

## Daily life 881

### Chapter 881 Retirement Doesn't Look Good On You

Ignoring Lin Dui's actions, the rest of the cultivators who walked in with him all moved to the center of the courtroom before Yu Ge directed them to stand in the direction they pleased, all except a few, whom he brought with him to where Lei Weiyua and Hou Duhei were.

The group that Yu Gen guided to the two domain experts was comprised of five individuals.

From the group, there was a slightly elderly woman who looked to be in her early fifties. She had graying white hair tied in a bun which gave her a motherly charm. She was a third-stage core formation expert and she was standing next to a young man who looked to be in his late thirties.

From the proximity she was standing next to the young man and the unconscious air of familiarity it evoked, it suggested the elderly woman and the young man had some relation with each other. Though the faint resemblance in some of their facial features was a dead giveaway that they did.

The young man had a simple face. One couldn't call him ugly, they would not call him handsome either. It was a face that would easily get lost within a crowd, but as uninspiring as his looks were, he did have a pair of high-spirited eyes that stood out. The eyes spoke of someone who would remain determined even if the skies were to fall. His eyes seemed to match perfectly with his cultivation base which was that of a quasi-palace stage expert.

Other than the two whom Yang Qing assumed were mother and son, right behind them were a pair of cultivators walking side by side whose eyes kept darting around the courtroom reflecting the nervousness within them.

The wariness they showed, and the way they scanned the room, almost as if looking for exits was done all too naturally. Such a habit, to be naturally ingrained as it was, could only be gained by those who were constantly exposed to dangerous situations at every turn. One of the pair was thin and tall, with a hawkish face, donning blue robes, and had a cultivation base that was at the peak stage of the core formation realm.

The cultivator next to him who mirrored his actions when it came to warily scanning the room for dangers and exits was also a peak stage core formation expert, wearing light green robes and was slightly shorter than the previous cultivator and his body wafted with a smell of pounced herbs.

Behind them was an elderly man, who looked to be in the twilight end of his years. He was hunched over, with silver-white hair and, a long beard that had reached the floor, and he looked emaciated. He had on silver robes with cloud embroidery at the sleeves. His cultivation base matched that of the spirited young man, which was at the quasi palace stage but unlike the latter, he lacked the firmness and robustness that the young man had.

Yang Qing could tell whatever fragility the old man showed, it wasn't because of his age. With his natural sensitivity to the vitality and flow of life in living things, Yang Qing could roughly tell the elderly man's age from the fluctuations his body and soul released.

The fluctuations showed he couldn't be more than 2,000 years old despite looking to be at death's door already. His current degenerated look wasn't because he had exhausted his lifespan but rather from Yang Qing could tell, his soul had been damaged, and from what he could tell, it looked like a part of it had been forcibly ripped from it. That separation not only severely injured his soul but had impacted his foundations too, hence the weakness.

The elderly man was the only one in the group who didn't seem slightly apprehensive at being in the courtroom, but rather he seemed to be sending vicious glares, not masking his killing intent at all as his gaze fell on the branch manager of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion branch in Red Maple Empire. His sights alternated between the branch manager and Lin Duyi who was still hidden in his mother's embrace.

That elderly man didn't seem to care that he was openly showing hostility to Lin Duyi in front of his domain expert parents, and from the level of intensity showed in those hate-

filled eyes, if given the chance, it looked like it wouldn't take much for him to consider risking it all and attacking the branch manager and Lin Duyi. Only a sliver of rationality seemed to keep him in place.

Maybe because they were aware that the old man already had one foot in the grave, but neither Cai Hong nor Yao De, the pavilion's branch manager showed any reaction to the open hostilities shown by the old man.

After the group of five arranged themselves next to Lei Weiyuan, all that remained was for the branch manager and the former emperor to decide which side they wanted to stand in.

For the branch manager, it went without saying, he went to the side where Lin Guiren was, but when it came to the former emperor of the Red Maple Empire, he looked conflicted but more than that from the moment he walked into the courtroom he showed a perplexed look when his eyes fell on the burly palace realm expert that was standing next to Deng Wei. He showed a look of disbelief, unable to tear his eyes away from him on the walk over.

"Gong Jie, is that you?" asked the former emperor, his expression and demeanor showing he bewildered he was.

"Retirement has not been good on you, Duan He.." answered the burly Gong Jie with a coldness to him.

Seemingly unable to believe it still, the former emperor ended up asking what it was that made him so confused in the first place.

"When did you reach the palace realm? Last I heard you were stuck in the peak stage of the core formation and now...." Duan Hu paused as he narrowed his eyes, growing more baffled as his gaze fell on Gong Jie.

"You're already in the second stage.." he absentmindedly added.

"I got lucky, is all. It was all thanks to our founder.."

"Founder?!"

Duan Hu's eyes widened as he saw Gong Jie's eyes reverentially dart toward the young man he was standing next to.

"What founder?" Duan Hu muttered, fully confused by the whole thing.

Chapter 882 Sides Chosen

Even though he felt the young man was mysterious and was likely much more powerful than him, Duan Hu threw caution to the end as he openly scrutinized the young man trying to identify his origins.

When Gong Jie mentioned he was the founder, he automatically assumed it was the founder tied to the Gong clan, but as far as he knew their founder Gong Zhi had died when he ventured to the Bestial Churning Sea trying to procure some ingredients that could help him improve on his blacksmithing skills.

But from what he read from the chronicles of the Red Maple Empire, Gong Zhi died on that venture. When he analyzed the facial features of the man before him, he could not see any resemblance between him and Gong Zhi, or any of the other founding families.

Because of his gender, he had automatically ruled out the Gui family and his family, the Duan family.

Just as he had steeled himself to ask the young man his identity, he saw him speak as he addressed Gong Jie.

"Little Jie, it's your turn to introduce yourself..." said the young man as he patted Gong Jie's back gently pushing him forward.

"Sorry, founder.." Gong Jie said as he smiled sheepishly while scratching the back of his head trying to reduce the sense of embarrassment he felt.

Duan Hu grew only more confused as he saw Gong Jie's reactions. He and Gong Jie were from the same generation, and while they were the farthest things from friends, he knew a bit about the man, especially his infamous temper. He was like a wild beast who when triggered would react accordingly.

He was notorious for always getting into arguments that quickly devolved into fights, and it didn't matter who it was. A couple of times he ended up brawling with even their clan patriarch. The clan wasn't exactly known for having mild-tempered individuals, but even within a clan of irascible individuals, Gong Jie stood out.

Seeing him acting like an obedient child was something he would have never expected. It surprised him even more than his second stage palace realm cultivation.

His gaze narrowed in thought as it fell on the young man.

"Who is he?"

As he was lost in wonder, his eyes suddenly widened.

"Could it?!"

Duan Hu looked like he had just seen a ghost. Just as waves of shock were coursing through his body due to the guess he had, he heard a gentle soothing voice sound in his mind. The voice of the young man.

"You're Duan Hu, right? You have her eyes... You could go stand with them if you like, or you could join us.."

Duan Hu's pupils trembled as he gazed at the young man, feeling a strange sense of tranquility well up within him as he looked at him. Complex emotions flashed through his eyes, before finally, he moved, heading toward the young man and Gong Jie.

As he moved, some part of him compelled him to look behind him where Lin Duyi and the Golden Bamboo Pavilion team stood. He couldn't help but shake his head when he saw their attention wasn't on him, even his so-called sworn brother, Yao De, the branch manager, kept his gaze fixed on the podium.

"My name is Gong Jie, a member of the Gong family in the Red Maple Empire, and a traveling blacksmith. I thank the court for accommodating our presence here," said Gong Jie as he cupped his cupped his fists.

Yang Qing nodded in acknowledgment before his attention centered on the entire courtroom. Despite his earlier scuffle with Cai Hong when she wanted to murder him, his heart and emotions turned still.

Sitting on his chair, he could feel the presence of the courtroom coalesce on him, and his podium. Lin Guiren, Cai Hong, and the others had ceased to be domain experts in his eyes but were instead parties subject to the rules of the court he governed.

He may have not noticed it himself but he radiated a regal aura that resonated with the imposing atmosphere of the courtroom even Cai Hong's eyes flashed with an inscrutable glow as she sensed the sudden change in atmosphere within Yang Qing.

"My name is Yang Qing, and I am an outer palace court judge of the Order.

The Order has been called upon today to mediate a few matters, and as per the cultivation charter guidelines, we have judged the matters brought before us to have met the threshold to warrant our intervention.

Both sides, the aggrieved and the accused will be allowed to make their cases and after both sides are done, the terms of the agreement will be discussed with me serving as both the witness and officiator of the deal.

Once ratified, whatever terms are agreed upon will be enforced by us, the Order.

Is everything clear?"

Everyone present nodded.

"Good.." Yang Qing said as he clasped his hands together.

"The first matter being handled is between the Wu family and the former emperor of the Red Maple Empire, Duan Hu.

Would both parties please come to the center please.."

Yang Qing made a welcoming gesture to both sides, as he waved his hands to his chest.

Duan Hu who wasn't that far from the center, was the first to arrive in a few steps. Next was the Wu family, which turned out to be the elderly woman with the greyed hair tied in a bun, and the young man standing next to her with simple facial features and spirited eyes.

As they walked to the center, the young man's eyes flashed with the same venom as did the elderly man from before who was still throwing death glares at Yao De and Lin Duyi.

When it came to the young man, the target of his resentment was none other than Duan Hu. His eyes flickered with a vicious coldness as his gaze fell on Duan Hu. It took Duan Hu a few seconds before he finally realized who both were.

Chapter 883 Smiles that hide stories within them

Just as Yang Qing was about to continue, he paused as the doors of the courtroom opened once again and two individuals walked in. One of the two individuals was Xia Ting, and the other looked to be a seventeen-year-old in dark orange robes, and a face one could forget easily.

Drawing curious glances all around, the two walked over to Yang Qing's podium, who promptly triggered isolation arrays via his medallion. Yang Qing waved Yu Gen, Hou Dehui, and Lei Weiyan over before he turned his seat with his back facing the center of the court and his front facing the wall behind his podium, where Xia Ting and the seventeen-year-old young man were standing.

Owing to the strength of the isolation array, not even Lin Guiren or the other domain experts could tell what they were discussing. To anyone not in the soul adept realm and above, they could forget about breaking through those isolation arrays and eavesdrop on the discussion, Yang Qing and the rest were having.

The interlude didn't take long. About two minutes or less they were already done with Yang Qing dispelling the isolation array not a moment after. The seventeen-year-old young man bowed to Yang Qing and the rest before leaving the courtroom.

Lei Weiyan and the rest returned to their respective positions. As for the rest, most couldn't hide the curiosity within their eyes as they wondered what all that was about.

Yang Qing settling properly on his podium, had his gaze fall on the young man with the simple look briefly, which drew a bewildered look from the man before Yang Qing's gaze finally trailed toward Lin Guiren.

"Pavilion master Lin Guiren, there is something I hope to seek your assistance in which pertains to the matters we are about to discuss today..."

"Speak freely, Judge Yang Qing. If there is anything I can help, I would be more than willing to do so.."

"Good, thank you for your assistance in advance. What I wanted to ask is this, do you know the whereabouts of Shao Ren?"

On mentioning that name, two people showed drastic reactions to it. It was the Wu family. The young man gritted his teeth as an unbridled killing intent flashed in his eyes, while the middle-aged woman standing next to him showed a pained look as tears started welling on the rim of her eyes.

With considerable effort and willpower the middle-aged woman, held back her tears as she extended her hand toward the young man. The young man on detecting the middle-aged woman's touch, reacted like he had been startled awake. The volcano that was erupting within him was instantly quelled by the tender worried gaze of the middle-aged woman.

"It's okay.." he whispered with a smile, which though stiff, did its job of assuring the middle-aged woman.

..

It only took a moment for Lin Guiren to recall who Shao Ren was.

Seeing no sense in probing why Yang Qing was asking about him or his history with the Wu family, Lin Guiren's response was concise and direct.

"Shao Ren has been cultivating at our headquarters for the past seven years in preparation for his breakthrough to the palace realm.

While he hasn't yet completed his breakthrough, he is not that far from it.."

"How long do you think it will take him?" asked Yang Qing.



"Based on his speed and accumulations to this point, it shouldn't be more than three years, four at the most.."

"Thank you for your candor, pavilion master.."

Lin Guiren acknowledged it with a slight nod.

Yang Qing softly sighed as his gaze fell on the simple man.

"You've heard him. Because he is at a critical juncture, we can't interrupt it, not without breaking one of the fundamental rules among cultivators.

Are you willing to wait until he is done?" gently asked Yang Qing.

The young man clenched his fists before he released as he exhaled gently in a bid to calm himself.

"Do you believe him?"

Even though he didn't outrightly say it, everyone knew whom his skepticism was directed to.

"Someone of his stature wouldn't bother lying about something like that.. Besides, what he says lines up with what we found. The person who just left more or less confirmed his general location and status.

It all lines up.."

A strange flicker of light flashed in Lin Guiren's eyes as he heard Yang Qing's response, with his gaze inadvertently following the path leading to the exit doors of the courtroom.

"I am willing to wait. It is better that way even.." answered the youth.

"Okay then. When the time comes, you both will be appraised.."

"Thank you.." said the young man with a heartfelt expression.

Yang Qing nodded as he said,

"Mmh.. Now if you don't mind. It's your turn to air your grievance.."

The simple-looking young man nodded as his gaze fell on his mother nodding assuringly toward her before it fell on Duan Hu, flashing with anger briefly before it went back to normal.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, before finally opening his mouth to speak.

"My name is Wu Mingli, and this is my mother, Zao Shan.." he said as he politely pointed his palms toward the middle-aged woman who bowed her head toward Yang Qing, Hou Dehui, and Lei Weiyuan with a genial smile on her face.

Anyone could tell from her smile how worn she seemed, drawing sympathy from most. Even the hunched-over elderly man spared her a look of sympathy as she was smiling.

"Before my father died, we considered ourselves loyal citizens of the Red Maple Empire, but after his passing, I am truly ashamed ever having been associated with them.

But that's not why I am here. I am here because of a man called Wu Fang, my father, and one of the few I ever truly admired and respected. There was no finer man than him, in my eyes, but alas .... the world is never kind to people like him.." Wu Mingli said with a melancholic

Chapter 884 The man he was

"My father wasn't exactly the most talented, but there were two places that I found he excelled at. One of them was being steadfast and the other was his sense of responsibility. His steadfast heart made him unwavering in the person he was as he stood up for the things he held dear, one of which was his family, and the other was the Empire.

He loved both more than his life..." Wu Mingli paused as he sighed lightly as his gaze drifting elsewhere. "I wish he had a bit of selfishness in him, if he was, maybe his fate could have been avoided.." he muttered absentmindedly before some clarity resumed in his eyes.

"He was born in one of the villages in the frontiers of the Red Maple Empire. Some long remote village that was far removed from people and was neighbored by mountains, hills, and rivers.

His parents were farmers and had things remained the same, he would have likely followed the same path. He was not a man with that much ambition. As long as he could care for the things that mattered to him, he was more than content. For the him back then that was showing filial pity to his parents and caring for them when they got old,?getting a wife, having children, and training his children to be dependable people.

To him such a life would have been more than enough, and now that I think about it, even later in life what he wanted out of life didn't change by much. It was only the scale that changed, moving from a village to an empire, and the reason for that change was what happened to him when he was sixteen years old..." Wu Mingli paused when he felt his voice trembling.

"A certain morning when he was sixteen, just like always, he went to the mountain that bordered the village to harvest some herbs and do some fishing in one of the creeks.

It was a routine that he had maintained almost every day since he was four, and that morning he had assumed it would be just another doing the same thing he had done over a thousand times.

Only he had no idea that the creek he always fished silver perch at, harvested crab gillyweed from, actually harbored a dangerous spirit beast in the core formation realm. The spirit beast in question was a riverstone serpent..." Wu Mingli said as he smiled when he recalled his father's expression as he narrated the story, especially when it came to that riverstone serpent.

At the time his understanding of the spirit beast was rudimentary. Their village was at the fringes of the border in some forgotten territory. Their lives were far removed from the rest of the Red Maple Empire, as such they didn't know much be it when it came to cultivation or matters related to it such as knowledge of spirit beasts.

Their knowledge was restricted to the local flora and fauna that neighbored the village, more specifically the ones they interacted with on their day-to-day. He didn't know what a riverstone serpent was, or how terrifying it was.

Only when he moved and was exposed to cultivation-related topics did he realize how lucky he had been. That knowledge and the experience he had with the serpent left him with an inadvertent fear of all snakes be it those without cultivation or those that had it. He feared them all with equal measure, a fact that Wu Mingli exploited when he was young and felt himself bold enough to play a prank on his father with a green snake he had caught in their courtyard.

The prank was successful as he petrified his father and had a great laugh from it, but his joy was short-lived. He shivered slightly as his gaze fell on his mother. Immediately after the prank, his mother gave him the worst beating of his life which left him wondering if they were truly related.

Immediately after the beating she went and bought about five hundred red-scaled spiders, dug a 400-meter pit in their courtyard, and threw him and the spiders in there for a few hours. His father feared snakes, and he feared spiders, specifically the red-scale spiders having been chased by a hoard when they caught him torturing one of their kinsmen.

It was one of the scariest experiences of his life, luckily his father saved him from the torture immediately after he regained his senses from the prank Wu Mingli had pulled on him with the green snake.

Pulling his thoughts back, Wu Mingli continued with the tale.

"Beneath the bedrock of the creek he usually fished at lay a core formation riverstone serpent that had been in hibernation for quite a long time, and if I was to guess it must have been lying there in that state for a few thousand years at least.

The village has been there for almost 3,000 years and in that time not once has there ever been any recording that mentioned any sighting or encounter of the riverstone serpent.

The serpent was likely inactive during that whole time, otherwise, if it had been active, I doubt the village would have remained active to date..."

Wu Mingli's conjecture wasn't unfounded. A riverstone serpent while not the most ferocious of spirit beasts was still not your garden-variety spirit beast. It was skilled with both water and earth elements, and they were infamous for causing mudslides that would suffocate its victims before it devoured them.

One that was at the core formation realm had the capability of drawing an entire town, maybe even half a city if it was sufficiently motivated. They had the ability to cause widespread destruction and because of their affinity with the water and earth elements, they had terrifying vitality and defenses, one of which involved perfect camouflage in areas that were filled with either water or earth-based spiritual qi.

The incapacitated state of that riverstone serpent was likely the only reason that village remained standing.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh at the village's luck. Countless cases of villages being attacked and devoured to the last man were reported to the Order every single day. There were even some that he couldn't believe what he was reading, such as one village where the villagers were raised like chives by a crimson cloak ape.

The ape raised those villagers like a farmer raised his livestock. It would feed the villagers spiritual fruits and other plants to help improve their strength and health, in a bid to ensure their birth rates would swell and the quality of their bodies would be high. It would then harvest seven of them per year.

That village had been living in that hell for almost 6,000 years up until one of the inquisitors of the Order stumbled onto the village while on a mission and eradicated the ape. But by then the ape had consumed tens of thousands of villagers. Those villagers from the moment they were born, were raised as cattle primed for slaughter.

The fate of Wu Fang's village was far kinder than what other villages faced when they neighbored a spirit beast and they were the weaker party. Wasn't the Deer Mountain Kingdom facing the same issues despite their numbers and the powerful cultivators within their ranks? In some aspects they were no different than those villages whose fates were not in their hands but on the whims of the spirit beasts.

Chapter 885 My sword

Pushing his wandering thoughts aside, Wu Mingli continued.

"The riverstone serpent likely heavily injured had been in a stasis-like hibernation for thousands of years and who knows it may have remained in that state for quite some time if it wasn't for my father.

When he was fishing, he accidentally got injured by a catfish that was in the creek. His tussle with it ended up with him suffering a slight injury that left him bleeding into the creek.

His blood was what pulled that beast out of hibernation.

While the village was secluded from the rest of the empire and didn't have a widely spread knowledge on matters related to cultivation they still knew enough to the point that the village had quite the number of qi refinement cultivators.

During my father's time, they had at least twenty of them with my father counting amongst their number, and being the youngest one at that.

Without some form of cultivation, it would have been next to impossible for the village to establish itself. It was bordered by hills, mountains, and forests all around. For the village to sustain itself in such an environment where they had no access to towns or places packed with humans where they could trade or get things they required, they had no option but to depend on themselves and make provisions from what surrounded them and that required some form of strength.

Be it scaling those steep mountains for spiritual herbs and the creeks that flowed through them filled with fish or venturing into the forest and hills that were filled with other bounties important for their sustenance.

All these ventured activities were fraught with dangers and difficulties that required some form of strength, especially the forest and hills which were filled with wild animals and a few spirit beasts whose strength had reached the qi refinement realm.."

Wu Mingli paused when he realized he was about to go off tangent.

"Master's habits and the other seniors seem to have rubbed off on me.." he thought wryly.

"My father at the time was in the early stages of the qi refinement realm, but because of his young age,.. He was nineteen at the time. The vigor of his youth, coupled with the vitality of a qi refinement cultivator, even if he only used low-grade cultivation arts to reach it, those two factors working

concertedly together ensured his blood was no different than a tantalizing, aromatic dish that had been placed right smack in the face of someone who has been starving for days.

Though in this case, the person in question was a riverstone serpent that had been starved for thousands of years.

My father's blood dripping down to where it slumbered, awakened it, and its desire to live, and an unsatiable hunger.

Drawing onto whatever reserves it had, it burst out of that bedrock, startling my clueless father in the process who couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the beast.

I am not sure what its size was, but going by standard sizes of riverstone serpents that were in the core formation, I guess in terms of length it should have been about a kilometer while in terms of girth, probably about the size of a normal cow.

I don't know, maybe because he was petrified, but my father's description of the one he came across went away from the norm..." Wu Mingli said as he laughed dryly.

He felt so betrayed when he got to see what a true riverstone serpent looked like and the description his father had given him of the beast.

"From the way he described it, he said it was as large as an ocean, with nostrils that served as gateways to the abyss, an aura that made the heavens cry, and vertical pupils that looked to have been composed entirely of a river of blood.

It's evident how terrified he was of the thing. Its presence and appearance left him utterly petrified and too scared to think of anything.

Without thinking he threw the stone he had at the serpent and immediately fled without bothering to check whether the stone connected or not, or even if it did any damage to it.

That point as he was running away, was what shaped my father into who he became later in life.." Wu Mingli said as his expression turned slightly solemn and melancholic

"He may have not had an idea on what kind of spirit beast the riverstone serpent was, or its abilities, or anything of that sort, but having been exposed to its aura, and being a cultivator,?he immediately knew how potentially dangerous such a spirit beast was just based off the presence of its body.

From the moment he laid eyes on it he instinctively knew that even if the entire village was marshalled together against the beast, there was nothing they could do against it. Their attempt would be no different than an egg trying to smash itself against a mountain.

They would all die without so much as putting a scratch on it. But despite knowing all that, when he was running away, the direction he was running to was the village.

He told me this,?as he was running even in his muddled terrified state he still had a bit of clarity in him that was enough for him to imagine what would happen to their village if that serpent followed him back there.

But even knowing this, knowing that his entire village could be massacred to the last person and devoured after, by the serpent, and him running to the village would be a guarantee to that fate, his feet didn't stop moving.

Not once did he divert his route and maybe lead the serpent in a direction that was far from the village. He went straight for it at the highest speed possible.

He told me this..."

Wu Mingli paused as his gaze was transported to that memory. It was five-year-old him seated outside, the clear sky filled with the twinkling thousands of stars accompanied by the gentle glow of a full moon, and below that vast glamor above them, was him, his father, and his mother, and a crackling fire at the center of them.

He could see the outline of that flame being reflected in his father's eyes as he spoke, and him listening attentively with his head buried between his knees.



"Mingli, what do you think about heroes?"

"They are cool.." answered the young Mingli, his eyes shining with the same radiance as the stars above as he did.

"Would you like to become one?"

"What do you mean become one? I already am one. Earlier I saved Shen Jue from Aunty Ma's yellow dog when it chased after him when it saw him pee on Aunty Ma's hedges..

He almost got bitten by it if it wasn't for me acting swiftly and carrying him up the tree next to him.

Mmph, serves him right for bragging that even his pee was powerful enough to leave animals scared to death.." said Wu Mingli, as he puffed out his chest.

"Ahem, that was heroic of you.." Wu Fang awkwardly said, unsure of how to react to that, before his gaze turned solemn again.

"What about a hero who doesn't just save a boy from being punished by a dog for his arrogance, but a hero who saves hundreds, from people you know like me, your mom, to your friends, down to strangers, have you ever wanted to be such a hero?"

"I do," Wu Mingli said as he clenched his fists with a blazing passion lit up within him.

"I did too.." his father said with a melancholic sigh as he took a sip from his wine leather bag.

"When you're young before the world has its claws in you, you always believe yourself to have the makings of a hero. When we are young we are all heroes in our tales. We play all these scenarios in our minds all day that always end up with us showing off our heroism.

I wasn't any different either...

What would happen if a bandit attacked the village? For a child with the grandeur of heroism the answer is simple, I would defeat the bandit..

What if the bandit isn't alone and their numbers are more than the village can handle? The answer for that, again simple, I would fight them off with my sword, not shrinking one bit. My valiance will be more than enough to scare them and if it isn't, I will willingly stake my life to protect everyone in the village.

That was how I imagined things when I was small. Fired up at every turn, hoping that the world would provide me with the chance to be a hero.

A chance that my imagination would be translated into reality. Where I can show off to my parents and the rest of the villagers how amazing I am. To be the hero who I have always thought myself to be.

The opportunity finally came for me, and I failed spectacularly at it. We may be heroes in our own stories, but remember this, the world can make villains of us all.

The world is not such a kind place that it will just let you be what you imagine yourself to be. It will test you in the cruelest of ways and if you're lacking even slightly, you will soon come to discover that the line between villain and hero is a very thin one.

As someone who crossed that line, what I can tell you is this, we all have a villain inside of us, son. For me, the greatest heroes are those who can confront the villains within them when the moment calls for it.

You don't have to save tens, hundreds, or thousands, you just have to save the one.." Wu Fang said as he leaned forward and gently poked Wu Mingli's heart.

"And how do you do that, the answer I found is keeping it simple and finding one thing you hold as dear as your life and using it as the sword to contain that villainous spirit.

For me, the sword I found was your mother... and you..

Find your sword, Mingli. The right sword that can help you keep the villains in your heart at bay, then maybe just maybe you can then point it to the world outside of it..

Never forget, don't underestimate the world, it can draw out the villain in us, and it is really good at it, too, and just like Aunt Ma's dog, it might attack you at unexpected moments. Keep your sword up at all times, hero..."

Chapter 886 Change in trajectories

Wu Mingli sighed as clarity resumed in his eyes. Back then he didn't understand what his father meant or why he seemed sorrowful, frustrated, and relieved at the same time as he said those words.

His father's words were incomprehensible to him back then, but after experiencing the harshness of the world only then did those words reveal the wisdom that lay within.

Even though he long discarded any desire to be a hero, those words still served and guided him to who he is today, especially when it came to tempering the heart and the will. Those words were what helped him reach heights he never thought possible, and now he was just a stone's throw away from the palace realm because of it.

"Don't worry father, I will make sure to wield my sword for you, just like you did for me.." Wu Mingli thought with staunch conviction.

With an austere and somber look to him, Wu Mingli continued.

"All this while as my father was running away from the riverstone serpent, all he could imagine was how it would tear through the entire village.

No matter how much he screamed at his legs to stop, they would not listen to him. With every ground he gained, the more fearful he became of what fate awaited him.

Whichever way it went, he knew his end would not be a good one.

Because of its highly weakened state, my father was able to cover half the distance it took to get back to the village from the creek in the mountains.

If it wasn't for its apparent weakness, even without doing anything, its aura alone would have been capable of suppressing and incapacitating my qi refinement stage father. With the enormous disparity in their strength, he would not have been able to move let alone make enough ground from it as he did.

As he was making ground, inching ever so closer to the village, my father's prayers shifted from getting away from the serpent to hoping it devoured him before he made it back to the village, sparing him the fate of becoming the greatest sinner of all, for leading that thing there.

By luck, his prayers were answered, twice at that. The first one was when the serpent finally moved, and when it did, it was like an avalanche had struck the mountain, and the second was when a blue lightning streak that looked like it had descended from the heavens struck that mountain with an even fiercer momentum than the riverstone serpent had when it moved.

A thunderous explosion hit the mountain which caused my father to tumble, roll over, and fall, and as he did he managed to catch sight of the fearsome destructive power of that lightning. Half the mountain got shattered by that lightning and the area where that behemoth of terror had become a massive webbed crater and a beast that was charred beyond recognition to the point it looked no different than a large pumice rock. The only thing that made one not think it was not a rock was the river of blood that poured out of it.

My father was spared the fate he greatly feared by some wandering cultivator who had been secluding himself in one of the hills that neighbored that mountain and was alerted to the serpent when it made an appearance.

Maybe out of pity for the state my father had been in, that cultivator dug out the riverstone serpent's wisdom pearl and handed it to my father, along with a few words of encouragement.

The words were lost on him. Because of shock, all his senses did not function as they were meant to. His hearing was bad, his vision was blurry, and for a few minutes there he had even forgotten who he was and where he was, and when he finally came to, the wandering cultivator was nowhere in sight.

All he had as proof that everything that happened wasn't some nightmare or illusion was the half-destroyed mountain, and the wisdom pearl in his hands. As for his benefactor, even later after he had calmed down, no matter how much he tried to recall their face or even their voice, his memory of them was always blurry.

Though, regardless of his blurry memory, those events became an indelible part of him and shaped the person he became later.

After the events, he left the village, maybe out of guilt for what he almost damned the village too. Even though that reality never happened, I don't think he ever forgot it or forgave himself for it.

Maybe because of how intense that guilt was, my father, someone who had intended and was more than content to spend the rest of his life in that village, left at the tender age of nineteen and went to start over somewhere else, already having an idea of what he wanted to do.

Shaped by that experience, specifically the wandering cultivator who intervened and saved his life in more ways than one, my father had in him to do something close to it. This path led him to become a garrison guard of the Red Maple Empire.

A post where he could protect others just like he was protected.."

Wu Mingli paused as he smiled sorrowfully.

"Because of how impassioned he was at his duty, eventually he rose through the ranks and was promoted from a garrison guard watching over one of the frontier towns, to a city guard protecting one of the cities that fell under the jurisdiction of the royal family.

I wasn't born then, but I can imagine how proud he must have been to be given the post, even as just a footman..." Wu Mingli said with a smile that was mirrored by his mother, who softly muttered,

"He bragged for a whole year.."

"Throughout his life, he never rose past being a footman. Even though he was assiduous in his duties and well-liked by his superiors and the citizens of the city he watched over, he could never make it past becoming a footman because of his strength.

Because of how lacking his village had been in matters related to cultivation, even if they had qi refinement cultivators and some low-grade cultivation arts to help one reach a breakthrough to the qi refinement realm, their means, and methods were not the best, they could not be considered average, and it left all of them with glaring flaws in their foundations notwithstanding my father.

Those flaws severely hindered my father's cultivation path, so no matter how much effort he put in, he could never touch the core formation realm.

He reached the seventh stage of the foundation establishment realm at his peak. With such strength, he could only ever be a footman, but even then, he was still one of the best city guards in Spring Plum City.."

Chapter 887 Green Dragon General Store

?Wu Mingli subtly clenched and unclenched his fists as his gaze fell on Duan Hu briefly before it went back to Yang Qing.

"Because of how fulfilled he looked when doing it, and how chivalrous he made the posting seem to be, I too at some point in life had entertained the thought of following in the same path and becoming a guardsman.

Our home was a constant hub of smiles of gratitude from our neighbors and those who my father had helped in one way or another both when he was on duty or off duty. Something I took great pride in at the time.." Wu Mingli paused as he smiled bitterly whilst shaking his head at his naivety from back then.

When trouble struck them back then, he desperately tried to go to those neighbors and those who owed his father a debt of gratitude, in the hopes that they would help the man they owed that debt to, but the moment trouble hit, their home turned from the king's palace into a beggar's cesspit that everyone did all they could to avoid.

All the empty promises they had made back then to his father turned into nothing more than smoke in the air when they were called on it.

His mother had warned him of that possibility, but the young him thought they were true friends, true companions who would remember what their father had done for them and do so in kind when he needed them.

They didn't and the young Wu Mingli back then, got heartbroken, bitter, resentful, and hated them for it, but the him right now, after maturing a bit, he could understand and almost empathize with the choice those people made back then.

What he was asking of them back then was no different than him asking them to throw themselves in front of a monstrous consuming fire that had the potential of dragging not only them but also everyone they were associated with.

It had been selfish of him to ask and to expect them to answer, which was something that took quite some time for him to understand and admit to himself.

Even if he understood and accepted their actions back then, if something were to happen to them and they came to him for help, he would not help them. It would not matter whether whatever they needed help with was something difficult to achieve or something that he could do easily with a flip of a hand, he would reject them all the same.

People who only ate with you when the table was full and deserted you when it was empty were not a company he wished to keep or associate with.

He admired his father's sense of selfless responsibility, but no matter how much he admired him, he did not want to be like him when it came to being selfless. His assistance and sentiment were restricted to those who mattered to him. Those were the ones he would raise his sword for, but to strangers, he would be no more different than a spectator in their affairs.

Pulling his thoughts back, Wu Mingli continued.

"It was in the commission of his duties as city guardsman of Spring Plum City that another tragedy struck him.

During one of his patrols, he came across an altercation between a store clerk and the teenage son of one of our neighbors.

The store clerk in question was the store clerk of one of the most famous and powerful shops in the city, the Green Dragon General Store.. "as he mentioned the store, killing intent flashed in his eyes before he quickly contained it.

"The general store in question was famous for dealing in all kinds of wares both common or rare. It was hard for someone to miss anything if one went to look be it potions, pills, talismans, formation templates, cultivation arts, weapons, everyday artifacts, appraisal commissions.

It was a one-stop shop for whatever you needed which was what made it so frequented and famous both within and outside the city. Well, that was one of the reasons, with the other and more significant reason for its success being its identity as a subsidiary of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.

Its background and prestige left it revered and feared throughout the city, even by the City Lord himself and the noble families settled within the city.

Just like other prominent cities around the Red Maple Empire, the Spring Plum City did not have any shortage of subsidiaries of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, but even among them, the Green Dragon General Store was considered head and shoulders above the rest. Their reputations were to the extent they were respected and feared even more than the City Lord or the noble families settled within the city.

With such a reputation hanging above them, you can only imagine what those associated with the store were like. They saw themselves no different than princes, and all within the city as their subjects.

It was to the point that even a mere store clerk could act with impunity without fear of any retaliation whatsoever, which was what should have happened that fateful day had my father not intervened.

One of the store clerks of that store by the name of Ding Xiaoli ended up in a dispute with the son of one of our neighbors by the name of Li Fei.



Li Fei had been looking for a miasma-purifying butterfly hibiscus to help cure his mother from the miasma poisoning she had gotten on the job working on a commission for the Green Dragon General Store.

Their family wasn't well off to the point that they could afford a sky-grade herb like the miasma-purifying butterfly hibiscus. The Green Dragon General Store had refused to cater for the medication under the guises that Li Fei's mother wasn't a direct employee of the store, along with other excuses the store used to welch out of taking accountability for her state.

Desperate, Li Fei's father and three of his brothers decided to try their luck at delving into forests and searching out ruins in the hopes they could find the solution to their predicament in those places leaving Li Fei and his two sisters to care for their mother in the meantime."

Wu Mingli silently charted his meditation mantra to quell the boiling emotions within him.

Chapter 888 Saved life, ruined life, ended life

Months passing by without hearing from his father drove the young Li Fei desperate, and it only got worse when his mother's state got worse.

Out of desperation he sold everything of value in their home and borrowed, my father was one of those who gave what he could to the venture despite knowing it was a fruitless task, and when Li Fei, couldn't borrow or sell anymore, he took what he had scrounged up to the Green Dragon General Store, in the hopes that on account of his mother's history and long time service with the store, they could work out a deal or even a structured payment plan.

Things didn't work out as Li Fei expected and he was ruthlessly kicked out by the store clerk Ding Xiaoli. Maybe out of fury at being rejected and the pent-up frustration finally blowing up, Li Fei lunged at Ding Xiaoli to attack him.

Ding Xiaoli was a late-stage foundation establishment cultivator while Li Fei was just a peak-stage qi refinement cultivator. You can imagine how things played out for Li Fei after he attempted an attack on him.

Li Fei was beaten within an inch of his life. His legs were crippled so he wouldn't escape, and his cultivation was too, and then Ding Xiaoli slowly tortured him in public so others could see. Shaking the mountain to scare off the tiger, they always like to say.." Wu Mingli said with a sardonic smile.

"Everyone who was there silently stood by as they witnessed the whole thing happen. Not one person said or did anything as Li Fei cried out till his voice turned hoarse.

I was one of those people.." Wu Mingli said with heaviness in his tone.

Li Fei's screams had haunted him for quite some time after the fact, and now as he narrated the whole ordeal, he felt like he had been transported to that very scene.

A cobblestone pathway, an intersection filled with many buildings and people, and at the center of that intersection, a grand pavilion with a statue of a green dragon coiling around the flying eaves of the roof of that pavilion.

In front of that pavilion was a twenty-year-old youth, whose knees were facing different directions crying, bleeding, eyes widened in fear and desperation, and standing above him was a well-dressed demon in garbed with a handsome human skin, a kind smile, and dressed in brocade robes.

If it wasn't for the blood on the sleeves of his robes and hands, and the ruthlessness with which he tore at the twenty-year-old youth, one would have mistaken that fiend for a saint.

Standing witness to that horror were countless people all wearing the same look from the elderly, to the men, to the women and the children, they all had that look of dread, the same look that the twenty-year-old youth being tortured to death had.

An intersection that usually bustled with activity was silent with an oppressive air of fear. Even with the sun high up, there was a suffocating darkness growing within that intersection.

Wu Mingli looked to his right, and there was someone there. A middle-aged man wearing a red-brown robe, a matching coat that had an embroidered image of a red maple tree, and a thin one-meter-long saber at his waist.

"My father was there too.." Wu Mingli softly said with his gaze still on the middle-aged man standing to his right who bore facial features that resembled him.

Yes, his father was there, and just like the others, he too had that same horrified and paralyzed look on his face as he watched what was happening at the intersection.

Wu Mingli, like a son who adored his father, liked to join his father as he did his patrols around the city, and that day wasn't any different. It was how they both ended up there that day, and it was also the first time Wu Mingli had ever seen his father make such a face. It was a look of desperation and fear.

For as long as he knew the man, no matter the situation he was in, he always had a steady and calm presence around him that reassured those around him. It was what made him such a great guard and why many people felt safe to ask him for his assistance, but that day he saw him afraid and most of all looking irresolute. He was shaky.

"What tremendous turmoil you must have been in, back then.." thought Wu Mingli as he cast a sympathetic look at the specter of his father before he turned his gaze to where his father was looking, with his bloodshot eyes.

At that moment as he switched his view, Li Fei who was having his left hand broken turned at just that moment and looked at them and weakly mumbled something, which at the time, Wu Mingli had been too terrified to make out, let alone notice it.

But when he grew bold enough to confront that memory and with his growing cultivation base, he finally noticed those words, and with it some sort of answer on why his father did what he did.

"H...E...L...PM....E....,"

"Li Fei weakly mumbled for help amid all that pain and before I could register it, my father acted. That time I didn't understand why. There was a reason why no one chose to step out.

There were hundreds of core formation experts out there, but none of them stepped forward;

There were noble families there, with some even coming from the founding families, but none of them came forward either.

Why was that?

My father wasn't the only guard there that day, others were present there, some his superiors, but none of them even so much as uttered a single word of defense for Li Fei.

Why did everyone present remain unmoved?

It is simple, we were all afraid, not of the horror happening before us, but of the person and the massive overarching pavilion behind him.

If it had been a different store clerk maybe someone could have said something at most, but Ding Xiaoli was different, he was Shao Ren's nephew, which in no simple terms meant he was pavilion royalty where the Green Dragon General Store was concerned.

Acting against him was no different than acting against Shao Ren, the store owner. It was why everyone was afraid, my father included.

He knew what fate awaited those who dared act out of a place where Xiaoli was concerned. It was why he had that look on him back then. The look of someone who had the desperation of death on them, but he acted anyway.

I don't whether it was because Li Fei reminded him of how he was in a similar circumstance back then and the wandering cultivator stepped in, or the guilt of what could have happened back then spurring him on, or because I was there, and he didn't want his son to see him differently.

Whatever the reason was, it was strong enough to compel my father to act against the better judgment of all who were present and intervene on Li Fei's behalf.

Even though he knew it wouldn't work, my father tried a soft approach. He tried to appeal to Ding Xiaoli's humanity to spare Li Fei.

An ambitious but foolhardy approach. If Ding Xiaoli had any humanity in him, he would not have done what he did to Li Fei, and he would not have done with such a gleeful look to him.

We all knew fiend cultivators could be considered saintly monks if compared to him. He was the incarnate of vileness clothed in human skin.

He was infamous around the city and with good reason. He only looked alive when he was tormenting someone. And if there was one thing he cared about in his life more than tormenting people, was his face, and my father's act of intervention had robbed him of both.

And for that, he retaliated in the only way he knew how to, through unbridled violence. I don't know whether it was because of how tense the whole situation was and its effect on him, but my father retaliated in kind, with an unhinged savageness to him.

One side was a pampered young man who things always went his way without struggle even from those whose lives he took, and the other was a middle-aged man who had to fight several times over for every single thing he ever got in his life.

Even though his path to the higher realms had been cut short due to his flawed foundations in the early stages, he shored up and perfected all he could within his realm. That fight ended as soon as it started with my father ferociously punching Ding Xiaoli in the gut, crippling his cultivation and knocking him out, all in one swift motion.

No one saw it coming, and no one believed it even as Ding Xiaoli barreled like a broken kite toward the pillar of the pavilion and slumped over.

A millisecond was all it took. In just a millisecond a life was saved, a life was ruined, a life was ended.."

Chapter 889 No different than slapping the emperor's face

"Ding Xiaoli getting crippled took everyone by surprise, my father included. With what he had done, most of us expected an immediate reaction from the store, after all, the whole commotion had happened just outside their door and the pillar Ding Xiaoli crashed through was theirs.

But no one came out.

At the time I couldn't understand why, and just naively assumed the reason they didn't react was that even they knew Ding Xiaoli's actions were unpardonable.

I thought they too had grown some conscience from the whole commotion. Xiaoli always behaved like a fiend, but never to the extent of what he did that day.

It was wishful thinking on my part that maybe the store had tacitly approved of my father's actions hence the lack of reaction on their part.

Because a few seconds later, one of the shop clerks of the store came out and picked up Ding Xiaoli's unconscious and crippled body and went back to the store.

Not once did he interact with my father, he didn't even spare a glance his way.

I remember feeling relieved when I saw that clerk walk back into the store..." Wu Mingli said with a bitter smile.

"I thought my father had got away with it, that the world was finally ready to accept just acts. How wrong I was.." Wu Mingli said as he shook his head.

"Back then I didn't know, but a few, especially the city guards and those well-informed, they knew why the store didn't react and it wasn't because they had grown a conscience as I had assumed.."

Wu Mingli's eyes laced with coldness and contempt fell on Duan Hu.

With his eyes still on the former emperor, Wu Mingli said,

"The reason the store didn't react was because of the title my father wore. Even though he was just a late-stage foundation establishment cultivator, at the end of the day regardless of his cultivation base, he was still a city guard, and city guards by default regardless of their attainments and rank fell under the emperor's jurisdiction.

Openly?acting against a city guard was no different than slapping the emperor's face.."

Wu Mingli didn't bother to hide the contempt in his tone as he said the last sentence.

"If my father had been just another bystander and not a city guard, they would no doubt have acted against him then and there, but because he was a city guard, the store had to be tactful in how they reacted.

They couldn't act against my father in the same manner Ding Xiaoli did to Li Fei. To act against him, certain 'conditions' had to be met.

Considering how domineering the store and the subsidiaries had been acting to the point that they could openly torture a citizen of the empire without fear of reprisal, fulfilling those conditions was something simple for them.

After all, the person in charge of those conditions was the same person who allowed them to act as they wished, isn't that right, Emperor Duan Hu.." Wu Mingli coldly said.

The former emperor's response to the question was an impassive sigh and silence. His actions drew a scoff from Wu Mingli.

"With such an attitude, I am genuinely amazed as to how you reached the palace realm.." Wu Mingli said before turning his attention back to Yang Qing. He would have plenty of time to deal with the emperor.

"With the store not coming after him, my father quickly carried Li Fei, bringing him back to our home. There was a heavy expression on him, which at the time I assumed was because he was worried about Li Fei who didn't seem to be doing too well.

My father quickly tended to his injuries. While he couldn't do anything about his crippled cultivation, dealing with his broken legs and dismembered arm was easy enough.

After he was done, I saw him handing Li Fei something and a few words as he escorted him back to his home. That was the last time I ever saw Li Fei or his family, because the next day, their house was empty save for the household items, but for the people who inhabited it, none of them were there.

Neither Li Fei, nor his sisters, nor their sick mother was there. And it wasn't just them, because his aunts and cousins did too. Come the next day not one of them could be seen. I can only hope that the reason for their disappearance was them running away, and the words my father left Li Fei with was telling him to run.."

Wu Mingli genuinely hoped that they run because if they did, then that meant his father's actions back then were not in vain.

"Though it's been 238 years since that incident, I doubt Li Fei is alive, but for his sisters, and the rest, I hope they had a better turn in their fates.."

Though Wu Mingli thought that, he couldn't fully believe in it. Has the world really ever been that fair?

When it came to Li Fei's family, his father was the one with the highest cultivation. Li Fei's father just like his father, was also a late-stage foundation establishment cultivator, with Li Fei's father being slightly higher at the tenth stage while his father's was at the eighth.

Having experienced the ruthlessness of the cultivation world over the past few hundred years, he knew a foundation establishment cultivator was just a stronger ant. They'd struggle to survive in that world just as much as a qi and or body refinement cultivator. A foundation establishment cultivator was just a little sturdier that was all.

The strongest person in Li Fei's family was his father, but his foundation establishment cultivation was insufficient to guarantee his family's life, if it was, would his wife have been denied treatment by the Green General Dragon Store?

If he had been at the core formation realm, while the store would have not feared him, they would have afforded him the basic courtesy afforded to someone of that station.



A core formation cultivator could be considered a precious resource even within a high-ranking organization like the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, let alone one of their subsidiaries. The Green Dragon General Store would not have wanted to fall out with one easily just because of a mere sky-grade herb.

Were Li Fei's father a core formation expert, they would have likely reached an easy compromise, but he wasn't and because of it, things devolved as they did, to the point he was forced to risk his life along with his brother's to search for alternative means elsewhere.

If their father's strength could be considered trivial, what about Li Fei's? Or his sisters'?

Chapter 890 A gentle frailty that hides indomitability

?Technically they did have another foundation establishment cultivator within their ranks, their mother. She had been at the fourth stage, but the poisoning incapacitated her. She was no different than a newborn child with how weak she was.

This only left Li Fei as the person with the highest cultivation base in that household, as an eighth stage qi refinement cultivator. But with him crippled, he was essentially just another mortal, which now left the burden to his sisters who were both younger and weaker than him with the most powerful of the two, aged twelve, being a silver body refinement cultivator.

If the circumstances were normal, they could have maybe depended on their two aunts who had moderately higher strength. One of them was a first-stage foundation establishment cultivator and the other was the ninth stage of the qi refinement realm. It wasn't much, but it was better than what Li Fei had.

But after what Li Fei did, the gravity of it and his actions inadvertently implicating them, would they even want to associate with him? They were not related by blood, only by marriage, and now they were staring down the fangs of the Green Dragon General Store.

Them abandoning Li Fei and his siblings, and cutting any sort of ties between them would be a kindness. It wouldn't be strange if one of them got the idea of killing Li Fei, his sisters, and his mother and offering their heads as a token of apology to the store in the hopes of protecting their lives and their families.

After those events, Wu Mingli could imagine Li Fei and his sisters were more than likely on their own. And if they were, what were the odds that a team whose highest cultivator was a silver body cultivator

managed to escape a behemoth like the Green Dragon General Store whose might shook the entire Spring Plum City?

Even if he assumed by some crazy luck they managed to escape the city, another obstacle waited for them ahead, in the name of the Red Maple Empire. As long as they remained, the store's tentacles that were deeply entrenched in every part of the empire would definitely find them provided they remained within its territories.

If they wanted to live, they only had one option, which was to flee the empire unnoticed. Would two teenagers, one a cripple, the other a silver-body cultivator, add to that a sick person and a nine-year-old really be able to pull that off?

While Wu Mingli may not know what was in the pouch his father handed to Li Fei, with his father's means, there was no way what was in there was capable enough to guarantee their safe passage out of the Empire.

But assuming by some heaven-tier luck they did make it out of the empire in one piece, was their strength sufficient to support their survival in the world outside?

Deep down he knew, the likelihood that Li Fei and his sisters survived the escape was slim to none. They were likely dead, and if he was a betting man he would likely bet that they died in Red Maple Empire. They likely didn't even get to make it past the city gates, and their deaths were likely gruesome ones done under the dark veil that shrouded the entire empire.

"All else aside, I really hope they made it out.." Wu Mingli wistfully thought.

"After Li Fei left, my father called me over to the same fireplace we always liked to sit at, and my mother made the same roasted potatoes and garlic-salted fish we liked to have when we were sitting there, and for the first time, he shared his potato wine with me.

That brew was a keepsake of his village. He always drank it himself but that night he shared it with me and my mother. What came next was nothing out of the ordinary. He regaled me with tales of his youth, dropping a few anecdotes and pearls of wisdom here and there that subtly helped guide me on the person I should be, by using some of the experiences, mistakes, regrets, and achievements he had in life.

Infected by the atmosphere that had the sense of normalcy it always had, I assumed everything was okay and that come tomorrow, everything would go back as it was. My father would resume his duties, patrolling the city, while I and my mother would resume our normal lives.

My father didn't seem worried, neither did my mother.." Wu Mingli said as he cast a gentle gaze on his mother.

It took tragedy to strike them for him to realize how strong his mother was. She may be in the early stages of the core formation realm and he was at the quasi-palace stage. He was miles ahead of her in terms of personal strength, but when it came to strength of spirit, he felt he paled to her.

In the storm that hit them, he would not have survived it as easily as he did, if it wasn't for her steadfastly facing it all on her own as she shielded him from it.

With how astute he came to discover her to be, she must have had an idea of what fate awaited his father, but that night, the last night that all three would ever spend together, she was as peaceful as his father had been.

Facing death with equanimity required a certain level of willpower as even the bravest might waver when that moment came. His father knew only death awaited him for what he did but despite it all, he was calm in the face of it, even sparing time to assist Li Fei and share a mundane moment with his family despite what awaited for him.

But to Wu Mingli, while he felt his father was brave, he felt his mother was braver. When death comes, for the person who dies, that would be the end of it, but for the living, the loved ones of the deceased, they would have to carry the burden of that death and whatever it brings, as the living.

The burden that comes, the storm that comes, it is all theirs to carry and shoulder as the living, and when it came to his mother, the burden that came was anything but light. Weathering through it as she did, for both of them at that, required strength that Wu Mingli didn't feel he had.

His mother looked gentle, with a frailty of fatigue to her, with a genial smile, she had an aura that was no different than a mortal grandmother, but beneath that exterior lay an invulnerable and unshakeable spirit that supported the path and growth of a quasi palace stage expert.

She gave him his life in more ways than one, and under impossible circumstances at that.