately what gave Chen Zian a leg up over Chen Bo came from the support of their grand elders which could be considered their trump cards. Chen Clan had three grand elders, each a quasi-palace realm expert. Chen Zian got the support of two of them, with the last one supporting Chen Bo.

In the end, the numbers favored Chen Zian but despite being the clan patriarch, Chen Zian had little influence in Blacktear County, which was Chen Bo's backyard.

Though evidence showed Chen Bo was uninvolved, on account that he had been in deep seclusion for the past 600 years in an obstinate attempt to try and break through to the palace realm, the Blacktear County had the highest number of pill slaves and human cauldrons. It also had the largest number of people who had dealings with Shen Mo. Seven elders had dealt with him and of those seven, one of them was Chen Bo's son, who was in disbelief when Shen Mo played a recording of a deal they had, in which he had Shen Mo continuously supply him with more children.

Even though the recordings showed him avoid saying what those children were for when Shen Mo tried to sneakily broach the subject, the visual recordings showed the images of those children and some of them matched the pill slaves and human cauldrons who were just in the courtroom.

The recordings even showed Chen Bo's son, Chen Lai advice Shen Mo to massacre a few villages from the territory controlled by the Gui family, if he was running out of places to source it.

Shen Mo ignored that advice of course, even with Chen Lai's promise to help him cover his tracks and even his willingness to pay more if the children came from there. No matter how much wealth or promises he offered, Shen Mo wasn't willing to draw the ire of powerful noble families like the Gui family who were just as powerful as the Chen family.

Doing as Chen Lai wanted was a surefire way of coming under the thumb of Chen Lai, which was likely what he was after. If he did the deed, Chen Lai would have likely held it over his head or even used it as a bargaining chip with the Gui family to try and gain their cooperation in something.

This was entirely possible, as from what Shen Mo knew, Chen Lai and those from Blacktear County hated Chen Zian's guts and were constantly seeking ways to oust him which even included seeking alliances with other powers. To him, Chen Lai was more than likely using him as a chip in gaining one of those alliances.

Other than sourcing for pill slaves and human cauldrons, Shen Mo had murdered and stolen at the behest of some of those elders, and those reasons were more personal, such as killing an alchemist who outbid one of the Chen elders for a recipe he desperately needed or threatening families that had children that showed some talent in cultivation. Those elders didn't want those children to nurture them but as practice dummies for their children, in which those practice sessions almost ended either in crippling or death of the children of those threatened families.

Shen Mo had done a lot of heinous things for them and he recorded each one, which he expertly presented in court, damning all those elders.

Following Blacktear County, Cherry Blossom County followed in the number of elders Shen Mu dealt with, the county's number being four, but when it came to Spiritwood County and Misty Caldera County, Shen Mu never had any direct dealings with anyone from those two counties with only an indirect involvement being showed when he showed the images of the children he had sourced for the Chen family over the years.

Both counties had the least number of pill slaves and human cauldrons, with Misty Caldera spotting the lowest with two pill slaves and one human cauldron, while Spiritwood had four pill slaves and three human cauldrons. Other than the two elders present in Chen Gutian and Chen Zholan, no other elders were involved, unlike the previous two counties.

When he was done with the elders, his gaze moved to the store owner of the Red Flaming Lotus Alchemy Pavilion.

"I only dealt with Owner Song Ba once, and the deal was the assassination of a clan member from the Chen family, someone by the name of Chen Xue.."

"Whaaaaaaat?!!! Xue'er WAS....."

A thunderous roar instantly exploded in the courtroom.

Chapter 837 Sentence Given (14)

"Tell Me Again! Who did you say you assassinated?! Who Did You Kill?!.."

In the group of elders, one particular individual instantly exploded the moment Shen Mu made his statement about assassinating someone at the behest of Store Owner Song Ba.

"Say it! Who did you kill?! I WILL KILL YOU!!!"

With a thunderous roar, the elder exploded with violence, his qi exploding in the process as he charged toward Shen Mu his expression livid, maddened with anger. However, the clash that was expected to happen, didn't. That elder was forcibly frozen in place by Yang Qing, who used his cultivation realm force to hold him in place. That elder couldn't so much as blink under the restriction.

The elder felt like a massive hand bearing the weight of the heavens had held him in place. No matter how much he tried to fight against the force with all his might, he felt like he was using a ball of snow to try and topple over a massive mountain.

Unable to move, all he could do was glare hatefully at Shen Mu as he struggled to process the realities of what he had just heard. Thanks to the restriction, he managed to calm down somewhat though it was a different kind of calm. This calmness had a coldness to it like an active volcano building up its pressure until the opportune moment when it will erupt with all its fury bringing havoc to its surroundings.

"Elder Gutian, please try and contain yourself. Attacks are not allowed in the courtroom.." Yang Qing softly said when he saw a hint of rationality return to the elder's eyes.

"Sorry for my earlier outbursts, Judge Yang Qing.." said Elder Gutian though one could tell his mind wasn't even there and had just said those words out of perfunctory politeness. Even as he made the apology, his eyes were still glued on Shen Mu, who despite being sent death glares by the elder seemed unperturbed, only sighing in pity as he looked back at the elder whose body was still frozen in motion.

Yes, the elder who just had a massive outburst, was Elder Gutian, the elder in charge of Misty Caldera County which had the least number of pill slaves and human cauldrons, and was also the uncle to the current patriarch of the Chen Clan, Chen Zian.

Chen Zian who had been silent all this while, spoke up.

"Judge Yang Qing, pardon my insolence, but could I ask something of him?" Chen Zian said as he pointed to Shen Mu.

"You can.."

"Thank you for your accommodation.." Chen Zian said as he gave a polite bow before turning to face Shen Mu.

"Is what you said true? Were you the one who killed Chen Xue?" calmly asked Chen Zian.

Even though he tried to contain himself as much as he could as he asked the question, a lethal coldness was mixed in his tone, one that spoke of his fury.

How could he not be when Chen Xue had been one of the most promising geniuses of the clan before he died unceremoniously?

Had he been alive, with the talent he showed, the next patriarch would have been automatic. It would not have mattered whether he gained the approval of the supreme elders or not, the fact that he had received the recognition of their clan founder, Chen Fu was more than enough to guarantee him the spot of clan patriarch when he came of age. But, alas, he died.

"More or less..." answered Shen Mu.

"What do you mean, more or less? Did you or did you not kill Chen Xue?" asked Chen Zian, the limits of his patience close approaching.

Shen Mu looked at Chen Zian, then Chen Gutian whose gaze was completely cold and almost apathetic, before finally falling on Song Ba, who was already pale, but not from Shen Mu's reveal but for the explanation given earlier by Mei Xiling, the disciple of the Medical Saint Garden. Her testimony and explanation that left no loopholes had damned him already, and everybody in the courtroom knew it, especially, him. From then on, as the clock ran on, all he felt was an increasing dread of his impending fate.

Shen Mu couldn't help but sigh at the look of desperation and dejection, store owner Song Ba showed. In Red Maple Empire, while he was wary of the noble families, it wasn't to the point of being terrified of them. If push came to shove and he had to act, he would not hesitate to draw his fangs against them, but he couldn't say the same about the subsidiaries of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion. That identity alone was enough to strike terror in most and Shen Mu had been one of them.

Their personal abilities aside, the level of deterrent they had from being associated with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion was to the extent that most feared them even more than the royal family of the Red Maple Empire despite the latter having palace realm experts and countless cultivators under their control and the former having only a handful cultivators and those at the top being only in the core formation expert.

It was for this reason that those subsidiaries operated as kings in the Red Maple Empire, lording it over everyone within the Empire, including even the nobles of the Empire themselves, with their noses up the sky. About the only one they spared any thought was their fellow peers and their relationship with one another was anything but cordial. Just like the noble families of the Red Maple Empire were constantly at each other's throats trying to devour, so were the subsidiaries of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, and their competition could be said to have been more fierce and ruthless when compared to the one the noble families of the Red Maple Empire had.

At least when it came to the noble families, they kept each other in check, and also the royal family that stood above them, was even more so. Their feuds though occasionally spilled over to bystanders, it was more often than not restricted to members of these noble families, but the same couldn't be said of these subsidiaries.

Those subsidiaries treated the entire Red Maple Empire as its chessboard, and everyone in it as pawns in their game of dominance. Only the royal family seemed to be outside their game, but the rest, be it the major noble families to underground bosses like Shen Mu, to regular citizens..they were all pawns for them to use as they pleased.

The major noble families could at least resist being pawns to some extent, but when it came to people like Shen Mu and the rest, they had no option but to become pawns if they wanted to survive. But here they were, all equal under the might arm of the Order.

"Store owner Song Ba hired me to kill a few passengers, at the time he didn't reveal their true identities and only said they had some ties to the Chen family and had cheated him on some deal by using their relation with the Chen family.

The excuse was outrightly flimsy. Who would dare cheat the Red Flaming Lotus Alchemy Shop? Being associated with the Chen family is nowhere near enough to give someone such guts.

But I was in no position to ask any question not when he offered a tri-essence elysium clover that was 20,000 years old and a chance to consult one of the executives of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion to offer pointers in my cultivation.

The fact that the request was made by someone from a subsidiary of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion already made it difficult for me to refuse and the two things he offered, with my stagnated realm, turned the situation impossible to reject.

Maybe that is why he brought the request to me in the first place instead of the other underworld organizations around or using his connections. He knew I was timid and desperate enough to accept..." said Shen Mu.

Yang Qing agreed with his assessment. For someone whose cultivation realm has stagnated even one who hasn't, most peak core formation experts, to quasi palace realm experts would do anything to get their hands on the tri-essence elysium clover which was a monarch-grade natural dao treasure.

It was a clover that formed three petals which over time condensed dew drops on each petal that were condensed liquified forms of dao. The type of dao contained within the three petals was the same in each petal, but it varied from clover to clover. One clover would have condensed dew drops containing

the dao of illusions through water, while another would contain the dao of regeneration through the wood element.

The type of dao formed by the clover was ultimately up to chance and wasn't something one could predict. Using the clover was simple, as one only needed to place the petals on their lips which would dissolve upon contact, releasing the dao dew and essence within in the process.

For peak-stage core formation experts or long-stagnated quasi-palace realm experts, that essence would give them the impetus needed to take the step forward by giving them a small dose of concentrated dao insights contained in the dao dew essence. How much they harvested, or how great a step they took was ultimately dependent on their powers of comprehension. If they were lacking in that regard, then no matter how many petals they consumed, the dao dew essence it contained would be lost on them, but if they had decent powers of comprehension, then even a single petal would be more than enough to help them take that giant step into the palace realm.

The petals of the tri-essence elysium clover were nothing more than a key and not a guarantee, but it was precious nonetheless, as it offered a chance to enter the doors on the other side and Yang Qing could see why someone like Shen Mu would agree to Store Owner's Song Ba's request.

"So after he made the request, even though I had my reservations about the request because of how vague he was acting with the details, I decided to go through, but I couldn't shake the feeling of the oddness of it all, especially, with how cagey he was.

Ultimately unwilling to do the deed myself, I hired an assassin organization by the name of Fog Cloaks Assassins to do the job. I fed them the information Owner Song Ba had given me which included travel plans, the ferry they'd use, the route, the targets which were everybody on that ferry, and their skills and cultivation bases.

Thinking back, I should have been suspicious of how thorough he had been with the information he provided about them, but back then I chalked it up to his extensive intelligence network as a seasoned merchant.

Knowing their unconscious fighting habits should have been a dead giveaway that something was off. No matter how developed his intelligence network was, he should not have known the tell signs they had when they transitioned from defense to attack, or feigning an attack, or all the trump cards they had on them.

It was so thorough that the Fog Cloaks Assassins even suspected I was laying a trap for them with how detailed the information had been. In the end, I had to tell them it was a job Owner Song Ba had requested for them to agree to go through with it but in exchange, they said I had to be present as they did the job, and I also had to give them one of the recordings I had made of the deal, luckily I had made five copies, so trading one wasn't an issue and I also had to give them one petal of the tri-

essence elysium clover.

Because of the information provided, the assassination went on smoothly. Not a single person from that ferry left alive..." Shen Mu paused as his eyes fell on Chen Zian and Chen Gutian.

"At the time, I didn't know who it was, though even if I did, with how desperate I was, I honestly don't know if I would have been able to resist the temptation.

But I truly didn't know the real identity of who would be on that ferry. Your son and the rest used fake names and the fight itself was finished quickly tha.. because of the information provided. They didn't have a chance to fight back.

It was only later when I came back and saw the uproar that came from his death that I realized the friends of the Chen family who cheated Song Ba were none other than Chen Xue and his guards.

But by the time I realized it, it was already too late, the damage had been done, a fact that Owner Song Ba used to keep me tightly under his control. Same as how I recorded the whole thing, he had a recording except his was of me striking a deal with the Fog Cloaks Assassin.

They sold me out and even doctored the recording to make it seem that I was the instigator of the whole thing. Owner Song Ba made me an offer, as long as I did jobs for him, and told him of the deals I made with the Chen family, as he already knew I had some dealings with some of them, then the recording would never see the light of day.

With no other choice, I agreed. Other than the information I fed him on the dealings I had, he never asked anything else of me.. though I had a feeling sometime in the near future, he would have, given how tense things had got between him and the owner of the Earthvine Restaurant.



## Chapter 838 Sentence Given (15)

Chen Zian and Chen Gutian simultaneously turned their attention to Song Ba, whose ghost-like features grew more defined by the second.

Chen Gutian looked at Song Ba, with the same silent coldness in his eyes that he had given Shen Mu moments ago before he turned towards Yang Qing.

"Judge Yang Qing, I promise not to act out of turn and I am sorry for my early outburst.."

Yang Qing, sensing his sincerity, nodded as he removed the restriction he had placed on him, allowing the old Chen elder some freedom in his movement.

Yang Qing wasn't too worried as he released him. Even if the elder decided to act out, Yang Qing was confident in suppressing him in an instant. About the only reservations he had was the consequences he would receive incase he did. As someone caught having human cauldron and pill slaves, his future was already grim, and now with the shock of the news that just hit him, Yang Qing didn't want to pile more troubles on him.

Elder Gutian nodded gratefully toward Yang Qing before he turned to face Owner Song Ba looking like he wanted to ask him something.

With the revelations thus far and the seemingly weight of it, rather than interfere, as long as there were no fights, Yang Qing decided to let things proceed their natural course. If Chen Butian or Chen Zian had any questions to ask, they could freely do so, in the context of things.

Besides, Yang Qing had noticed something as Shen Mu was giving his testimony. Chen Butian and Chen Zian were not the only ones who displayed reactions to his confessions about the death of Chen Butian's son, Chen Xue. Most of the elders of the Chen family seemed shocked by the news, with some disheartened by it, and others, it was just plain shock with no other reaction, but for one of them, the way they reacted caught Yang Qing's eyes.

Yang Qing couldn't help but narrow his eyes at him as he alternated his gaze between that elder and the Owner Song Ba.

"Owner Song Ba, why did you do it?" coldly asked Chen Butian.

"You've been playing me for a fool all this time, haven't you? What a fool I have been.. colluding with my son's killer.." he added as he shook his head whilst smiling bitterly before his look turned calm again.

"Back then, I only agreed to your plan of taking in those poor children to the farm and subjected them to those roles, all because you promised to help me find my son's killer. No matter how much I hated myself for it, I kept telling myself it was okay as long as it led me to my son's killer. To that end, I would have done everything and anything, including sacrificing my conscience.

And now you want to tell me it was all for naught? I destroyed my conscience, at the behest of my son's killer?

Why Song Ba? Why did you do it? Did playing with the emotions of a grieving father and playing him for a fool really bring you such pleasure?

What did I ever do to you? What did my son ever do to you? Of all the questions I have, that's the one I want to know. Why... Why did you have my son killed?" Chen Gutian asked his voice, his face, all showing the grief that had haunted him for the past forty-three years since his son's death.

In all his life, his greatest pride and joy was his son. The founder of the Chen family, Chen Fu had established himself as a sword cultivator, and when he broke through to the palace realm it was through the sword dao. However, later generations didn't have the same talent as him when it came to the sword, and they eventually decided to ply their efforts in alchemy instead.

However, even after pivoting to alchemy as their lifeline to stay afloat and relevant, it was still a sword clan, through and through. They may not have the same talent as their founder, but they never abandoned the sword, not truly. Every generation would still practise with it, and Chen Butian was no different.

In his youth, his eyes were on nothing else but the sword, he loved it but unfortunately for him, the love was one-sided, the sword didn't love him back. He had no talent for it, but like most, he believed that one day his relentless efforts would shine through and win its hearts, after all, it was said hard work trumps talent.

Later in life, he realized the fallacy in that statement. Hard work could never trump talent. A mortal could exercise his or her body to death, but if they couldn't sense and absorb qi, they would never be able to become cultivators;

Someone could have a blue-grade cultivation art and meditate on it day and night without pause, but if they didn't have a sufficient level of talent in comprehension, then without a fortuitous fate-altering encounter, they were doomed to remain as they were.

But with talent, someone cultivating the poorest white grade cultivation art could somehow make gains using the art, and even quite possibly elevate it from the white grade to the blue grade. True talents could take a massive leap to the skies with a single movement while those without it could just stare at the skies, forever bound to the ground beneath their feet.

Hard work could never trump talent, but it could equate to it. But for that to happen it needed luck, which either tries to fill in the gap talent would need, or which was more often than not provide the talent that was missing in the first place.

For example, a mortal with zero talent in cultivation suddenly stumbles onto a natural spiritual treasure that transforms their body and gives them the talent to cultivate.

Getting born into an affluent clan, like Chen Butian was, could be considered a form of luck. He may have not had the talent for the sword, but thanks to the considerable resources the clan had and the effort he put in, even without talent, he was able to make some progress with the sword and even achieve sword qi.

Were he to be born into a different clan, an impoverished one, it would have been in doubt if he would have even developed sword sense, or ever reached the core formation realm, but because of his luck, he was born into the prestigious Chen Clan, a clan containing the heritage of a sword palace stage cultivator.

When an immortal ascends even his chickens and dogs ascend with him and that was ever so true for Chen Butian, but ultimately, the late stages of the core formation realm and getting sword qi was the limit he could ever reach even with the support of the Chen Clan. That luck could only take him so far.

He was like a normal horse. No matter how hardworking the normal horse was, there was only so much it could carry, even with care from the owner, feeding on the best hay, regular checkups, and maintenance, there was a limit the normal horse would carry before its legs gave out. But if that horse had a smidge of dragon blood in it, then that limit grows exponentially regardless of how well it was cared for.

That was the importance of talent, and Chen Butian had little of it, luckily he had the Chen Clan to fall back on, it was why he was so greatly devoted to its wellbeing even after he realized he had no talent for the sword. He was one of the few elders who actively volunteered for the younger members of the clan, especially those in the body refinement realm. He would also be the first to volunteer for dangerous missions like delving into unknown ruins, mysterious realms, and other dangerous places in the hunt for treasures, and before he knew it, he was already 4,000 years old, closely approaching his lifespan limit, with no wife and children.

He didn't mind it, but when the other elders including his nephew Chen Zian, asked him to rest, he had done more than enough for the clan, only then did he consider having a family and it wasn't because it was something he truly wanted but only because he felt it was something that would be of service to the clan. All his life other than the sword, his clan had always come first, even above his life.

With that thought, he found a dao partner, and even when he chose his dao partner, it was with the clan's benefits in mind which was why he went for someone from one of the minor nobles so as to draw more support for the Chen Clan. Other than her background, he didn't care much for his dao partner and eventually, he had a child with her, Chen Xue.

Before he was even born, Chen Gutian already had everything planned out, which was he would use his lifespan to ensure his child would be of great service to the clan that had given him so much. To him, his child was a tool of service to the clan, they would exist solely for the clan's sake.

At least that was what he thought, but from the moment Chen Xue was born, for the first time, there was something that took the hegemony that the Chen Clan had in his heart, and that was his son. His world shifted and existed for his son, with everything else coming second place to him. Chen Gutian always found himself surprised at the change that happened to him because of Chen Xue and it wasn't because Chen Xue had shown considerable talent that drew even the eyes of the entire of the Chen Clan.

To him, he knew, even if Chen Xue had shown mediocre talent, he would still have felt the same way. Chen Xue was his son and pride and joy and that was it, there was no rhyme or reason. Chen Xue became his greatest achievement. Even if he gained sword intent, something he longed to achieve, it

still would not come to the exhilaration he felt every time he was around his son and the journey he shared as father and son.

One of his regret was, he started that journey too late and to make up for it, he tried to ensure Chen Xue had a wholesome life. Whatever plans he had of making Chen Xue useful to the clan, he scrapped them, as he was even the one who continually tried to have Chen Xue live more, instead of just cultivating. To try and have other things in his life, that would make cultivating important.

The day Chen Xue died, Chen Gutian had managed to convince him to take a break from cultivation and go experience the thrill of an auction house, from the excitement that came from the unique treasures being revealed to the bidding war that came after, and the thrill that came from being one of the victors. He hoped to add some color to his son's life. As someone who lived his life with single-minded devotion, he knew how exhausting that life was, and didn't want his son to live the same life he did.

Therefore he had him go to that auction, not knowing he had sent his beloved son to his death.

When he received the news, he collapsed and went into shock for a month, missing even the funeral, and when he came to, he didn't believe it at all, thinking he was under some illusion attack, and when it finally sunk in, he broke. He cried, roared, fought, did anything to try and numb the pain of the loss, and the guilt he felt but none of what he did worked.

He grew to loathe himself in the process with each day becoming unbearable, but through it all, there was one thing that kept him sane and steady, and that was vengeance. Finding his son's killers and paying them back in interest was the only thing that kept him going.

#### Chapter 839 Sentence Given (16)

A silence bore down on the courtroom, its growing presence, stifling. Owner Song Ba seemed a little out of it, his mind, seemingly elsewhere, leaving only his soulless and nerve-wrecked body behind which was of no use to Chen Gutian who seemed to be using whatever willpower and self-control he had left to not attack Song Ba, but that self-restraint seemed to be eroding the longer Song Ba without answering his question.

Chen Zian at the side though looked to be holding himself back better than Chen Gutian did, lacked the characteristics bearing of calm that he had earlier. Right now, he was nothing more than a volcano about to explode.

He was just as angry as Chen Gutian at the whole thing, albeit for different reasons from him. While Chen Gutian was maddened at the loss of his child and being duped by his son's killer which added salt to injury, Chen Zian's anger at the whole thing was at the loss of what potentially Chen Xue could have been.

His consideration was of how vital Chen Xue had been to the clan, especially the potential of what he could have been. Chen Zian, like most in the clan, saw hope in Chen Xue, hope that someday in the near future their clan would welcome another palace realm cultivator, and a sword cultivator at that just like their founder Chen Fu.

Chen Xue, since young had shown an uncanny aptitude for the sword, the likes the Chen Clan had not seen in a while. At six years old he had already achieved sword sense and at fourteen he already had developed sword qi, and at thirty he had already developed sword intent when he was just at the first stage of the core formation realm.

However, what made almost everyone including even the supreme elders hold him in high regard wasn't because of the talent he showed with the sword but rather because he had gained their ancestor's mark of approval.

Their ancestor, Chen Fu, while he couldn't be considered the greatest genius of the sword when one considered the continent as a whole, but in certain circles he could be considered gifted.

Back then, when he and the six other founders of the empire ventured into the territory of the red maple spirit as they fled for their lives, even though he and the five others were not its chosen successor, the red maple spirit handed them treasures on account of Duan Qui.

As a long-lived spirit that had reached the peak stage of the palace realm and had already knocked on the doors of the domain realm, its breadth of sight was as wide as any seasoned cultivator. It may have not stepped into the domain realm and even failed the tribulation, but its experience, owing to its long lifespan and the achievements it made meant its judgment was just as good as a domain expert's.

When it handed out the treasures to the six of them, it wasn't in a haphazard manner but handed them treasures that were compatible with their talents. It was how it judged Chen Fu to have an aptitude for the sword, and Mo Li who had an aptitude for the saber, and Gui Ling whose talents lay in alchemy, Zhang Ren who had a strong spirit and sturdy body suited for the purely destructive arts that were tied to slaughter qi.

For each, it gave them the appropriate treasure, and as a tree spirit that had lived 100,000 years, it wasn't a hard thing to do. Even though it wasn't a sword cultivator, or a saber cultivator, or cultivated its body to perfect the art of destruction, over the course of its long life it had collected a little bit of everything to expand its horizons. In the end, all paths led to the same road.

There was a lot to be gained from studying different daos, because in doing so, one better understood the different facets of the world around them, and the deeper that understanding got, the easier it became to understand oneself and the path one should take.

It was a great way of preventing blindness to one's dao by being fluid in the different forms and diverging paths it could take and the red maple spirit with its long life could afford to study different types of dao even if it wouldn't master them, deciphering them was a great way of improving itself which was how it ended up with all types of cultivation arts and techniques.

Mo Li received a blue-grade saber art from it, while Chen Fu got a blue-grade sword cultivation art that was also at the blue grade. Both were of the same level which was the low tier of the blue grade, but they were profound arts nonetheless which became the driving factors to both breaking through to the palace realm and even guaranteeing the continuity of their clans long after them.

For the Chen family, the art Chen Fu received was called the Owl vigilant sword art, which had great demands on the cultivator's soul, specifically their spiritual essence. The art's true forte was countering attacks before they fully bloomed with fierce precision and for one to perfectly pull it, they needed a strong spirit that could sense those subtle changes.

The demands of the art were extremely difficult to meet which was why other than Chen Fu, no one ever reached perfection with art, let alone even the blooming stage which was a tier lower. The better ones cultivated it to the emergent phase while the majority were stuck in the beginner phase when it came to the mastery of the art.

Their ancestor must have anticipated the difficulty the art would prove to others, thus tried to break the art into easily digestible parts but in the process, he inadvertently had an enlightenment and ended up creating another art in the process, one that was built on the foundations of the Owl vigilant sword art.

That art ended up being of a higher grade, a middle-tier blue-grade sword art, a fact that the Chen family had kept secret from others. Every person who knew of the existence of the art had to make a grand dao oath of not divulging its existence to outsiders.

That art was the true trump card of the Chen family, however, it was just as difficult cultivating it, as it was cultivating the Owl vigilant sword art, but because it was his creation, their ancestor was able to create a means through which others could understand it easily, but even if he made it easy, it wasn't truly easy. There was nothing ever truly free in the world, for everything gained, a price had to be met, and the price demanded for learning the art was something that stumped most within the Chen Clan.

Their ancestor imbued the true essence of the cultivation art he created in a top-tier natural dao treasure called the insight infusion jade bamboo, a spiritual plant capable of eternally storing a cultivator's insights but also their spirit provided they were strong enough.

Using the bamboo, their ancestor poured all his insights of the cultivation art into the bamboo, which ended up transforming the bamboo in the process. It created 16 leaves, each leaf containing a portion of the insight their ancestor had left behind, and because it also recorded his spirit, the bamboo ended up transforming into a sword treasure that leaked the tempestuous sword qi of their ancestor.

"The true sword of a sword cultivator is their body. It is the river through which other swords are born.."Was what their ancestor always said.

There was a wave of millions of sword qi surrounding the bamboo which put a life-threatening pressure on those below the palace realm. The only way to pass through that sword qi was to decipher its essence, only after you did would you get the authorization to get to the bamboo.

One could not brute force their way through it as the sword qi contained the strength of their ancestor. Anyone who wasn't at the palace stage expert would easily be shredded to pieces. Luckily for them, because it was birthed from their ancestor's spirit, even those who tried to force their way through, there were no fatalities but for those who did, their bodies and cultivation base would be permanently crippled by the sword qi.

There was only one way through, to grasp the essence of the sword qi and use its rhythm to find a way through to the bamboo. Once one was at the bamboo, it was simple, one would pour their essence into the lowest leaf, and using their entire essence which was their mind, body, and soul, they were to feel the power contained within and firmly grasp the truth within and make it their own.



The process was direct and simple enough except, it was harder and even more dangerous than the flood of sword qi surrounding the bamboo. Feeling the power of the leaf with one's entire essence was basically allowing their body, mind, and soul to be sliced apart by the essence of the sword art their ancestor had stored within. This was no different than being personally attacked by their ancestor.

The pain was unimaginable, and the pressure was soul-

crushing, and they had to bear through it long enough to grasp the essence contained within that leaf. Enduring, demanded a lot of one's willpower.

One's cultivation realm was useless there and few could survive even ten seconds of it let alone endure it long enough to grasp the truth within and the worst part was, the pain and the pressure would grow exponentially with each leaf. The further up the bamboo pole one moved, the harder it became.

There was once an elder of the clan at the eighth stage of the core formation realm, who had successfully endured the wrath and demands of the first four leaves, and was making his way for the fifth one.

With every essence successfully consumed, the body, mind, and spirit of the cultivator would be strengthened greatly along with the understanding of the art. That elder though was at the eighth stage of the core formation realm, thanks to the baptism of that bamboo, could fight toe to toe with cultivators that were at the 11th stage and even had a chance of defeating them. He was that powerful. But when he made his attempt for the fifth leaf, he could hardly endure it for five seconds and his mind broke in the process turning him into an invalid.

That reality made most, no matter how much they wanted to learn the middle tie blue grade art, they were hesitant to attempt progress past a certain threshold. Chen Zian managed to cultivate it to the sixth leaf and he was one of the highest performers only being outdone by the three supreme elders who had cultivated it to the seventh leaf.

Despite only one leaf separating them, Chen Zian was sure that for the next 200 years at least, he would not be making any attempt at grasping the seventh leaf. In fact, he had sworn, he would only make that attempt when he was in the quasi-palace realm, before then, he would stay as far away as he could from it.

He had tried the sixth leaf when he was already at the 12th stage of the core formation realm, and even though he survived it, it was only barely. He passed out a millisecond later after he had grasped the essence of the leaf, and the damage he endured, especially to his mind, left him unconscious for seventeen months, and since then, despite the considerable harvests he made, he would shiver and get nauseous at the thought at making a try for the seventh leaf.

Looking at that jade bamboo was no different than staring down the maw of a dragon. Every attempt one made was the same as experiencing death in the most brutal and terrifying way. Chen Zian often found himself wondering if there was anyone who would ever reach the 16th leaf and some part of him was even doubtful if this was even a middle-tier blue grade art because it did not feel like one.

But as terrifying as the bamboo was and the doubts he had, Chen Zian saw someone who he felt had a high chance of conquering the bamboo, and that was Chen Xue.

By the time Chen Xue was fourteen he had already grasped three leaves, making him the youngest to do so. By the time he was thirty-four years old, he had grasped the same amount of leaves as Chen Zian, which was six, and when he did, he was just at the first stage of the core formation realm, unlike Chen Zian who was a peak stage core formation expert at the time.

Chen Zian truly believed Chen Xue would conquer the bamboo and master the art completely and once he did, in one of the creeds left behind by their ancestor whoever mastered the art to completion would inherit his true legacy which included the sword he used.

Chen Zian didn't know what their ancestor's true legacy was, or even where it was, but considering the demands he made of his successor, it had to be something precious. But for Chen Zian, he felt even if Chen Xue didn't manage to reach the 16th leaf, with the amount of talent he showed, given enough time, the Chen clan would produce a palace realm cultivator. No longer would they play second fiddle to the Mo and Zhang family.

They would no longer feel as though a guillotine was constantly hanging above their necks. Their clan's longevity would be guaranteed and to him, that was the most important thing. This was why he it him or the other high-ranking figures of the clan which included the three antiques, they all held Chen Xue in high regard. He represented a lifeline for the clan and when he died, it was like the Chen clan had died with him which was why every fiber in his being was roaring for him to tear Song Ba to shreds.

Song Ba who looked bewildered and lost suddenly looked up, though he was still tense, something seemed to have switched in him.

"Shen Mu managed to keep his life by offering something to trade.. Could I do the same, Judge Yang Qing?"

Chapter 840 Sentence Given (17)

"Please don't agree to his request, Judge Yang Qing! That man killed my son!" Chen Gutian vehemently said with desperation in his tone.

A look at the expression he had on was all it took for anyone with discernment to guess his thoughts. He looked like a person who believed Song Ba would be able to weasel his way out of all he had done and quite possibly even get a cushy pardon for all he had done.

The world operated like that after all. As long as one had something substantial to offer, they could get away with anything. It wasn't such an outlandish thought to Chen Gutian that the Order could quite possibly release Song Ba.

Even if the Order was presumably a beacon of justice, he had experienced too much of the world to believe that they would remain impartial in the face of tangible benefits. Song Ba as a seasoned merchant and one who had ties to a grand organization like the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, surely would have something worthwhile to trade.

He had only discovered his son's killer and now there was a voice inside of him, yelling.

"KILL HIM! KILL HIM! Kill him before he is released. He will get away with it! You know he will. Do it now while you still have the chance. Avenge your son. Do it! Do it! Do it!.."

Luckily a smidge of rationality held him back preventing him from going completely over the line.

"While I am interested in what you have to share, I feel like there are a few things I need to make clear from the onset, so you know what you're dealing with here, and one of them, which is the most important one is, nothing you offer will get you released.

The evidence against you is already beyond damning, and the charges are as bad as it gets. The Order has intolerance against any and all matters that touch on the taboos of fiend arts. We already know it was you who supplied the techniques and means through which these elders nurtured pill slaves and human cauldrons, especially when it comes to the potions.

Your refining flames, the red flaming lotus flames were a key component in blending all the ingredients.

It was your flames that helped cover the tracks as efficiently as it did, enough to fool the eyes of most orange-grade alchemists.

Unlike Shen Mu who wasn't a direct participator in it all, you and those elders were, you are all culpable in the nurturing and harvesting of pill slaves and human cauldrons, and as such, your fates are all but sealed because of it..." Yang Qing paused as his gaze narrowed on Song Ba, a solemn presence radiating from him.

"No matter what you have to offer, nothing you give will earn your freedom in any way, shape or form. You could offer the head of the most heinous criminal and the result will be the same.

For the crime of actively engaging in the nurturing and cultivation of pill slaves and human cauldrons, the sentence for that crime is prolonged death. You will have to pay for every life you subjected to that fate, both the living and the dead.

Every crime has its pursuer and every debt has its collector. For what you did, the Order will collect in kind.

From the moment we found you guilty of those crimes, your death was guaranteed. That will not change, no matter what you offer, Owner Song Ba.."

Chen Gutian heaved a sigh of relief, while Song Ba, faltered, his knees almost giving way. Whatever strength he had garnered to try and negotiate with Yang Qing, seemed to have evaporated away the moment Yang Qing stopped talking.

While his thoughts weren't like Chen Gutian's, who thought there was a way for him to weasel out of everything and get away scot-free; he didn't expect that to happen, not with the crimes he was charged with, but he expected there was a way to meet halfway, especially with what he had to offer.

Hearing Yang Qing directly say his death was all but set, sent him deeper into the abyss, especially when he imagined what a prolonged death meant. As someone who dealt in pill slaves and human cauldrons and all other misdeeds, he could only imagine what paying back all he owed entailed and that thought made him feel, that maybe it was better off if he took his life now.

But he had doubts if he would even be able to. Yang Qing aside, who could likely freeze his movements with a mere thought, there were two domain experts present. Song Ba could forget doing anything of the kind, not to mention, he knew himself well, he was a coward through and through. Even with the threat of a painful death hanging over him, he didn't think he had the resolve to take his life. Deep down he knew, if it came to it, he would hesitate.

Just as he was about to lose himself in the pit of despair, he heard Yang Qing speak again.

"That being said, if you have something to trade, even though death is still your end road at the end of all this, the journey to that point can be amended and made a bit easier on you..

What do you think? Would you be willing to trade whatever you have for that?"

"Smooth?" Song Ba asked with a weak, quivering voice, that was birthing a little bit of strength in it.

"Yes, smooth.." answered Yang Qing feeling no need to expound further on what that entailed leaving it to Song Ba's imagination.

Despite the vagueness of it all, whatever it entailed it was better than the alternative. Whatever Song Ba envisioned was waiting for him in terms of a prolonged death and paying back what he owed, his imagination would ultimately fall short of whatever the Order had in store for him.

With the characters the Order dealt with since its establishment, the Order had refined its ability to break those characters. Some of them were as bad and hardened as one could get. The whole world could condemn them and spit on them and torture them for what they did, and they would remain unfazed by it and even have time to jeer at the world as they took its condemnation as a badge of pride.

However, no matter how hardened they were or unrepentant, half a year under the 'dedicated care' of the Order was more than enough to turn them into soft persimmons. Song Ba wasn't exactly a hardened person. Yang Qing had doubts he would even be able to survive the first ten minutes of that care.

To him, he was okay if Song Ba took the deal or not, though he very much preferred the former. For Song Ba who was having a mental breakdown a few seconds earlier, only to regain some semblance of calmness, it meant he had confidence that whatever he had was worthwhile.

Regardless of his dealings, he was a seasoned merchant, that identity was what made Yang Qing curious about what he had for trade, not to mention the suspicions he had, which he felt Song Ba could shine a light on.

It took Song Ba only a few moments before he came to his decision , which was more or less what Yang Qing had expected.

"I accept the deal.."