

## Daily life 851

### Chapter 851 Sentence given (28)

After getting his response, maybe to try and shake the nervousness that was within him, Chen Lai found himself straightening his robes, and taking a few breaths. Even though he had already steeled himself for what he was about to say, the convicting pressure the court had on him, he felt like he was facing the inviolable presence and weight of the heavens itself, judging his guilt.

Forcefully pushing back his nervousness, Chen Lai spoke.

"I admit my guilt in the harboring and nurturing of pill slaves and human cauldrons and I admit my guilt to everything the court has presented as evidence of my crime. I did those things with willful thought, no one tricked me, blackmailed me, or threatened me into doing them. I chose to do them, and I accept whatever punishment the court deems fit for those crimes.." Chen Lai said as his voice though low, reverberated around the courtroom.

"The court acknowledges and commends your admission of guilt, Chen Lai, and while it may have no immediate impact on the sentence handed to you, at a later time it may.." said Yang Qing as he motioned for Chen Lai to step back.

With Chen Lai having taken the lead, and Yang Qing's statement, the elders no longer seemed hesitant, as one after another took to the podium, directly admitting their guilt whilst also making a plea to Chen Zian to not pin the blame of any of their actions on their family members who were uninvolved in the matter.

With not one of them choosing to confess rather than make excuses, everything progressed fast. However, even though all of them, confessed, for some it wasn't what they truly wanted to do as Yang Qing noticed the reluctance in their eyes.

Those figures only did so due to cowering under the mounting pressure that was on them when one elder after the other chose to confess and own up rather than defend themselves. But it wasn't just that, the insurmountable and damning evidence against them was also a huge factor for their admission, that and the unveiled threat Yang Qing had repetitively made on what awaited them if they dared lied to the court.

Whether out of a renewed sense of decency and responsibility or out of fear, Yang Qing was all too pleased with the rapid and smooth progress, that those admissions brought.

With all the admissions finally in place, he could finally give his verdict.

"I, having found all evidence sufficient enough to pass a fair verdict, hereby present my sentence as the judge in charge of this case.

Chen Lai, Chen Lin, Chen Shanyuan, Chen Hou, Chen Gong, Chen Yufen, Chen Huang, Chen Mo, Chen Jiang, Chen Qiao, Chen Longwei, Chen Zedong, Chen Liwei, and lastly, Chen Han,

I find you all guilty of violating the Cultivator Baseline Conduct Charter for harboring and nurturing pill slaves and human cauldrons and as such for the violation the penalty is execution by cleansing from the chaos yang fire of redemption for the next 247 years which matches the number of victims you have converted into pill slaves and human cauldrons, both the living and the dead.

As per the rules, those who survive the entirety of that cleansing, if you survive to the last day, you will be released.."

When Yang Qing said that, the eyes of almost every person charged lit up, whether it was the Chen elders being sentenced, or Song Ba or Shen Mu.

When Yang Qing announced that only death awaited them even though they had accepted it, it was still a hard pill to swallow, and now hearing that there was a chance at freedom, it was like a severely dehydrated person coming across a single dew drop on a blade of grass. Even if it wasn't enough to satiate their thirst, the dehydrated person, that drop was no different than coming across a big oasis.

That sentiment was the same to those in the courtroom about to be sentenced. They didn't know how it felt to be cleansed by the chaos yang river or redemption, but no matter how difficult it was, each and every one of them thought to themselves, that surely they would be able to survive as long as they grit their teeth and steeled themselves through the cleansing.

They all increasingly felt they had sufficient willpower and desperation to weather through it, and no matter how torturous the process was likely to be, they only needed to survive 247 years. As late-stage core formation experts, 247 years was as long as a nap to them. A blink of an eye and it was done.

"Is this true? If we survive those years, will we be let go?" eagerly asked one of the elders whose excitement had given him the courage to speak up.

"It is. As long as you survive till the last day of the 247 years your debt to those you harmed will be considered repaid. I can swear a grand dao oath to attest to it if you want?"

"No, no, there's no need for that, I believe you.." ecstatically said the elder with a wide smile on his face that was mirrored with by the rest.

Yang Qing paused as he gave them time to internalize the news while taking in their reactions while sighing on the inside when he saw those elders' eyes shining with hope. Even Shen Mu at the side seemed hesitant.

As per the terms of his deal, for his testimony, he was spared the treatment of the chaos yang river of redemption, but the substitute for being spared was he would be imprisoned indefinitely until his lifespan ran out.

He would not be tortured and would get to live out his days as a regular at the Requiem. It was a good deal on all accounts the treatment of the chaos yang river of redemption, but the substitute for being spared was he would be imprisoned since, even though the environment was harsh, Shen Mu had been informed that he would still be able to cultivate and there have been records of prisoners having major breakthroughs because of the richness of the environment there.

But even with all that, some part of him was tempted to ask for a switch of his deal. Even if he kept his life, life imprisonment no matter the conditions was still life imprisonment, and the Requiem despite having records of cultivators breaking through, who knew the real reason why they broke through.

Most cultivators broke through under the pressure of death or being tempered by extremely difficult situations. Requiem being a prison was definitely not short of life-threatening and extremely difficult obstacles.

The deal only said they would not torture him, but it didn't entail guaranteeing his protection in there and if he was being perfectly honest, a huge part of him, no matter how deserving he felt of the punishment handed to him, if he was given a shot at freedom, he would take it in a heartbeat.

And now, with what Yang Qing just announced, there was a way he could get an early release. If he asked for his sentence to be switched to the cleansing, he was sure he would get less years than the elders as he wasn't directly involved nor had knowledge of the business they were doing. He was just the supplier of those kids, some he kidnapped yes, but some came willingly. Add that and all the other crimes he was guilty of he felt he would get maybe 100 years and even less maybe on account of his mother and her identity.

"Maybe.." he'd only just thought of this as he turned to face his mother, only to freeze when he saw her shake her head as if she had read through his thoughts.

"Why?" he looked questioningly. Yes, his willpower may have not been his strongest suit considering the path he ended up taking after suffering a major loss, but he was different now, right? His mother was alive, he was repentant, and he had a saber intent which wasn't only a powerful combat tool, but strengthened the user's spirit too.

Surely he could survive it, right? His odds were surely better than those elders, and at least the time. However, his thoughts were cut short when he saw the other person who had made a deal close to his, remain unshaken by the news. He was about the only person to remain the same. That person was Song Ba. Shen Mu didn't believe it, he had expected a similar reaction from the merchant when a shot at freedom was presented to him, but it was like he hadn't even registered what Yang Qing had said.

On sensing his gaze, Song Ba turned to him and smiled.

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?Shen Mu felt a shiver travel up his spine when he saw that smile.

"Is there really something wrong with that river?" he wondered.

Even though he asked himself that, the warning from his mother and Song Ba's reaction already answered the question.

There was no way the Order would be so lenient as to let go of cultivators who engaged in taboo matters. If they did, they would be drowned with criticism and public outcry for being corrupt or inept in their duties.

Cultivating pill slaves and human cauldrons was considered a sinful act, commonly associated with fiendish cultivators. Even before the Order was created, those harboring human cauldrons were considered a public enemy to the entire continent.

If it was known that the Order was letting go of those found guilty of such acts, what would the continent's reaction be like?

As it stood, the Order was already on thin ice on the continent, add a scandal like this, and that ice would quickly melt bringing a fierce storm to the Order's doorstep. Even if the Order was powerful enough to wade through all kinds of storms, they would not willingly invite one if they could avoid it.

Once his thoughts reached that far, Shen Mu's eyes widened. If the Order made that offer, then that meant they had confidence that no one would be able to survive the Chaos yang river of redemption.

The Order has been in existence for almost 1,000 years and in that time, what manner of characters have they come across? For the reputation they had built, countless had fallen to their hands, and in that number surely there was no small number of core formation experts, palace realm experts, and maybe even domain experts, but in all this time, Shen Mu had never had a single person guilty of heinous taboo crimes being released.

This could only mean one thing, no one has ever survived that river to date. When he reached that conclusion, he could feel his whole body freeze over. He had almost thrown himself to an early death under the allure of a potential release that never existed in the first place.

"How cruel are they?" thought Shen Mu as he looked up, finding a strange glint flash in Yang Qing's eyes as it fell on him. If moments ago, his thoughts were merely, then the look Yang Qing gave him, all but confirmed it.

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"I hope you can all maintain the same zeal when the moment comes.." thought Yang Qing as he took in the crowd's reaction.

He had sensed Shen Mu's temptation, which wasn't all that strange as he had seen others follow his train of thought when they made a deal opting to endure the test of the Chaos yang river of redemption, believing it was a better choice, but it couldn't be further from the truth.

That river could kill a peak-stage soul formation expert in a thousand years, a peak-stage domain expert in a hundred years, and those below the domain realm would not last more than ten years. That river contained the most pure and ancient form of yang flames which were so potent that it could burn through space, burn through air, burn through any dao that was not related to it.

The river was only one kilometer long and twenty meters wide, however, it reigned sovereign, one hundred thousand kilometers around. Whatever it didn't permit to exist, would not exist without its say-so.

But with danger comes rewards, as destructive as the river was, it also brought countless benefits to those who were able to endure it or gain its recognition. The Chaos Yang River of Redemption was a mystical dao form that was rumored to have been in existence in the primordial era when the world was formed and as such it contained mysterious truths and secrets that preceded antiquity. A power that was unique and unmatched in profundity. Those able to grasp even the tiniest portion would harvest the benefits well after they have broken into the soul formation realm.

Yang Qing had heard that a few of the higher-ups of the Order cultivated there, especially those looking to break through to the soul formation realm and it wasn't only them, even those looking to break through to the domain realm would have a chance to cultivate there under the protection of a soul formation expert to be tempered and reforged by the flames of that river.

The reason why the Order had a lot of domain experts was rumored to be because of the river's effects.

But, even with the apparent benefits, no one ever stays there for more than a year. Only those in the soul formation realm could push to double digits, but even they would not dare hit triple digits, especially when one considered a thousand years in that place was enough to kill any peak stage soul formation expert, despite their foundations and accumulations.

The river's ability to refine one's entire essence from their body to their soul, to their mind was second to none, but that was only if you could survive it.

Per Yang Qing's estimation, when it came to the Chen Clan elders before him, it was in doubt whether they would be able to survive six months let alone 247 years. A peak stage domain expert would not be able to endure those flames let alone some late-stage core formation experts, but if by some chance one of them endured it, they would be released, not because the Order honors its promises, but because of the Chaos Yang River.

A core formation expert enduring its flames that long could only happen if they gained the river's recognition, and if they did, killing them would prove difficult bordering on impossible, after all, it was rumored that the river shared the same source as the phoenix's flame of rebirth and those who gained its recognition, received the same favor as the phoenix did.

Anyone outside the Order would believe such a thing to be false, after all how unique were the phoenix's flames, its rebirth ability was something born of the supreme dao, making a replication of its ability nigh impossible but within the Order, there was a record of one person surviving its flames well beyond what should have been their ability to survive it.

Four years old that person was when he came across the river. Starving and dehydrated, that child made his way to the river and survived for eleven years as he drank the yang water from that river, as his body was broken and reformed several times over during that period until finally, the river acknowledged that child.

All this time, only that person has ever been acknowledged by it and is the reason the Order got to have that river in the first place. That person was none other than the Chief Justice of the Order, Lai Ning, the immortal child.

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?Only after the excitement had sufficiently died down did Yang Qing continue with his verdicts.

"Owner Song Ba for being one of the primary instigators of this whole ordeal, and your association with a blood fiend group, your verdict would have been execution under the heavenly inquisition blade, and the sentence would have been carried four years from now.

However, because of your cooperation, and the court judging the information you traded to be valuable, that sentence has been vacated with another taking its place.

You will spend the remainder of your life imprisoned, never to see the light of day..."

Song Ba heaved a sigh of relief when he heard that, however, he instantly became wary when he saw Yang Qing's attention on him like he wasn't done.

"In addition, while the trade does guarantee your life, a bit of a price needs to be paid for what you did..."

Song Ba's heart dropped when he heard those words, and his eyes widened.

"As such, it is my recommendation pending approval from Supervisory Judge Lei Weiyuan, Supervisory Judge Hou Dehui, the Judicial Review Committee, and the Spirit Council, that Song Ba be subjected to the baptism of the Chaos Yang River Of Redemption for three days, or the limits through which his body and mind can remain intact.

Afterward, the Order can heal the injuries that present themselves as a result of that duration..

What do you all think?"

Song Ba filled with the courage of self-preservation, hurriedly spoke up.

"But Judge Yang Qing, I thought we had a deal.."

"We did.."

"Isn't this a betrayal of that deal? You promised an easy death for what I offered.."



"Haven't you heard my sentence? You will still receive an easy death by getting to live out the entirety of your lifespan incarcerated instead of what your original sentence should have been.

I can promise you this, death by heavenly inquisition blade would have been a truly horrifying end. The agony it would have left on you would have followed you well into the afterlife.

But because of the information you provided, such a death has been removed from the equation.."

Yang Qing raised his hand as a gesture for Song Ba to let him finish.

He didn't lie, for someone with a lot of blood on their hands, especially ones whose victims held a lot of grievance, facing the heavenly inquisition sword was the worst thing they could ever face, even worse than being thrown into the Chaos Yang River Of Redemption.

At least with the latter, it didn't discriminate, and though any death brought by it was painful, it could be considered relatively swift, but the heavenly inquisition sword was different, it was especially ruthless to cultivators like Song Ba or Shen Mu who had the scent of grieving souls on them. Souls that were unable to find rest because of the reasons behind their death, and how they lost their lives.

As far as Yang Qing knew, almost every Order employee had interacted with the sword, the moment they started working for the Order because they all swore an oath to uphold the principles of the Order, with the sword bearing witness to the oath.

Yang Qing could never forget the memory of his interaction with it. He didn't even know where that sword was when he was taken there, only that the room was dark save only for that sword that looked to have been crafted from the purest crystal in the world, unblemished by anything.

The sword had a gentle mystical light that flowed through its entire body, which made all who saw it feel like all their hidden thoughts and desires were laid out to bare beneath that light.

Even with the gentleness it evoked, Yang Qing felt a binding pressure on his soul, which came from feeling entirely exposed. There was nothing he could do or hide that the sword would not know.

Even after interacting with it, that sword was still a complete mystery to him. He knew next to nothing about it, other than, no one could ever lie in front of it and those judged by it would experience pain worse than death. The sword had this ability where all the aggrieved souls would be brought to life, albeit shortly, and they would all have a chance at enacting their vengeance several times over on the one they accused.

The accused would have to endure the torture by every restless spirit that haunted them. The sword as a conduit would transmit the wrath and everything those spirits would wish on the culprit.

It was the deliverer of the wrath of the aggrieved and restless souls who even in their death knew no peace and once the last victim had their vengeance, only then, would the accused get slain by the sword.

Yang Qing didn't know how that was able to do all that, hearing only rumors here and there such as the sword being tempered in a rumored dao treasure, similar to the Chaos Yang River, only this one was called the Chaos Yin River of souls.

Yang Qing wasn't sure how true that was, but he did know the sword's abilities were terrifying and Song Ba could consider himself extremely lucky to have avoided that fate.

"The deal was for you to have a simple and easy death which you will... For them, surviving the cleansing of the Chaos Yang River Of Redemption depends on their abilities, the Order has no influence whatsoever on their survival or death.

Our only job is to take them to the river, where they will stay for the duration of their sentence. Their life and death in there has nothing to do with us, but for you, things are different.

Your association with blood fiend cultivators already guarantees you a painful death, let alone being the mastermind in creating pill slaves and human cauldrons.

Me agreeing to the deal is an act of magnanimity and consideration, but even then, you still need to pay for what you have done, even by a tiny bit so the souls of your victims, be they living or dead, can have some form of justice.

This is why I have suggested that you be subjected to the same treatment as them for three days or til the upper limits of your endurance, whichever is longer.

You owe a debt and it has to be paid, one way or another, and this is the most efficient way, and unlike them, where their survival is up to them, in your case, the Order will personally guarantee your survival at the end.

Make no mistake, Owner Song Ba, this is not your death sentence, but a debt collection... Is that clear?" asked Yang Qing.

"It is.."Song Ba said with a low voice as he tried to hide his dejection and nervousness.

As a merchant, he had long grown wary of things that were too good to be true, especially when it came to deals. When there was an imbalance in the deal, when one side seemed hugely advantageous to the other, that always set off huge alarm bells in him because to him, no matter the advantages there was usually a hidden corresponding price to pay.

The sentence of the Chaos Yang River, surviving it might seem like a path to redemption, but considering the crime done, Song Ba knew the river was sure to collect in kind. There was no way the Order was going to be at the losing end of that deal, and now being sent there even for a few days, he couldn't help but worry.

He wasn't exactly known for having strong willpower, if he was, he would likely not be in the situation he was in today. His only saving grace was he would not die from it, but even that thought left him in a depressive and frightful mood. Pain worse than death must have come from places like the Chaos Yang River in mind.

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?Just as he was lamenting his luck, Yang Qing continued,

"In addition, for conspiring to murder Chen Xue, while we have no jurisdiction in such feuds, should any one of his kin at some point in time, whether today, tomorrow, ten years or hundred years from now, decide they want to collect on that debt, despite you being in our custody, the Order will facilitate the blood debt duel, in accordance to the customs of the cultivators' code of conduct.," said Yang Qing with his gaze pausing momentarily on the Chen Clan patriarch who seemed to be clenching his fists in frustration.

Yang Qing was right, Chen Zian felt deeply frustrated, especially after learning of Chen Xue's death.

Other than Chen Zholan's betrayal, what frustrated him was, he realized how weak their clan was. Even if they had realized back then that Song Ba had been involved in the death of Chen Xue, he and the rest of the clan, bar Chen Gutian would have been hesitant to act.

Song Ba's identity as a subsidiary owner under the banner of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion would have made them hesitant, bordering on unable to do anything about it. Chen Zian could have easily slaughtered Song Ba, but would he?

Song Ba by himself was nothing, but the Golden Bamboo Pavilion behind him was enough to strike fear in the hearts of many. He did not doubt if any of the founding families, even including the royal family, were in the same situation as him, they would have the same hesitation and considerations he was having right now.

For what Song Ba had done, the Golden Bamboo Pavilion was sure to draw a huge line with him, but if Chen Zian took Yang Qing up on his offer and challenged Song Ba to a debt-blood duel, would the Golden Bamboo Pavilion let him go scot-free, even after cutting ties with him?

It was a risk he couldn't take, and that thought made his blood boil over. Red Maple Empire was littered with other Song Bas. What if they just like Song Ba decided to target a member of his clan? Would he just have to shut up and take it? He knew already knew the answer to that, and had known for a while, because if he was keen on avenging Chen Xue, why did he choose Chen Zholan who only schemed, and did not challenge Song Ba who actually worked on the plan, or Shen Mu who hired the assassins that did the job.

The answer was he couldn't. One had the stamp of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion on him, and the other, assuming he could even match Shen Mu in a fight and win, he still had to consider his domain expert mother standing behind him.

Facing the realities of one's weakness was always difficult, let alone swallowing it. It always left an unpleasant aftertaste.

Whatever thoughts he had, Song Ba seemed to have come to the same conclusions too, as he seemed undisturbed by the announcement, as he even managed to spare Chen Zian a nonchalant glance before he went back to worrying about how bad the experience of the Chaos Yang River would be.

As for worrying about Chen Zian or any other person from the Chen Clan taking up the offer, he could care less. There was a reason why he chose to settle in the Red Maple Empire or dared to deal in pill slaves and human cauldrons with one of the so-

called founding families.

Red Maple Empire was just the glorified back garden of Golden Bamboo Pavilion, and those nobles were gardeners. It might seem like they had a partnership with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, instead of being subordinates, but everyone knew what the relationship was truly like.

Why else would the subsidiaries behave wantonly within their territory as if they were the true overlords of the place and why would the Empire let them?

Even with their relationship severed, Song Ba knew Chen Zian would never escape the shadow Golden Bamboo Pavilion had cast on them. He had no choice but to swallow it, either that or the Chen family produces a domain expert. But what were the odds of that happening?

If they struggled so much producing a palace realm expert, was a domain expert even remotely in the cards for them?

Song Ba felt he had a higher chance of surviving the Chaos Yang River for 247 years than the Chen Clan had of ever having a domain expert, and even if by some freakish chance they were able to, what were the odds they would be able to produce one before his lifespan ran out.

In all this, there was one thing that gave him confidence that that would never happen for them, and it wasn't because the Chen Clan lacked the talent and the resources to actually pull it off, which it did, but it was because of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.

The Pavilion would never let them or any other family in Red Maple Empire for that matter, ever produce a domain expert, and risk losing their back garden. A merchant would never accept the loss of a

valuable resource like that. Part of the reason Song Ba willingly agreed to kill Chen Xue was because Chen Xue by virtue of his talent had granted him immunity even if he was found out. In the pavilion's books, his actions were considered merit.

Why has the Empire since it was founded never moved past the ranks of barely average among rank four organizations despite its long history and its foundation being the territory of a long-

lived spiritual plant that had once touched the doors of the domain realm?

In all its history, it has never produced a palace realm expert that had touched the seventh stage of the palace realm. Not one late-stage palace realm expert, despite the resources of the red maple spirit at their disposal.

Were they truly that incompetent generation after generation that not one person could ever reach the seventh stage or was it because of something else?

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?Song Ba hurriedly cleared his thoughts of the potential undercurrents of the Red Maple Empire. To him, if he was asked, he could only say the Empire brought that fate on themselves by choosing to maintain an ambiguous relationship with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.

If they outright committed themselves as a true and proper subordinate, instead of an allied partner like they tried to portray then the Pavilion would likely treat them as it did them. Its subsidiaries had no shortage of shops owned by talented cultivators with the top leading ones having already reached at least the middle to the late stages of the palace realm.

The executives who were in charge of the management of the subsidiaries and the branches of the pavilion, the Pavilion had nine executives, and each one of them was a late palace stage expert, and for some, they had once been part of the subsidiaries before they were elevated in stature and provided they managed to reach the peak stage of the palace realm, their status would be elevated further into the ranks of the Golden Elders, which was the position that was just below the three founders of the pavilion.

The Pavilion had seven Golden Elders and among their ranks, four were peak stage palace realm experts, two were at the quasi-domain stage and the leader of the group was a bonafide domain expert.

When it came to its own, as long as one showed promise, the Golden Bamboo Pavilion would pour resources and support said individuals, but only if you were considered one of their own, which the Red Maple Empire wasn't considered as long as they wore the title of 'ally'.

"Is pride really that important if it stifles or risks your growth?" thought Song Ba, unable to understand why the Empire remained insistent on the relationship it had with the pavilion despite the clear disadvantages.

To him, them trying to maintain a sense of independence and freedom was a foolish decision especially when one considered the state of affairs in the Empire. The subsidiaries, with the blessing of the pavilion, constantly stirred up trouble in the Empire, by promoting discord among the noble families.

They weren't the only dagger used, the up-and-coming noble families were another. With secret support from the pavilion via some of its prominent subsidiaries, those families were quickly improving and growing in strength, and it wouldn't be long before they completely catch up to the founding families and maybe even completely replace them.

The reason those founding families were constantly feuding, other than instigation from outside forces, was because of the desperation that those families put them on with the gains they were making. It was why they didn't hesitate to tear each other apart.

When two people are chased by a bear, the one who survives is the one who runs the fastest, and if both their speeds and circumstances are the same, then one of them will try to trip the other to increase their odds of survival. It was the same thing those families were doing.

They knew most of the challenges they faced, either directly or indirectly had something to do with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, and since they were helpless to do anything about it directly, not unless they found another backer at the level of the Pavilion, they could only tear at each other, in the hopes that one of them will slow down the bear that was after them.

It was why Song Ba always struggled to understand what the royal family and those families were thinking by desperately struggling to maintain their independence instead of giving in just like how their neighbors the Five Clovers Kingdom did. The Five Clovers Kingdom was a true subordinate of the Zou Clan.

Yes, their circumstances were different, with the Five Clovers Kingdom having been a rank three kingdom, starting down a potential takeover during the expansion reign of the Red Maple Empire, while the Red Maple Empire had a powerful empress to rely on and the inheritance of the long-lived peak palace stage Red maple spirit.

But even if the empire borrowed the name of the Red Maple Spirit, it was not the Red Maple Spirit.

Look at the two nations now, the kingdom that wasn't worth their attention was almost catching up to them, while they stagnated and rotted from within. Whatever independence they were struggling to maintain would be taken away, either by the pavilion or the Five Clover Kingdom, whichever came first.

Is it worth it for a false sense of independence?

One must know to adapt to circumstances if they are to survive and Song Ba felt just like his days were numbered, the Red Maple Empire would not be far behind. Maybe he might soon have company as he walked the Yellow River to the afterlife with Chen Zian who was looking hatefully at him being one of them.

He quickly held himself back from chuckling at the twisted sense of fate.

Song Ba tore his attention from Chen Zian as he placed his hand over his heart which seemed to have calmed down slightly. The short sadistic reprieve had given him a much-needed outlet for his fears.

Chen Zian gritted his teeth in pained frustration at the look of disregard Song Ba gave him. He may not be in Song Ba's mind, but he could tell what Song Ba was thinking. A second later he couldn't help but sigh.

"Ultimately we are just too weak. Maybe back then we should have been insistent with Chen Xue. I don't know if he would have reached the domain realm but even reaching the palace realm would have provided a shining light out of that looming darkness, " thought Chen Zian.

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Yang Qing unaware of the thoughts and non-verbal exchange between the two continued with his verdict.

"Shen Mu.."

Shen Mu straightened up his body as his eyes flickered with worry. He wasn't the only one who seemed on edge at the mention of his name, his mother, Tan Lanfen wore a look of worry as her index fingers moved back and forth like they were chiseling something.

"The court having found your cooperation and testimony satisfactory, we will thus honor the deal agreed upon before in exchange for your full cooperation.

For your crimes, you will serve a life sentence, completely under the watch and authority of the Order until you breathe your last..."

Shen Mu couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief when he heard that. Even if the deal was already agreed upon before the proceedings even started, he couldn't deny that some part of him was slightly worried that the Order would renege on the deal and throw some terrifying sentence on him that would end with him dying painfully.."

"In addition, just like Song Ba, you are forever bound to a blood debt duel owed for Chen Xue's life. Even if you didn't know of his identity beforehand nor did you strike the blow that ended his life, you're still culpable in his death having hired the assassins for the job.

His blood is on your hands, the same as Song Ba and the Hidden Fog Assassins who did the deed.

From now till the last day of your lifespan, should anyone from the Chen family claim that debt, the Order will honor and uphold it.."

"I understand and accept, and thank the court for its magnanimity.." Shen Mu solemnly said as he cupped his fist.

He had expected as much when it came to the blood debt. Even before the Order, such was the way of life for cultivators. Whatever blood you spilled, you had to anticipate that there would be someone coming to collect the price for it at some point in time.

That being said, he felt conflicted about it. He felt regret for his part in it yes, but if someone from the Chen Clan came to collect, despite what reservations he felt about the whole thing, he would fight with everything he had to preserve his life. The thought of killing another person from that clan made his heart feel heavy, especially if his father was the one who requested it.

Sneaking a glance at Chen Gutian, some part of him hoped he would forever remain confused he was in rather than gain clarity and with it, a thirst for vengeance. He had enough blood on his hands, and with how bad things were for Chen Gutian, the weight of taking his life too was a burden he didn't want.

As he was lost in his thoughts, Tan Lafen had thanked the court too for sparing her son's life and requested to have some time with him before he was sent to Requiem, to which Yang Qing acquiesced but her time with Shen Mu would only be under the presence of a domain expert from the Order. With all things considered it would likely be someone from the special inquisitors who were experts at anticipating and sniffing out hidden measures.

With almost all of the sentences given, he was left with Chen Zholan and the distraught and confused Chen Gutian. Seeing Chen Gutian's state, Yang Qing opted to hand Chen Zholan his sentence.

Even though Chen Zholan looked better than Chen Gutian, mentally, it wasn't by much, as one could see the fear in him as he looked around him, looking for help or mercy. The Chen Clan elders had drawn a clear line from him, Chen Zian wanted to kill him, and the court was overbearing.

It was like everyone and everything around him was judging him as the culprit of the whole thing which prompted him to keep muttering,

"It wasn't my fault..."

"Chen Zholan for the crime of harboring and nurturing pill slaves and human cauldrons, just like the rest you shall be sentenced to the Chaos Yang River Of Redemption, where you will undergo its cleansing for 247 years, and should you survive it, just like what I told them, your debt will be considered to have

been paid in full..." said Yang Qing, though Chen Zholan didn't seem all too excited at the prospect, still wearing the same look of fear and nervousness.

"However.." Yang Qing added as his gaze fell on Chen Zian.

"The court will temporarily hold off on enacting the sentence because of the challenge issued earlier.

The court approves Chen Clan Leader Chen Zian's request to settle the blood debt owed by you Chen Zholan for your part in the murder of Chen Xue.

Should you survive the blood debt challenge, only then will the sentence given come into effect..." announced Yang Qing.

"Clan leader, having issued the challenge, as per our rules, with you being the collector, you have the right to decide on the time, but that time can not exceed seven days because of his impending sentence. Were he given a life sentence we would have accommodated the time frame you required, but because of the terms of his sentence, you have a week to prepare for the fight.

If you exceed that, without proper cause, his sentence will take effect on the eighth day.

When would you like to have the challenge?"

Without pause or thought, Chen Zian answered,

"Immediately, Judge Yang Qing.."

Chapter 856 Blood debt duel (1)

"B..B.. but Judge I am not ready!" Chen Zholan hurriedly said in protest.

He was only at the eighth stage of the core formation realm while Chen Zian was at the peak stage of the core formation realm. Even though such a gap in cultivation base didn't equate to an insurmountable gap in the core formation stage unlike in the palace realm where a difference in every minor stage came with a monumental leap in strength, he still had grounds to be worried.

Chen Zian wasn't just any peak-stage core formation expert, as someone who regularly sparred with him, Chen Zholan knew intimately how great his abilities were coming second only to the three supreme elders who were in the quasi-palace stage, though Chen Zholan had this nagging feeling, that Chen Zian was likely on par with those supreme elders as he had likely achieved a fully formed sword intent.

Outwardly, both within and outside the clan, Chen Zian was known to have not reached that stage yet, but as the cunning old fox he knew him to be, Chen Zholan felt Chen Zian would definitely hide he had achieved sword intent even from his people so as to have a card in reserve.

Chen Zholan felt strongly that he had likely achieved sword intent because of Chen Xue. Other than Chen Zian, the person he had sparred with the most was Chen Xue, which started when he was small going all the way through to when he had birthed his sword intent.

They must have sparred about a million times to the point that Chen Xue's sword intent was ingrained in Chen Zholan's entire being. That inadvertently made him extremely sensitive to the hidden qualities of sword intent. He didn't know how it happened, but he could feel a certain quality from the three supreme elders that gave him the same sensation as Chen Xue did.

At first, he had chalked up that feeling to intimidation, but later through experimentation, he felt it was likely tied to sword intent, especially when thirty years ago Chen Zian started exhibiting that quality when prior he had not.

If his guess was true, his fight against Chen Zian, if it could be called that, the victor was already decided.

There was a difference between fighting a peak stage core formation expert with no sword intent, and fighting one that has, fighting the former was like fighting a lion, but fighting the latter was like fighting a lion that had the teeth, scales, and claws of a dragon.

Knowing Chen Zian's vicious nature, there was no doubt he would take his time with those claws causing maximum amount of pain, drawing it out to torment him as he broke him piece by piece until finally delivering the finishing blow.

Chen Zian was the last person he wanted to face.

"As the perpetrator, you have no say in this. The battle shall commence immediately.." Yang Qing calmly said, extinguishing whatever hopes Chen Zholan had of delaying the thing.

Chen Zholan wanted to make another go at it but Yang Qing's gaze dissuaded him from it.

An instant later just as Chen Zholan was wallowing in fear and worry someone spoke, drawing the attention of the entire courtroom.

"Chen Zian let me do this.."

The voice was low, raspy, and lacking in vigor but even in its weakness there was an unyielding resolve.

All the eyes centered on the originator of that voice.

"Uncle..." Chen Zian was just about to dissuade his uncle from taking the mantle of vengeance and let him handle it, but he swallowed his words when he saw the gaze Chen Gutian gave him.

He seemed to have aged even more so in the short amount of time they had been in the courtroom and that was saying a lot for someone close to the end of his lifespan. His frame seemed to have shrunk as he seemed shorter and bonier than he had been, with his skin hugging his bones, and his robes swallowing his entire, while his hair was as white as he could get.

He looked no different than a living fossil, but that living fossil had a spirited look in his eyes that managed to affect Chen Zian.

"Fine.." Chen Zian solemnly said.

"Thank you for accommodating me and I am sorry for betraying the clan.." Chen Gutian said with an honest smile coloring his face.

After that he turned to face Yang Qing, bowing at the waist as he did so.

"I did something deplorable and shamed my son and the clan in the process. There is no excuse for what I did. I would like to undergo the sentence as my fellow elders. No more, no less.."

"You're sure?" asked Yang Qing.

Chen Gutian's circumstances were special which gave him no small amount of headache on how to deliberate. His grief had been preyed on, and of all those present, he was the only one to have the least amount of human cauldrons and pill slaves with the former standing at one, and the latter being only two, and none of them were dead.

Also from the interviews conducted on them, those children had said Chen Gutian had treated them well.

Ignoring their roles, the treatment they received from him was no different than what the clansmen would receive, and when it came to the child chosen to be the human cauldron, the inspection done on his body revealed that he had been regularly fed natural treasures that boosted one's vitality. His lifespan wasn't completely damaged as a result of those efforts, same to the pill slaves.

Yang Qing had decided for his sentence, he would have sentenced him to a trial of the hearts by the heavenly inquisition sword which also could judge remorse as much as guilt while weighing the crimes. The sentence would be him getting stabbed by the sword and having their guilt and conscience tested by the sword. The process was brutal, to say the least, but provided one was truly sincere, wholeheartedly at that, they would survive the test, and once they did, their sentence could be considered served and paid in full.

However, for those who failed, only an agonizing death awaited them. Based on what he had seen, Yang Qing felt Chen Gutian would likely have survived the test, and if he still felt guilty after, Yang Qing would have suggested he use his remaining life to take care of the children he had on his farm, once they were fully restored by the Order.

From what he had seen of those children, they would likely accept, and also the fact that they had no one else to rely on was also another factor. The Order as large as it was, was limited in its ability to help especially when it came to resources. It had to maximize every bit it had to groom more gifted personnel to deal with the growing workload. They didn't have much leftover to support others. Healing them and

giving them a shot at a new life by referring them to other places like Yang Qing had planned to do was the best they could do.

But now seeing Chen Gutian and the choice he made, he had to reevaluate the plan.

"I am sure, Judge. It is the only way I can face my son.." answered Chen Gutian with a peaceful smile.

Ever since he came to, he seemed different. He had a sense of tranquillity about him that was completely different than the erratic demeanor he had before, or the lost look that he had after. Now he had a sense of clarity and assuredness about him.

Yang Qing could already tell why and based on the look Chen Zian was giving Chen Gutian, he was likely aware too.

"Fine. Should you end as the victor of the duel, you will receive the sentence as the other elders.."

"Thank you for accommodating this old man.." Chen Gutian said as he performed another bow before he turned to face Chen Zholan who seemed bewildered at Chen Gutian's transformation, especially when he saw the clarity in Chen Gutian's eyes, which were devoid of anger, hatred, or bloodlust which he would have expected to see in them when Chen Gutian turned to face, but all he could see was a sense of peace, and a gentleness that a father would give to their son.

"Zholan.." Chen Gutian said as his eyes flashed with regret.

"What?" Chen Zholan warily asked.

"What do you think Xue'er is thinking right now? Seeing all these? The father he admired and respected went and did something so shameful as harm other children all for the sake of vengeance.. his best friend, whom he thought of as a brother was so afraid of him that he had him killed..

and now the two most important people in his life were about to fight each other to the death.

Would he scold us? Would he beat us up and tell us to stop acting foolishly or would he be at a complete loss on what to do with us?

All my life, I have lived unafraid of anything except one, no two, disappointing my son, and disappointing the clan, and I have managed to do both.

It's why, now, I can't seem to hate you, I can see the same fear in you. Our reasons may be different, but we have lived our whole lives under the weight of fear.

You may have betrayed my son and had him murdered, but I have to thank you for being his friend. Having you around made him happy as holding a sword did, and for that I am thankful and to repay that debt, I will help you exorcise that fear that has long plagued your life."

"How?" Chen Zholan coldly asked.

"In death, all burdens of the heart and mind are removed. I will grant you a good death.." Chen Gutian said with a gentle and peaceful smile, his demeanor evoking the sense that it was a grandfather showing care for his grandson.

Chapter 857 Blood debt duel (2)

"Than I will have to thank you in advance for your assistance.." Chen Zholan said, his tone rife with sarcasm that matched the sardonic smile he wore.

Chen Gutian's sense of calmness had thrown him off a bit but after settling down, he felt relieved for not having to face Chen Zian. He couldn't help but throw another wary glance at Chen Zian in fear that he may decide to push as the challenger instead of letting Chen Gutian take it.

But when he saw Chen Zian stand silent, his heart relaxed. Chen Gutian was at the eleventh stage of the core formation realm, while he was at the eighth, but even though Chen Gutian was at the eleventh, in terms of combat ability, Chen Zholan felt he had nothing to fear from the former.

Chen Gutian was a washed-out old man with average talent. His accomplishments had more to do with the clan's backing and resources rather than his own talent. Left to his own devices, Chen Zholan strongly felt Chen Gutian's talent would tap out at the fourth stage of the core formation realm.



He was different. Other than Chen Xue, there were not many in the clan who's talents he ever felt inferior to, let alone an old man who needed copious amounts of resources just to reach the eleventh stage of the core formation realm. An amount that would have likely nurtured two peak-stage core formation experts with decent talent.

Chen Zholan had used about an eighth of the resources Chen Gutian had, but when it came to accumulations and foundations, Chen Zholan's achievements had left Chen Gutian's in the mud, be it the stability of their realms, their understanding of the dao of the sword.

From what Chen Zholan knew Chen Gutian had cultivated their legacy art up to the third leaf, whereas he, despite having a lower cultivation realm, being over a thousand years younger, had already cultivated to the fourth leaf, and if his fear of Chen Xue's talent had not infected his will power, he would have even made an attempt on the fifth leaf like the sect master and most of the top figures of the clan, registering himself as one of the youngest clan members to do so.

His odds of defeating Chen Gutian were much higher.

"Don't worry old man, I will send you to meet your son soon enough. How did someone with his talent ever father someone like that demon talent Chen Xue?"

No, no, this is not the time to be thinking about that. Even for an old man with one foot at the doorstep of death, I need to be focused.." thought Chen Zholan as he took a few breaths to calm himself down before another worry snuck up on him.

"If I win the fight, would Chen Zian be able to issue the challenge again or another member of the clan?" Chen Zholan worriedly thought as he warily looked at Yang Qing.

If he could be challenged without pause by different members for the next seven days wouldn't he be stuck in perpetual challenges for the next seven days, and as the accused in this matter, he would probably have no say or rest placing him in an already precarious position?

Chen Zian as a challenger was a wall he did not need to think he could get past, maybe if fought recklessly, angling for a pyrrhic victory he could force a draw, but what then? What if after that one of the three supreme elders decided to issue the challenge?

If it was as he feared then that meant, only an exhausting, and agonizing pain awaited him for the next seven days.

Overcoming whatever paralyzing fear he had of Yang Qing, Chen Zholan decided to raise his concerns on the matter.

"Excuse me Judge Yang Qing but I would like to confirm something about the death duel format?" Chen Zholan asked with a shake in his voice that shook just as much as his knees and hands as he cupped his fists.

"I was just about to explain the rules of the duel, if the rules don't address the query you have, feel free to ask after I'm done with the explanation..." said Yang Qing.

"That applies to the rest as well," he added.

"Thank you.." said Chen Zholan.

"The format of the blood debt duel and its accompanying rules are not many. It's actually just one that we really emphasize on, and the other is just an accompanying rule.

That rule is this.." Yang Qing paused his gaze trained on everyone present before it centered on Chen Zholan, Chen Gutian, and Chen Zian.

"A blood debt challenge can only be issued once. In the end, regardless of who is the victor or the loser, the debt is considered paid in full.

What do I mean?

What I mean is this, if Chen Gutian loses this battle, Chen Zholan's debt of murdering Chen Xue can be considered paid. By participating in the blood debt challenge regardless of the result, the debt is considered collected,

So Elder Chen Gutian, should you lose, your son's debt will still be considered repaid, and the Chen Clan can not reissue that challenge nor can you place that debt on any of Chen Zholan's direct relatives, be it his grandparents, parents, siblings, aunt and uncle, or whoever you might think to transfer that debt to since you can't have Chen Zholan.

If they are involved, whatever you do to them is up to you, but if they are not and you harm them in any way for that crime, it becomes the Order's matter.." Yang Qing said as he narrowed his eyes.

"As long as we are the officiators of this duel then Chen Xue's grievance ends with the single blood debt duel. It does not go past that. Is it clear?" asked Yang Qing.

Chen Zholan couldn't help but clench his fists in excitement. Even if he was still doomed to die, delaying it by even a few hours was still well worth it. At least he would not be tortured by his own clan members, and the duel was something that he could actually win. He even started making plans on how he would prolong the fight as much as he could to delay the onset of his sentence.

#### Chapter 858 Blood debt duel (3)

"I understand, Judge Yang Qing and I respect the court's decision on the matter.." said Chen Gutian.

"Zian'er what's with that face?" asked Chen Gutian with a genial smile as he addressed the Chen Clan Leader who had contorted brows.

Chen Zian paused as if he were hesitant with his words, but eventually, he decided to voice out his thoughts.

"Uncle, with what we've been told wouldn't it be better if.... I... did it?" Chen Zian asked, leaving a lot unsaid, but the breaks in his words and how he spoke, said a lot and it was what the other elders were thinking too.

If only one challenge was allowed, Chen Gutian may not be the safest bet to issue it.

No matter how much of a hateful snake Chen Zholan was, no one in the clan would ever discount his talent. It was one of the reasons most within the clan were amiable to him even those from the faction that opposed Chen Zian. His talent was greatly admired by most within the clan, and Chen Gutian, well, with how boisterous he usually was, he got into no small number of fights because of it.

They had all seen him fight, and even though those fights were not fights to the death, it was enough to form a baseline. None of them felt Chen Gutian had the facilities to defeat Chen Zholan. His odds of losing were higher.

They may not like Chen Gutian that much, with some even hating his guts, but they respected Chen Xue, and what happened to him had to be avenged and the best person would be Chen Zian, who even though they disliked just as much as they did Chen Gutian, even more so, they could not deny he was powerful or why else would their leader, Chen Bo, choose to seclude himself for almost 300 years, in desperation to improve his strength?

To them, Chen Zian taking up the mantle of vengeance was a no-brainer, especially if they only had one shot at it.

But Chen Gutian thought otherwise.

"Permit my selfishness one last time, Zian'er.." Chen Gutian said with a sad smile.

"It's the only thing I can do for him as his father. Let me do this, I need to do this.." Chen Gutian softly said, the resolve in his voice echoing out loud.

Chen Zian stared at him for a moment before he answered,

"Fine.." a sigh escaping his lips as he did so.

"Thank you, and don't worry, I may not have been much, but I was Chen Xue's father. I won't lose.." added Chen Gutian with a carefree smile on his face.

"I will toast to your victory.." Chen Zian said, smiling for the first time.

"Not the cheap stuff, use the 10,000-year-old petal peony spirit wine in my abode. I had been saving it up to share with Xue'er when he reached the sixth leaf.... but this would be a good moment as any.

Pour some at his tablet will you?"

"I will.."

Only after the exchange was done did Yang Qing continue.

"The other minor elements of the fight is we will provide everything needed for the combat; this is the weapons and even the robes you will wear for that duel. All external objects you may have will all be confiscated and the venue will be a plain platform.

Does that answer any questions you might have?" asked Yang Qing, his eyes on Chen Zholan as he did.

"No, no, I don't,"

"I am okay too, Judge Yang Qing.."

"Okay then. To the rest of you, since this involves a member of your clan, all of you including Chen Zian will be permitted to view the duel. Your sentence will resume immediately after the duel concludes.."

"Thank you for your consideration, judge.." harmoniously said the elders who seemed glad. Whether it was because they would get to see Chen Zholan get what he deserved or because they had a pause in the execution of their sentence, who knows?

"Okay, I, Yang Qing, Outer Palace Judge of the Order, as the officiator of the blood debt duel between Chen Gutian and Chen Zholan hereby approve of its immediate commencement.." Yang Qing said as he brought his gavel down instantly producing a burst of light that covered everyone in the courtroom.

A second later they were in a different location. They were atop a platform that seemed to have been built on the peak of a mountain. The whole mountain was filled with fog, which strangely enough didn't impede vision, but instead seemed to make the skies above them clearer like they were looking at the skies on a clear night filled with the light of stars and moon.

"What is this place?" muttered some of the elders as they gazed around them in stupefaction while Chen Zian looked visibly surprised as his eyes were trained on the fog that surrounded the platform. He could feel some powerful, archaic, and ethereal force lurking within it, something boundless, and transcendent.

He could feel something within him whispering to him that what he sought was in that fog, he only needed to grasp, but try as it may, whatever power or mysteries was in that fog was as ephemeral as its form. It seemed so close yet so far, understandable in one second and indecipherable the next, and the more he tried, the more he felt it getting further and further away like an obscuring veil was wrapping itself ever so tightly around him with every failed attempt.

In the end, he couldn't help but sigh in reluctance as he increasingly felt that whatever was in that fog, as long as he grasped a tiny portion of it, would have provided him a path to the palace realm. The deep yearning he felt when he saw that fog was something that was evoked from within his true essence, which meant that whatever that fog was, it had something that could greatly impact his cultivation.

After today's events, he was ever so desperate to reach the palace realm and desperately protect his clan's right to existence and survival.

..

Once everyone had settled down, Yang Qing appeared at the center of the platform.

"You can all take your seats..." he said as he waved his sleeves which caused the fog around them to churn as it extended backward while a few portions separated matching the exact number of all those present, except Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian.

Those portions quickly moved beside all those present who looked quizzically at it before Yang Qing told them they could sit on it.

Once they sat, most couldn't help but gasp in surprise which Yang Qing expected considering he had the same reaction when he first felt how soft and comfortable that fog was as a futon. Even now, all he wanted was to jump and relax on it. It was the most relaxing and softest thing he had ever sat on. It

evoked a sense of comfort he could never put into words, but considering the nature of that fog, it was only to be expected.

In a hurry to get the show on the road, Yang Qing waved his hands once more, causing a churn in the fog which trembled as another portion separated from it, only now it divided into two portions, with one portion headed to Chen Zholan and the other to Chen Gutian.

Just as both were wondering what to do with the mysterious fog, they saw something incredulous happen. The fog on each of their sides transformed into a long row of shelves filled with all kinds of weapons that all released the same fluctuations identifying them as top-tier sky-grade weapons.

Neither Chen Gutian nor Chen Zholan could believe what they were seeing. Chen Gutian's recent breakthrough in serenity was destroyed as his eyes widened in shock as he looked at the never-ending rows of all manner of weapons from swords, to sabers, to staffs, to spears, to gauntlets, to glaives. Whatever weapon he could think of was there, and the quality all matched.

To him, such a sight was something he would never imagine. He had doubts if even the Gong Clan, one of the founding families of the Red Maple Empire that had built its foundation in blacksmithing would have such a lineup of weapons, and ones that were at the absolute peak of the sky grade, all at the same standard.

Just by sight alone, he felt there was about hundreds of thousands of sky grade weapons, and that was just his side, on Chen Zholan's side it was bound to be the same number.

"You have three minutes to choose your weapon from the row.."

Chapter 859 Blood debt duel (4)

After informing the duo, Yang Qing walked over to Yu Gen pulling over a portion of the fog that he and Yu Gen used to sit on as it slowly rose a few hundred meters from the platform.

With a single command, the fog obscured the duo as Yang Qing fished out a jar of cloud mist wine and two cups, quickly pouring for both he and Yu Gen as they both inadvertently sighed at the mysteries of the fog around.

"Where did they even find such a thing? Every time I see it I am mesmerized like the first time I saw it.." Yang Qing said as his eyes glittered with endless wonder and curiosity when they fell on the fog around them.

Yu Gen who had the same reaction, answered,

"A world this big, filled with thousands upon thousands of mysterious objects and places like the Millionsfold Treasure Ocean, the Beast Churning Sea, the Celestial Ocean, or the green fog region.. It's not strange to find inexplicable things like the chaos fog of manifestation.

That being said, it is still one of the most wonderous ones I've come across. I can't believe such a fog with no sentience at all can weave countless dao as a seamster does a cloth. How many Daos do you think it knows?"

"Considering the chaos energy it is rumored to contain, probably thousands, otherwise how else would it create such flawless transformations.." Yang Qing said with an envious sigh as he had a tiny portion of the fog next to him transform into a brazier that burned with a gentle light blue flame which he used to cook some skewered cow tongues he had on hand.

The fog that surrounded them, just as Yu Gen had mentioned, was called the chaos fog of manifestation and it could be considered siblings with the mimicry chaos sky metal which was inlaid into the black medallion tower of the Order and became one of the foundational fabrics of its headquarters.

Both were rumored to have been birthed from the same source which Yang Qing guessed was why the Order had both in the first place. He just didn't know who brought them.

The mimicry chaos sky metal was what allowed movement into different floors and courtrooms of the Order, especially when it came to sensitive areas. It acted as a passageway but also as a barrier to those places.

The mimicry chaos sky metal had a unique ability that would cloak everything it touched with the power of the void and since the entire building was made of the metal, it meant in no simple terms that the entire headquarters was in the void.



But if the entire was in the void, how was it still visible in the real world? Yang Qing didn't exactly know how the mimicry chaos sky metal worked, but with the little understanding he got when he was told about it was the metal acted as a bridge and anchor to both worlds; the void world and the physical world, both sides would not be able to see or access the bridge without its say so.

The tower basically existed in limbo between two worlds which made the tower virtually untouchable by both worlds as one would have to seek the approval of the mimicry chaos skymetal first before gaining access to the tower.

Mysterious realms operated similarly to what the metal was doing, man-made ones, that is. For those types of realms, someone powerful would tear the fabric of space where it was weak, revealing the void world within then they would use several treasures. The bulk of the treasures in use were to ensure the void space was habitable and safe as void energy was cataclysmically destructive.

Were a palace realm cultivator like Yang Qing thrown into the void and exposed to its energies, despite the depth of his cultivation and firm foundations, he would not be able to survive more than two hours before the void energy disintegrated everything within him from his cultivation base, down to his body and soul. In the end, he would be consumed by the void and transformed into its energy.

But as destructive as it was, for those who could withstand its overbearing power, that world hidden within the void was a true paradise for cultivation. Void energy, though chaotic, destructive, and dense, contained a lot of benefits, one of which was the countless traces and whispers of dao a single drop contained. The reason those weak couldn't survive was the potent force it contained that would tear apart anyone and anything unable to withstand it.

Most cultivators, especially those at the late stages of the domain realm and above liked to cultivate there because of those qualities of void energy. It was one of the highest rated places for one looking to gain insight into supreme Daos like the space dao along with other obscure Daos like fate and karma that one would struggle to gain traces of in the real world one would easily find its traces and pathways spread all around in the boundless world of the void.

It wasn't only the limitless pathways of Daos that drew a cultivator's attention to the place. The void was home to rare wonderous treasures from void crystals which if one had a way of converting and refining its energy, a single crystal contained the same powering energy as a million high-grade spirit stones, or extremely rare one like the nihilistic void stone that disintegrates anything it touches to nothingness, whether it's a formation array, an artifact, an attack, provided it's powered by dao, the nihilistic void stone will grind all its power down.

From present records when it comes to formation arrays or artifacts, anything below purple grade and saint grade will have its abilities reduced to nothingness the moment it makes contact with the nihilistic void stone.

It wasn't just the nihilistic void stone, there were countless other treasures like the luminous void wisteria which when consumed gave one eyes that were able to see the threads of dao, as one would see the threads of a yarn.

It was because of the astounding world the void hid, that any organization worth their salt, despite the risks involved would all try and establish a mysterious realm. The purpose of those realms was to borrow and refine a portion of the power and properties of the void, in the hopes that it would be transformed by it just like the nihilistic void stones, the void crystals, or the void creatures that learned to thrive in its environment.

But to build a mysterious realm one needed a powerful anchoring treasure that would hold the mysterious realm in place and prevent it from being swept up into the void. Those realms needed a place that anchored them to the real world, otherwise, if it got swept up, those within would be forever stranded in the void. That treasure also doubled up as a cloaking feature. Because it anchored a part of the world to the real world, the aura coming from the real world acted as a veil that shielded the realm within the void, and what it shielded it from was the inhabitants of the void i.e. the void creatures which were the greatest threats in that place.

However, the cloaking wasn't foolproof, as provided those creatures were close enough they could easily see through it, and for those truly powerful, they didn't even need to be close to notice the anomaly. The only way to prevent misfortune from striking was to have a powerful figure preferably a soul formation expert stand guard in that mysterious realm to detect any danger that might arise be it from the void creatures or void storms that may happen once in a while which had the potential of completely destroying the mysterious realm or the anchoring treasure it was bound to.

No matter what means one used, one was never truly safe there, but the mimicry chaos sky metal was different. It eliminated that risk completely as it operated on both the laws that governed the void, and those that governed the real world manipulating them freely as it wished, and such a treasure, as far as Yang Qing knew was virtually unheard of.

The chaos fog of manifestation was just as wonderful, as it could recreate anything you wanted it to create, with one exception. It could not create life. So any living thing be it humans, animals, spirit

beasts, sentient plants down to even sentient artifacts would not be recreated by it, but everything else, it could do with a mere thought such as the hundreds of thousands of grade weapons, or the brazier Yang Qing was using to barbecue his beef tongues or the mountain the duel platform they were in.

All of it was by the power of the fog, and it wasn't a mere representation, but the real thing. The fog contained chaos energy which gave it the ability to freely manipulate countless daos at will. Yang Qing didn't even think it had a limit on the number of Daos it could manipulate.

But sadly, it could not be used for cultivation like the Jade Leaf Empire and the Jade Leaf Academy used the Ten Thousand Jade Leaf Tree for their cultivation. One would not get enlightenment or any form of understanding from the chaos fog of manifestation despite the numerous Daos it manipulated.

Every time one tried to observe it to glean understanding from it, it was like facing a transparent glass, that hid everything from view, and the longer you tried to look at what lay beyond the glass, the more your vision would get hampered, till finally the translucent glass would become opaque, obscuring everything from view.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh in pity as he imagined what could have been had the mysteries behind the fog been accessible. With the number of talents the Order had, giving them access to a catalog of numerous freely flowing Daos, was like giving wings to tigers. The Order would have likely already been a true hegemon by now as they continuously churned out palace realm experts.

As for domain experts, he was under no illusions that they would be swimming in the same number of domain experts as they would palace realm experts.

Even with the fog's ability to manifest different Daos, the true test of the domain realm was surviving its tribulation. The fog would not be there to help them with it, but the palace realm was different. With sufficient preparation, one can survive it, and the bulk of that preparation was your understanding of the dao you were using to break through. Provided your understanding was good enough, the tribulation was nothing to fear. You could even bathe in it.

Provided the Chaos fog of manifestation was usable, it would have been perfect for deepening one's understanding by exposing them to different Daos. As a consequence, the Order would have been able to produce the palace realm a lot faster and in larger quantities than they currently did, and with more palace realm experts, more branches could be established, lessening the gaps between them, furthering enhancing the response and reach of the Order.

When it came to large organizations for example rank one and rank two, the soul formation experts and the domain expert were in charge of holding the helm, they rarely acted because of implications, but the main driving force of these forces were their palace realm experts. The more one had, the more avenues one had to expand and exert their influence, and for the Order that was something they desperately needed.

Yang Qing couldn't help but stare at the fog with a sense of grief, and resentment in his heart blaming the fog for being mercilessly and thoroughly exploited by the Order.

"Could it be the Order? Did they make you stingy?" wondered Yang Qing, using the same calming means he had learned over the years whenever he felt stifled and angry.

All his misfortunes, whether it made sense or not, blame the Order. It always brought him great relief to blame them or had the possibility of riling him up even further. It worked as a double-edged sword, but even with the risk, it was a habit he wasn't planning on giving up.

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With Yang Qing preoccupied bemoaning and blaming the Order in his heart as he chewed on the crispy beef tongues, Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian had each chosen their weapon of choice.

It came as no surprise that they both went for swords, coming from a sword-cultivating clan, and further adding to their similarity, both their swords were single-handed long swords that were suffused with the wind element giving them the deep cyan glow that they had.

Both elders satisfied with their decisions walked to the center of the platform. Yang Qing seeing that they had made their choice, waved his hand, dispelling the rows of weapons leaving only a wide platform.

The atmosphere around the area instantly changed as it turned solemn. The elders who had their attention consumed by the chaos fog of manifestation, no longer gawked at it as they all focused their attention on the two people at the center of the platform.

Yang Qing floated to the center of the platform, his robes swaying with the gentle wind that blew around them.

"I won't waste a lot of words, so without any further ado let the blood duel begin!" he said as he used his right hand like a mallet and beat the air like a drum producing a loud gong sound in the process.

The instant he did, Chen Zholan, and Chen Gutian, without hesitation, or exchange of words, clashed swords.

#### Chapter 860 Blood debt duel (5)

In the time it took to blink, they had exchanged over fifty blows, a testament to their abilities and experience in combating other cultivators. They didn't try to gauge each other's strength, probing each other here and there while trying to slowly build up momentum. No, such superfluous actions were reserved for the young ones, those who still had not yet been baptized by the true flames of the cultivation world.

Those who did, like Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian, knew how easy it was to lose one's life in the cultivation world. A moment of carelessness and you could easily lose your life. There have been countless accounts of where a weaker opponent managed to catch a stronger opponent off guard, especially when it came to the lower realms between the early stages of the core formation realm and the qi refinement realm.

It was something those like them who had been baptized in the fog of war had seen over and over again, especially in their fights against the Five Clovers Kingdom.

Case and point, there was a time when a figure within the Mo family with above-average talent came to the battlefield for the first time with a cultivation base that was at the middle stages of the foundation establishment realm. While he didn't completely stand out, his skills were a cut above the rest, and was quickly garnering merit points on the battlefield.

However, that figure, who was even touted to have the potential to reach the quasi-palace stage some day got killed by a late-stage qi refinement cultivator, and the reason, the carelessness and arrogance of youth. He had gotten so overconfident in his abilities, that for those he thought beneath him, he would use the barest of minimum, despite being warned by his superiors whether he was facing a lion or a rabbit, he was to lay waste to both with his utmost strength.

He ignored that advice and because of it, a qi refinement military personnel of the Five Clovers Kingdom who was thought to be dead, waited patiently for that Mo family member to let his guard down and then launched one attack, burning every essence in his body to deliver that one fatal attack. That family member got stabbed through the head and died without even knowing how he died.

Someone lauded to have the potential of reaching the quasi-palace stage ended up dying to the blade of a qi refinement cultivator that was already at death's door.

That was a reminder of how ruthless the cultivator's world was, where a moment's carelessness would spell your end. Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian as veterans of war would not dare make the careless mistake that Mo family members did and it was evident in how they faced off against each other.

Chen Zholan before the fight believed his odds against Chen Gutian were better than if he faced off against Chen Zian, but regardless of what he thought, the moment the battle commenced, he challenged Chen Gutian as though he was challenging the greatest foe he had ever faced off against. He held nothing in reserve and neither did Chen Gutian, they both went all out.

The air around the platform went solemn and silent save for the relentless clash of blades between the two.

The fruits of their cultivation and attainments were laid bare for all to see as they crisscrossed all around the battlefield looking like the incarnation of wind demons looking to rip each other's lives.

"Their cultivation art is really something.." muttered Yang Qing as he carefully observed the two fighters.

He knew a bit about the core cultivation of the clan, the owl's vigilant sword art. The art was built on speed, precision, hyperawareness, and sensitivity. The art's strength was in countering an enemy's attack with extreme swiftness, taking their lives in the process.

Yang Qing could see the spirit of the art in the way the two combatants in Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian went at each other. Their movements were fast and precise without a pause in movement, which answered the question Yang Qing had before the start of the fight.

What would the fight be like when counterattack meets counterattack? The answer was a relentless fluid attack that constantly changed in a single heartbeat. Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian delivered lightning-fast attacks with each attack either aiming at the vital organs or looking to incapacitate the opponent such as attacking their wrist or the tendons in their arms and legs.

They rapidly switched from attacker to defender with one continuous motion.

With a light twist of the wrist Chen Gutian's sword moved like a viper looking to strike Chen Zholan's right eye, Chen Zholan gently glided to his left, slashing upwards deflecting the attack in the process as his attack aimed to sever Chen Gutian's fingers. Chen Gutian instantly let go of the sword dodging the attack by a hair's breadth and recaptured his sword almost instantaneously with his body lowered aiming for Chen Zholan's knees with a horizontal slash looking to cleave it through.

The longer the fight continued the faster and more lethal their attacks became as the line between attack and defense blurred. With how fast they moved, anyone at the early stages of the core formation realm and below would be unable to follow their movements. All they would be able to see are dense cyan streaks of light crisscrossing at rapid speeds around the platform.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh in amazement the longer the fight continued. As powerful as their moves were, they were silent like a gentle breeze, but as lethal as a viper's venom. The force in their attacks or counters would be compressed into its utmost limit and when released, it would be with contained pinpoint precision, and with minimal energy loss. Even when they moved it was with silent glides. Their breaths and entire being were perfectly melded with the air around them.

Their attacks and defense would turn soft and firm when needed, and the two fighters knew exactly when to make the switch. Looking at them, one would not believe the cultivation art they practiced was a wind-based one. It felt more like a blend of water and earth elements. It was fluid and malleable like water when needed, and a second later it would turn firm and immovable like earth.

"No wonder there has been no one recorded to have reached the blooming phase of the art. It may just be a blue-grade art, but its demands on the cultivator are not any less than that of a gold-grade art.." said Yu Gen.

"The speed and demands the art has from attacks to counterattacks, the user has to have a strong soul for their spiritual sense to notice those intricacies fast enough to react accordingly.

There are also the demands on their bodies, I doubt anything less than the body of a core formation expert would be able to truly execute this art, even in the beginner stage of mastery.."

"I doubt just the body of a core formation expert is enough.." Yang Qing added with an inscrutable glow in his eyes.

"From what I can see of the art, it seems to have a transformative aspect to it. Its users have their bodies continuously changed by it so they can execute it better.

It has to have a minimum threshold in each stage which might be the reason the Chen Clan hasn't had someone cultivate it to the blooming stage.

By my guess, at the body refinement stage at the very least, they need to use the art to achieve a gold body, but even that might just be at the threshold.

Considering the capabilities I'm seeing now, it could help someone achieve a diamond body provided they have a great understanding of the art, and have the resilience to actually endure it to that stage..." he added.

"Those are my thoughts exactly. The art demands precise and intricate manipulation of one's body in response to the art's dynamic changes. A core formation expert's body is hardly enough. There is also the demand on their qi capacity. It needs quite the storage capacity to sustain it.

I've only come across a handful of blue-grade arts that are as demanding of it.." Yu Gen paused as an idea struck him.

"Now that I think about it, Yang Qing this art suits you perfectly, with your abnormal qi capacity and the strength of your soul, not to mention you have the peerless jade physique. It's perfect for you.."

When he reached this point, Yu Gen's gaze alternated between Yang Qing and Chen Zian.

"It might be their core art, but who knows, their clan leader seems to be more of a merchant than even Song Ba. He might let you take a peak.."



"But I am not a sword cultivator.." Yang Qing said with a wry smile.

"I've always wondered about that. With your talent, you could have chosen any weapon to master, but from what I have heard, you haven't. Is there a particular reason you haven't?"

With a sigh, Yang Qing answered,

"Well, when I was young I did want to be a sword cultivator, but after I joined the Order, I was dissuaded from it by Assistant Dean Yu Long and Ren Shu, I mean the deputy valley master of Medical Valley.

Because of my physique, while it doesn't hinder me from mastering the sword, if I did so, I'd be losing out a lot from some of the innate qualities it offers. The only way I can be a sword cultivator without losing out is if I master other weapons or styles to the same level as the sword to balance it out, like the saber, spear, fist, or palm. If I achieve intent in one, I have to achieve intent in all, and it needs to be at the same scale.

Discounting the difficulty involved in actually achieving it, I don't know if my physique would accommodate it like Huilang's.

Every peerless jade physique has its specialty. Accommodating different types of intents is Huilang's while mine is the sensitivity to life and balance.."

"It's a pity.."

"I know. I could have been a sword immortal by now if that wasn't the case.." Yang Qing shamelessly said, provoking a twitch in Yu Gen's eyes.