

Daily life 861

Chapter 861 Blood debt duel (6)

The symphony of blades clashing continued to color the mountain peak, the atmosphere filled with tension and anxiety. That atmosphere had even affected Yang Qing and Yu Gen who had stopped their discussion with even the former putting away the brazier and whatever beef tongues were left as his eyes followed Chen Gutian and Chen Zholan.

The intensity of their fight grew with every passing second as the speed, ferocity, and power of their attacks increased with every swing and every clash.

Were the duel held anywhere else but this mountain, the surroundings would have likely been long ravaged beyond repair. The force created by the duo's attacks was capable of punching holes through mountains, or laying waste to hills and turning them into plains.

But because of the nature of the mountain and platform being a by-product of the chaos fog of manifestation, there was absolutely no damage to the platform or its surroundings. The fog contained and cushioned every destructive force created by the fight without interfering in the fight itself.

Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian were still going at each other neck to neck, but even after a few seconds had passed by, despite the ferocity of their attacks, not one of them had so much as a scratch on them. It was a true testament to their skills and the abilities of the owl vigilant sword art.

They held nothing back as they attacked each other, with each attack, fast, precise, and lethal to the extreme. They were constantly dancing at the edge of death or a fatal injury, but as if they could read each other's intentions, they both managed to dodge each other's attacks at just the right moment.

Looking at them, one would think they watching a delicate dance across a precipitous cliff where a moment's carelessness could spell one's doom.

The crowd's anxiousness was exactly for that reason. As fellow clan members, even if they were not the ones fighting, because of their intimate familiarity with the art both were executing, they knew how dangerous that fight was, even with no injuries on either side.

The owl vigilant sword art was built to exploit mistakes, especially tiny ones which it exploited to the extreme to provide a lethal counter. The art's aim was to reap the target's life from that one mistake no matter how small. One single blow, not five, not ten, not twenty, but a single blow to take an opponent's life. Everything was geared toward that end, taking the opponent's life with a single swing.

Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian may not have any injuries on them yet, but because of the art's decisive and lethal nature, all it takes is one hit for one of them to be incapacitated or gravely injured.

Five minutes quickly passed by with the two still at a stalemate, however, the intensity didn't wane one bit. As the fight continued, their individual qualities started to show along with the art's demands.

Chen Zholan's skills in comprehension of the art showed. Those with keen senses and sharp insight could tell his understanding of the art was deeper than Chen Gutian's. His movement, his attack, his defense, everything was seamless and free-

flowing, and had a lot of nuances and variations to it which showed how comfortable he was in the manipulation of the art. This in turn reduced the strain on his body as a whole, especially his muscles and spiritual qi reserves, while increasing the power and lethality of his attacks with how unpredictable and free-flowing he was with the art.

Chen Gutian on the other hand, despite being the one being pushed around the majority of the time, there was a reason he managed to hang on despite the difference in levels of comprehension and that was his experience. He may not have the deep comprehension Chen Zholan had but he had practiced the Owl vigilant sword art for far longer than him. As such from that experience he had ironed out his deficiencies with the art. He had a clear grasp of what his body could or could not pull off when it came to the art, down to the minute detail, and the result was someone who maximized those limitations to bring out maximum efficiency.

His attacks may not be varied or contain the same power as Chen Zholan's attacks did, but thanks to the deep understanding he had of his body when it came to the art, he always knew how to respond accordingly to whatever Chen Zholan threw at him.

One fought with his body, the other fought with his comprehension.

However, from the reaction Yang Qing saw in the Chen Clan elders even Chen Zian, Chen Gutian's display was a surprise to them, which Yang Qing found intriguing and it wasn't just them as Chen Zholan was the same too. Even though he was fully focused on the fight, the fluctuations he produced every time Chen Gutian defended against his attacks, or countered with one of his own, each time, there would be a reaction from Chen Zholan showing his surprise.

"How did he get strong? I've sparred with him over a hundred times, he was never this good. With his dwindling lifespan his body shouldn't be this fast, even his qi reserves seem to be at the same level as mine. Did he do something?" wondered Chen Zholan.

"Didn't I warn you and Xue'er every single time since you were young, never let your mind wander for even a second when in battle as it could spell your doom.."

Chen Gutian's calm elderly voice carried over as he took advantage of Chen Zholan's momentary lapse. As Chen Zholan was performing a diagonal slash aiming to tear Chen Gutian from his bowel across his sternum up to his shoulder, his lapse in concentration caused his muscle to tense slightly which lowered his speed, but not by much, only by a millisecond or so, however, for a practitioner of the owl vigilant sword art, that millisecond may as well have been a minute to Chen Gutian.

Chapter 862 Blood debt duel (7)

Chen Gutian performed a downward slash intending to interrupt Chen Zholan's diagonal slash. Chen Zholan out of fear of losing his sword from the clash, tensed his muscles as he lowered his center of gravity, opting to lower the speed of his attack and focus on stability only to find the powerful attack he was expecting to fall on him was a feint.

Chen Gutian put less than expected force in his attack and instead borrowed the force created from their clash to recoil himself over Chen Zholan, launching himself slightly above Chen Zholan's head, his body rotating along with his sword aiming to dice Chen Zholan's head.

Chen Zholan rapidly reacted by dislocating his ankle and rolling over forward, narrowly dodging the spinning blade aimed at his head. However even if he dodged the attack, he didn't escape unscathed as a geyser of blood sprayed from his shoulder revealing an exposed clavicle that was hanging loosely on his shoulders.

To those weaker than them, that whole segue of attack would have been like shimmering light charging over Chen Zholan in the blink of an eye, and a spray of blood appearing an instant later. From the recoil to gliding to slashing, Chen Gutian's speed had been as blindingly fast as he was throughout the attack.

If it were anyone else but Chen Zholan in that position, they would have likely had their head sliced through like a pumpkin without even realizing how.

Chen Zholan wasn't given a chance to bemoan his state as Chen Gutian continued with his relentless attacks. A flurry of stabs and slashes that shimmered into hundreds of cyan light descended on him like an avalanche as he was forced into a desperate struggle of dodging and parrying.

With one shoulder almost out of commission, his movements were greatly affected which in turn affected almost every other part of his swordplay, particularly his reaction. For someone who had gone almost five minutes without so much as a scratch, shallow wounds started coloring his body in a growing number and it wasn't long before his pristine white robes were colored red.

"His despicable character aside, one has to admit he is talented..." murmured Yang Qing, Yu Gen nodding.

Even with a torn shoulder, which effectively rendered his right hand unusable, and Chen Gutian not letting up in his attacks, the fact that Chen Gutian still couldn't heavily injure him was a testament to the capabilities of Chen Zholan.

Even injured, his talents shone through in how he handled himself, especially in manipulating the Owl vigilant sword art. He fluidly executed the art to parry almost all of Chen Gutian's attacks, and when defending or completely dodging the attack wasn't feasible, he knew when to trade his survival for small injuries, which always forced Chen Gutian's hand to accept the trade.

Even handicapped he still managed to contain Chen Gutian's attacks, but how long could he keep this up was what everyone wondered.

The owl vigilant sword art was highly taxing on one's body, and that was when one was fully fit, let alone in an injured state like the one Chen Zholan.

As the fight went on it became clear to Yang Qing why the art was classified into a blue grade art. As potent as the art was, it had clear deficiencies, one of which was it was ill-suited for fighting a protracted battle.

The longer the fight went on, the worse it got on the one executing the art. Their muscles would be highly strained, and the demands of the spiritual sense were translated into great demands on the soul which would be just as fatigued as the muscles the longer the fight went on, and then there was the enormous qi reserves the art demanded all throughout its executions. Its focus on extreme precision and speed meant you couldn't let up for even a second. The tempo either had to be sustained or continuously raised. There was no lowering it or its bite would dull.

Chen Zholan and Chen Gutian had only fought for ten minutes but the amount of qi they expended was similar to the amount of qi one would expend executing a regular blue-grade art for one and a half hours straight.

He could already tell they were fast approaching the half mark on their reserves though Chen Gutian seemed to have a slightly larger capacity than Chen Zholan.

It was glaringly obvious now when it came to the Owl vigilant sword art, you either had to settle the matter fast or as time progressed, the opponent would be the least of your problems. The art would quickly turn its blade on the owner.

With each passing second, the relentlessness of Chen Gutian left Chen Zholan with little to do other than defend. His robes were soaked in sweat and blood, with hair sticking close to his skin, but even with Chen Gutian pushing him to the extreme, where a single misstep could spell his death, his eyes were calm, his response meticulous, without any waste of movement and when it came to Chen Gutian, his experience showed.

Even with a clear advantage, he wasn't anxious, eager, or impatient to end, but maintained the same attitude he had throughout the fight even before Chen Zholan's injury.

A second later one of Chen Gutian's attacks managed to penetrate Chen Zholan's sturdy defense which resulted in a pinpoint blast at Chen Zholan's side, leaving a gaping hole.

But even with another grievous injury to him, Chen Zholan didn't so much as flinch or act desperately because of it. He maintained his composure and momentum, as he adjusted himself accordingly to his body's state which even if he was hurt, earned a look of respect from those watching, notwithstanding Yang Qing and Yu Gen who both furrowed their brows at the same time just as Chen Gutian was arming another powerful thrust towards Chen Zholan's exposed side.

A sharp piercing light was instantly produced from where Chen Zholan was standing, heading straight for Chen Gutian's sword.

Clang.

A loud metallic sound reverberated around the platform, followed by the explosion of air and dust around them with something barrelling backward at breakneck speeds. Without pause, four bamboo leaves appeared above the platform, each leaf had a terrifying sharpness to it that it would not be a stretch to say one of those leaves could instantly shred apart a 10,000-meter mountain into particles.

"His art seems to have changed. Is it something he had? It seems to be even better and more dangerous in terms of its destructive abilities than the Owl vigilant sword art.." said Yang Qing to Yu Gen as he observed the delicate crystalline bamboo leaves that were honing in on Chen Gutian with fierce momentum.

In a single moment, the role of attacker and defender had changed with Chen Gutian being on the defensive end as he blitzed around the platform defending against those leaves. Every time his sword clashed against one, it produced the same feeling as one would when clashing against another weapon.

His sword had faint cracks on its surface and his left side was bleeding heavily with bone being revealed.

Chen Zholan was fast on him with his sword coated in a deep green color that gave the illusion it was a bamboo shoot that released a terrifying sharpness that was several notches higher than the leaves targeting Chen Gutian. Were an early-stage core formation expert present to view the blade in its current form, their eyes would instantly bleed from the sharpness radiated by it.

"What do you think, brother Yu Gen?"

"It's a different art, though, I don't know, it feels to have some aspect of the previous art he used, only this one seems to focus on one aspect to the extreme, sharpness."

"My thoughts exactly.."

Up on the platform, Chen Gutian tried his best to dodge the leaves looking to rip him apart, however, with how nimbly they moved, it proved difficult as cuts ranging from shallow to deep started appearing on his body from every leaf that penetrated his defense, and the circumstances turned graver when Chen Zholan joined the attack.

His attacks were now more forceful and powerful but still remained fast. His attacks felt like the attacks of a snapping bamboo shoot. Those snaps were curvingly fast and impactful, with Chen Gutian recoiling every time he traded blows with Chen Zholan.

However just as it looked like Chen Zholan was gaining ground, Chen Gutian's blade transformed, and just like Chen Zholan's, his had the look of a bamboo leaf. Three leaves were produced from the tip of his blade in rapid succession, which clashed against three of the four leaves that were targeting him, and just as the fourth leaf was about to tear his right eye out, a fourth leaf came out and intercepted the leaf that was after him.

"You reached the fourth.." Chen Zholan muttered in surprise as he saw Chen Gutian's fourth leaf, which though looked smaller than the rest of the leaves he had produced, still contained the same sharpness.

Chen Zholan's surprise didn't stop there as he saw another leaf slowly sprout from Chen Gutian's blade as their blades clashed against each other.

His eyes widened as he saw the leaf slowly sprouted as he muttered,

"Impossible.." over and over.

The other elders looked just as surprised by the turn of events, only Chen Zian displayed a different emotion, his was that of regret, as he let out a lamenting sigh.

Chen Gutian at the moment had blue light veins appearing all around his body as the fifth leaf was being produced. When that fifth leaf formed, it was the size of a pea grain, but its momentum contained the destructive force of the four leaves he had produced combined.

"Let's end this shall we.." he softly muttered with a tired aged voice as the fifth leaf launched itself toward Chen Zholan, who managed to narrowly dodge it as it was aimed at his forehead. It struck his ear, vaporizing it in the process.

Chen Zholan let out a maddening roar as he increased the speed of his attacks with Chen Gutian matching him in kind. They traded blow for blow, their attacks turning into shimmering blurs in the process, as their attacks reached new heights in terms of speed and power. Their wounds grew rapidly, with more appearing on Chen Zholan owing to the extra bamboo leaf Chen Gutian had under his control.

Even with their growing injuries, none of them stopped as they increased the tempo. Chen Zholan with a decisive glint flashing in his eyes, pulled his sword back like he was knocking an arrow, and in the process left his chest exposed to be sliced apart by two of the leaves that had been targeting him.

"You're not the only one who can put their life on the line.." he muttered. In his gaze, he saw Chen Gutian's thrust slowly approaching his heart. It was like time had slowed down.

"Will my sword ever reach you.." he thought as he saw the silhouette of a young handsome man with eyebrows that were shaped like a sword and clear serene eyes appear behind Chen Gutian.

"Four leaves return into one.."

The four leaves that had been floating above him instantly combined at the tip of his blade forming a clover, and with it, a silent sword hum was produced along with a gentle cyan light that covered the entire sword and Chen Zholan.

He gently thrust his sword forward. It moved slowly just like Chen Gutian's sword and his leaves were moving. In its slow speed, it caught up with Chen Gutian's sword but ignored it as it moved past it, inching ever so closer to Chen Gutian's chest, whereupon contact, the leaves slowly melted into Chen Gutian's chest as the light that had covered the sword and Chen Zholan blended into it.

Chen Gutian's chest disintegrated inch by inch, with blood and bone being melted away by the green light that had invaded his chest and it wasn't long before a massive watermelon-sized hole was created in Chen Gutian's chest, and Chen Zholan's hand passed through that cavity while on his end, Chen Gutian's blade had already reached his body with Chen Zholan apathetically looking on as his chest was slowly being run through.

"Good fight.."

Chapter 863 Decay of the major families (1)

Chen Gutian stood weakly, still wearing a genial smile on his face that wouldn't think he was the one with a massive gaping hole in his chest. His aging face seemed to be aging even more as his white hair turned into a faint translucent color looking like it was a web string and not hair. One could feel his life draining out of him.

"I cansee why..... Xue'er admired you so. At the clan..... I doubtthere aremany... with your level of talent.." Chen Gutian said in between labored breaths.

"I admired him too... at some point.." Chen Zholan slowly said as he removed Chen Gutian's sword that had impaled him in the chest. He ended up coughing up blood as he removed it.

His body looked worse than Chen Gutian's, with deep lacerated wounds that revealed bone covering almost every part of his body. Just like Chen Gutian, his aura seemed to be rapidly declining, though his was less severe than that of Chen Gutian.

Save for those two the whole platform was blanketed by a heavy silence with looks of shock coloring the bulk of those present, particularly the elders. Almost every single one of them had their eyes wide and their jaws to the floor with a couple of them having pale, petrified faces.

There was a look of disbelief on their faces, understandably so after what they had seen, considering Yang Qing and Yu Gen looked slightly surprised while Chen Zian, even though he was silent, he had this solemn look on his face as he looked at Chen Zholan. His eyes became grimmer as he recalled the scene from earlier.

Chen Zholan's final attack was the cause of it all. His final attack had been brilliantly fast and terrifyingly sharp to the point that most of the elders couldn't track it with their eyes, and for Chen Zian, he felt were he the one facing off against it, surviving with devastating injuries was the best he could have hoped for.

"I can't believe he reached the prerequisite to master that move," he thought with his eyes still locked on Chen Zholan, as other emotions started flashing through them such as regret.

The cultivation their ancestor had left in the insight jade bamboo was tiered into sixteen leaves with a rising difficulty when it came to grasping one leaf to the next. However, there were chasms in difficulty that stood out in grasping the leaves, there were three major ones in particular, one was moving from the fourth to the fifth leaf, the other one was moving from the eighth to the ninth, and the last one was moving from twelfth to thirteenth.

The last chasm from twelfth to thirteenth was an educated guess on their part since to date no one has ever reached the thirteenth leaf, with the highest holder having reached touched on the doors of the ninth leaf but failed in the end, and the price for the failure was his cultivation got crippled in the process.

His ending was a testament to how perilous and huge the gap was. For Chen Zian before he made a leap for the fifth leaf, he had to make a lot of preparations for almost 300 years and even then it didn't feel like it was enough. It had taken him slightly 100 years to move from the first leaf to the fourth leaf but the attempt for the fifth leaf, just a single leaf had taken him 300 years and even then he barely made it through.

Because of the dangers involved in mastering each and every one of those leaves, ignoring the chasm stages, their ancestor's will allowed one to move from one leaf to the next upon reaching the minimum level of standard in grasping the insights within each and one of those leaves.

This meant there were different standards in the display of that art because of it, and what Chen Zholan showed was a move that only someone who had reached a major understanding of the four leaves could pull off. It was a technique that one would only access if they reached a certain level of understanding in those four leaves.

In the entire clan, counting Chen Zholan and Chen Xue, Chen Zian could only count four people who had mastered that art since. Of the remaining two, he was one of them while the last person was one of the supreme elders.

That showed how difficult the demands for mastering that technique were. When it came to him, the major part of the preparation he made for the fifth leaf was to master the four leaves into onetechnique, and of the 300 years it took him to prepare, he had spent close to 200 years mastering that technique.

When he did, it was well worth the hardship and pain he went through to master it as it was one of the impetuss to helping him master sword intent along with surviving the mastery of the fifth leaf. However, what he truly appreciated about it was its destructive force. Its power rivaled that of someone who had a basic mastery over the sixth leaf.

Just with that move alone, Chen Zian was confident of facing off against the two supreme elders who had not mastered it, despite both of them being at the quasi-palace stage.

"He mastered it.." he muttered with bitterness in his tone.

The bitterness wasn't out of envy that Chen Zholan had mastered it in a much shorter time frame than he did, but out of sorrow and deep regret for the loss to their clan in the loss of a true talent.

They managed to produce two talents in the same generation gifted enough to master the four leaves into one at such young ages.

He couldn't help but feel like he had eaten a fly as he imagined the future the Chen clan would have had with those two at the helm.

Earlier, he had bemoaned the loss of Chen Xue and wanted to murder Chen Zholan because he was the cause of it, but now, seeing the potential Chen Zholan showed, whatever anger he had was washed away, and all he had was a deep regret at the rot in their clan that it ended up pitting two stars against one another, and harbored clan members who would nurture pill slaves and human cauldrons just to get ahead.

At the rate things were going, the Golden Bamboo Pavilion or the other rising noble families wouldn't have to plot against them, they were already doing a fine job by themselves.

Chapter 864 Decay of the major families (2)

Chen Gutian's breathing grew fainter as his body seemed to be growing smaller as the muscles within his body rapidly shriveled. But even weakened he still remained standing his gaze trained on Chen Zholan with the same peaceful smile on his face.

"You seem happy?" asked Chen Zholan when he saw Chen Gutian's smile widen.

"I am..How can I not be? I faced off against the wall called talent and for the first time, I managed to measure up against it..." Chen Gutian weakly said as he laughed prompting him to cough up as he did so.

"But the greatest reason I am happy is I get to see Xue'er.." he added with a sense of peace and contentment in his tone.

Chen Zholan looked at him for some time as he saw Chen Xue appear next to Chen Gutian wearing the same smile Chen Gutian did.

With his eyes locked on Chen Xue, he couldn't help but let out a sigh, as the silhouette of that mature-looking Chen Xue overlapped with a ten-year-old Chen Xue that followed him around like his shadow.

"In the end, death cleanses all.." he muttered wistfully. The fear, self-loathing, and obsession that he had long made a permanent home in him had already vacated now that death's end was almost upon him.

He had barely mastered the four leaves into one technique, and to execute it he had to sacrifice something. He ended up shattering his core at the price. He no longer had his cultivation base. And for something that he had been obsessing with all his life to the point he manipulated and murdered for it, now that he lost it, he found it strange how calm and easygoing he was with its loss.

Chen Zholan let out another sigh as the silhouette of Chen Xue disappeared.

"When you see him, say hi to him for me. Tell him... I will be joining him soon enough. We can have a true spar then.." he said as he turned to face the weakened Chen Gutian whose eyes looked to be just at the cusp of dimming.

"I will.." Chen Gutian muttered as his hands let go of the sword he was holding while his body toppled forward. Chen Zholan stopped his fall as he caught him in the process and lay him gently on the floor, closing his eyes in the process.

After, he ended up sitting himself as he felt all strength leave his body, a consequence of his severely battered body and shattered core. He was prompted to look up when he saw a shadow over him.

"The blood debt duel of Chen Zholan against Chen Gutian is officially over with Chen Zholan as the winner.

The debt of the murder of Chen Xue is considered paid.." announced Yang Qing as he appeared next to Chen Zholan.

He pointed his index finger at Chen Zholan as a small green dew droplet filled with resplendent light was fired from his fingertip into Chen Zholan's body. Within moments all the injuries he had accrued were healed. Bones were reformed, muscles were sown back together, missing limbs reformed, and in just a few short seconds his body was unblemished and his aura stable, leaving Chen Zholan dumbfounded as he looked up at Yang Qing.

"You still have a sentence to serve. It would be careless of me if I let you die without serving it.." Yang Qing calmly said before he turned to face the rest of the spectating elders.

"With the duel officially over, your sentence begins. Senior Yu Gen, would you please?" Yang Qing said as he motioned for Yu Gen to have those elders transported to the requiem.

But before they could be taken away, one of the elders hesitantly spoke up,

"Could we say goodbye to him?"the elder said as he pointed to Chen Gutian's body.

Yang Qing nodded in agreement.

One by one the elders walked over to Chen Gutian's body bowing as they cupped their fists in respect until the last person was done after which Yu Gen left with them along with Chen Zholan who exchanged looks with Chen Zian as he was leaving, saying a word in the process.

"I am sorry, Clan Leader.."

"Do you regret it?" asked Chen Zian when they were shoulder to shoulder.

"Does it matter?" asked Chen Zholan as he walked away.

"Regret is a luxury for the living.." he added as he was teleported away by Yu Gen.

Chen Zian sighed at the response as he made his way to Chen Gutian's body to give his respects. He took a seat next to his body, taking out a jar of wine as he did so which he promptly began to drink out of.

"A toast to your glorious display, Uncle. Hope you can finally rest in the next life.." he said as he raised the jar of wine in toast.

Almost ten minutes passed by with him in that position with Yang Qing patiently waiting in the background. Once he was done, Yang Qing helped make arrangements to have Chen Gutian's body delivered to the Chen Clan estate.

Once everything was arranged, only then did he make his way back to the courtroom, finding Xia Ting, sipping on something in her bamboo cup. She had been absent at the duel as she was the one charged with transporting Song Ba to requiem for his sentence along with passing the information Song Ba had traded to the Shadow Hawks Division, on the location of the members of the Grim Scavengers, to verify the identities of those marked before the information is sent to the special inquisitors and the branch chief of the Yellow Plains Branch.

Yang Qing walked over to his podium and sat in silence soaking in the solemnness of the courtroom. Chen Gutian's matter had left him out of sorts, but as someone who had experienced such things time and time again, he quickly readjusted just in time as Yu Gen brought over the defendants for the next case, which was the Zhang family.

Yang Qing could only cross his fingers that there were not any unwelcome surprises with them like it did with the Chen Clan's case. If he was being honest, one Chen Gutian was enough and he had just about had enough of his fill for the day, no matter how well readjusted he was.

Chapter 865: Decay of the major families (3)

As Yu Gen was walking in, he was followed by nine individuals dressed in black robes. Eight of the nine individuals looked young. They looked to be between their mid-twenties and early thirties, with only one of them looking slightly older, in his late forties.

Despite not meaning to, each one of them radiated with a palpable air of slaughter, but despite its denseness, their eyes and temperaments were tranquil and still. The erraticness and blood lust that one would expect from those with such a dense slaughter aura was absent in them. They looked like perfectly sheathed blades of slaughter.

They walked silently to the center of the courtroom, with measured steps, and lined up, which seemed to be by design as the one with the weakest cultivation base was to the far left and the one with the strongest cultivation base, which was the middle-aged man ended the group to the right.

They were all in the core formation realm, with the weakest being in the third stage of the core formation realm, while those in the middle were all between the fourth and sixth stage of the core formation realm.

The middle-aged man, the strongest of the group, was a quasi-palace stage expert, and among them, his slaughter aura seemed to be the lightest, almost nigh imperceptible. For someone who wasn't at the palace realm, they would be unable to detect it.

To them, the middle-aged man looked no different than a scholar who liked enjoying his tea and reading scrolls. He was thin and had a scholarly air about him that accompanied the genial gentleness in his eyes, but behind that face, Yang Qing could see a thick black red mist that clung to his body like a cloak.

That black-red mist had the metallic scent of blood, and even though it seemed harmless, just a tiny portion of it would reduce the weakest group member of the group, the third-stage core formation expert into a bloody pulp within seconds.

Yang Qing nodded in gratitude to Yu Gen before he resumed the long adage routine and speech he had given countless times before which explained the rules of the court, what was expected of those present, and the repercussions should any one of those present be found in violation of the rules of conduct within the courtroom.

After he was done, the middle-aged man looked like he had something to say, so Yang Qing allowed him to do so before he laid out the charges.

The middle-aged man cupped his fists toward Yang Qing as a show of greeting, gratitude, and apology for his interruption.

"Forgive my rudeness my name is Zhang Guiren and I am the high elder of the Zhang Clan. I offer my apologies on behalf of our Clan Leader, Zhang Biwu. He would have liked to be here for the case, but he is the current general in charge of manning one of the border regions that we share with the Five Clovers Kingdom.

Considering the tense state of affairs between our two nations and the vital role our clan leader occupies, it would prove difficult to have him here on short notice. However, he has been apprised of everything and I have been mandated to act as his proxy both in presence and in whatever the court might ask of him.

My words and actions are his..." said Zhang Guiren as he performed another short bow.

"Thank you, High Elder Zhang Guiren for the explanation, and though the presence of the clan leader is usually appreciated, provided they're not the one on trial, their presence here is not obligatory and their absence would not reflect poorly on the court or affect our judgment on the matter.

The court understands absences are absent, and we appreciate your consideration and courtesy.." Yang Qing said as he cupped his fists too.

"Now, let's move on to the main matter..." Yang Qing said as he turned to face the young Zhang Clan members whose faces and demeanor were completely different from that of the Chen clan elders.

Despite the Chen clan elders being older and with higher cultivation bases, in terms of presence and in how they carried themselves, they were completely different from the eight Zhang clan members before him.

The Chen clan elders had been frantic, and unnerved from the moment they stepped into the courtroom. Anyone could tell they were extremely afraid, but that was not the case with the eight Zhang clan members before him. They were completely unperturbed with zero fluctuations in their emotions. They looked more like soldiers calmly awaiting their instructions from their commander.

Their demeanor wasn't all too surprising considering the clan they belonged to. The Zhang clan was a militaristic clan. They had made their bones in war. Their founder, Zhang Ren had been dubbed the mad bull spear of the empire, aptly named so because of the cultivation art he cultivated and how he was at the forefront of expanding their territories when they had just formed.

With his cultivation art, the raving crimson bull of slaughter, a spear art, he spread destruction and fear to all who were unlucky enough to be the target of his spear. The art was a blue-grade art, and just like the rest founding families, it was something handed to him by the red maple spirit.

The art was a slaughter-based art, and thus its users could only gain a deeper understanding of it by engaging in combat. It honed and refined the aura of slaughter to a pure form and based on the sense of calm the Zhang clan members were showing, Yang Qing guessed the art had aspects to it that strengthened the spirit of its users so they could maintain their rationality even when having such a dense baleful qi of slaughter around them.

Because of their founder and the nature of their core cultivation art, the Zhang Clan out of all the other clans always contributed the largest number of experts whenever the Red Maple Empire was embroiled in war, that fact remained true back then when the Empire was just starting and it remained the same now in their war against the Five Clover Kingdom. No one contributed more numbers to that war effort than the Zhang Clan. The battleground was their true home.

They barely had any influence synonymous with a founding clan within their territory, but at the borders where war was waged, that was their true domain.

Chapter 866 Decay of the major families (4)

To the Zhang clan, as long as you were strong enough to throw a fist, you were old enough to be on the battlefield.

From the record Yang Qing saw, they had a few six-year-olds who joined the battle fronts a few years back. At six years old he was busy thinking of ways to give his grandfather and the other elders diarrhea while the Zhang clan had six-year-olds joining a battlefront with another kingdom. A battleground filled with hardened killers, where even being a veteran of war counted for nothing as you could easily die in the next second same as a rookie.

The calm state the eight were showing was only to be expected. One of the instructors who had been involved in the large-scale wars that the Order had been in in the early years after it was founded, back then he had been a measly early-stage core formation expert fighting against countless enemies both hidden and open.

Night and day, he was in never-ending combat and the only way he managed to maintain his sanity through it all was by considering his life already forfeit throughout the whole period.

"Live as the dead, and you will thrive with the dead.."?he always said. Yang Qing had a feeling the eight Zhang clan members had the same thoughts too. They already counted themselves among the dead on the battlefield and being here in the courtroom, it was just another battlefield to them, just wearing a different name and setting, but the stakes were all the same.

Since the moment they were born, they must have already been raised to consider their lives forfeit and have lived that way ever since. Why should they cower now?

..

Pushing his thoughts aside, Yang Qing went on with the case.

"Zhang Li, Zhang Wen, Zhang Dou, Zhang Xi, Zhang Wang, Zhang Luo, Zhang Wei, and Zhang Lixuang, you both stand accused of engaging in taboo matters that violet the charter on cultivation society conduct.

The taboo matter you are accused of engaging in is the practice of blood fiend arts. We have multiple witness account testimonies that attest to it. How you have been consuming the blood essence of your opponents to grow your strength.

At the discretion of those witnesses, I will be replaying their accounts. They will not be giving it in person, as they were afraid of reprisal after.

In addition, I have with me here a 36-petal sentinel sacred flame orchid and heaven light opal..." Yang Qing said as he presented two objects in the palms of both his hands.

One of those objects was encased in a transparent crystal rectangular jade box. Within that jade box was a single stalk orchid which from stalk to the petals was pristine white with a resplendent wavy light of gold mixed within. Even encased, one could feel the overwhelming energy of purity that emanated from it.

On his left palm was also another object whose presence and look was just as transcendent and ephemeral as the orchid. The object on Yang Qing's hand was an opal that was deep blue with mots of stars swirling within it. Looking at it, gave one the illusion that Yang Qing was holding a portion of the

night sky in his palm. Even though the opal was the size of a mango, it contained the expansive presence of a full night sky. It looked like it could stretch for millions and millions of kilometers.

Both objects were ascendant-grade treasures that had been loaned to him for purposes of the case by the internal logistics department. They could sniff out even a tiny smidge of the presence of blood fiend arts on someone.

Both treasures could forcibly draw out the essence of blood-

fiend arts out of those who practiced them. The 36 petal sentinel orchid ignited in a sacred flame whenever a blood fiend cultivator was close and the number of petals ignited will be in respect to the concentration of blood fiend essence in said cultivator.

From what Yang Qing knew of the flower, igniting 16 petals and above meant one had consumed the blood essence of at least a million people. The tenth finger of the scarlet blood ghost hands syndicate had ignited 22 petals when he was tested.

When it came to the heaven light opal, when in the presence of a blood fiend cultivator, the opal would transform into a dim red color as the stars transform into red lightning whose shade of color will get darker and thicker depending on how dense the blood essence is on the blood fiend cultivator.

If it's extreme, like that of the tenth finger, the opal would detonate and transform into a blood-red cloud with a black-red lightning brewing within it that contained the same calamitous power as a tribulation lightning. From what Yang Qing had heard, that lightning contained the same lethality as the tribulation lightning of breaking through to the soul formation realm.

Despite the inherent risks paused by those two treasures on blood fiend cultivators, Yang Qing dared take them out because they were the best at exposing them, and it also wasn't that lethal to those with a low concentration of the blood fiend essence, which was the case with the eight Zhang clan members.

Even without using both treasures, Yang Qing's yin yang nature jade physique granted him the same ability as those treasures. Be it blood fiend cultivators, corpse cultivators, or poison cultivators, he could always sniff them out just as easily and even their levels were something he intrinsically knew. He had a natural sensitivity to the aspects of life, and he was especially sensitive to things that profaned it.

The slaughter cloak surrounding the eight clan members was different from that of Zhang Guiren, in that the latter was purer, it was in line with the great order of the world but for the former, theirs was impure and that impurity was brought by the fiend arts they practiced. But despite the eight practicing the art, the impure concentration wasn't a lot.

If Yang Qing were to guess, they had at most 100 bodies on each of them or less. That number was significantly less than what he would normally find on most blood-fiend cultivators. Their number was low, especially when one considered the eight clan members lived on a battlefield where they had countless opportunities to raise that figure.

Chapter 867 Decay of the major families (5)

Once he was done, Yang Qing went for the jade slips that were lined on his podium. They contained the testimonies of those who had witnessed what the eight Zhang clansmen before him had done.

Unsurprisingly, those witnesses were all fellow soldiers, some even being their fellow clansmen. It was thanks to the efforts and close relation that some of the inquisitors of the Yellow Plains Branch had with those soldiers that they were willing to divulge such information.

If it wasn't that relation, they would have likely taken what they knew to the grave. However, their cooperation only went as far as written statements on the events they witnessed. Real-live testimonies were out of the equation for them. They still hoped to continue their duties at the border, and if it got out they reported their colleagues or clansmen for some, to the Order, they would never be trusted.

In extreme cases, if word of it got out, with a place as chaotic as a battlefield, arranging their early demise would not be a difficult thing, and in the best-case scenario, they would get banished and shunned for life. They could forget life as they knew it.

The Order had no choice but to accept the written testimonies as enough but luckily for them, they had the two ascendant-grade treasures meant for sniffing out blood fiend cultivators. They didn't need those testimonies that much to verify that fact, the ascendant grade treasures were enough by themselves, the testimonies were just formality and courtesy. The testimonies were just there to establish cause for suspicion and the test that would follow after.

Just as Yang Qing was about to start to replay the contents of the jade slips, Zhang Guiren interrupted politely.

"Pardon my interruption again, Judge Yang Qing, If I may speak?"

Yang Qing curious about what Zhang Guiren had to say, answered,

"You may."

"Our clan has many shortcomings, we are far from perfect, even though they're most within the empire who would dub us heroes. We know ourselves, we are not that, if current circumstances are any indicator.

However, for all our flaws, there's one thing we are not, and that is cowards who shirk away from their responsibility.." Zhang Guiren said with a firmness in his tone.

"None of them is here to refute the charges against them. They are willing to plead their guilt and accept the charges against them. There's no need to present the testimonies or verify whether they cultivated blood fiend arts or not. They know what they did and are willing to confess and accept the consequences of their actions.

There's no need to waste the court's valuable time. They accept the charges and whatever punishment the court deems befitting of their actions, they will accept that too, and on behalf of the Zhang family, we will accept it too.." Zhang Guiren added with a solemn expression.

"Is that what you want?" asked Yang Qing, his question addressed to the eight clan members.

The eight who remained indifferent the entire time exchanged looks with one another as they nodded toward the clan member that had the highest cultivation base amongst them. He was at the sixth stage of the core formation realm. Their eyes seemed to communicate something as they addressed that clan member, who nodded before he stepped forward.

"Our vice clan leader is right, as Zhang clan members we will not shirk our responsibility. We willingly admit our guilt in the matter, but before you sentence us, could I say a few words.." said that sixth stage core formation expert whose tone was completely unlike one would expect from someone who had lived their lives on the battlefield reaping the lives of others. His tone had a graceful peacefulness to it and contained a hidden strength that made others feel a sense of reassurance.

"If it wasn't for him turning to blood fiend arts, just based on the strength of his soul alone, he would have walked far on the path of slaughter without fear of having his mind go berserk.." thought Yang Qing as his gaze fell on that sixth stage core formation expert.

He looked to be in his late twenties, with long flowing black hair and matching eyes, that contained strength, and tranquility within them. Of the eight, he had the least taint to the baleful slaughter qi around his body, and in terms of aura, his was the one that was closest to Zhang Guiren, with how concealed his slaughter qi was, even with the irascible nature of the tainted blood qi added to his slaughter qi, he managed to contain the volatile nature of both, well. No doubt, thanks to his powerful soul.

Yang Qing saw a look of pity followed by anger flash in Zhang Guiren's eyes, just before he spoke up.

"Zhang Su! Haven't you shamed the clan enough? Do you still intend to drag us through the mud and squabble? Cultivating those fiend arts not only muddled your head but also your spirit.

Be silent and calmly accept your punishment. Do not disgrace yourself, your men, and your clan any further..."

Zhang Guiren's tone was even-tempered, not showing the anger that was boiling within, but hearing him speak, was no different than a blade of slaughter gaining the ability to talk. The intent within was capable of causing an early-stage core formation expert to immediately start bleeding from every orifice, but Zhang Su, the sixth-stage core formation expert, who was the target of it, seemed entirely unaffected, even taking the time to peacefully maintain eye contact with Zhang Guiren.

"Every action I have ever taken vice clan leader, has always been with the clan in mind. I am not afraid of death, nor do I have the intention of avoiding it either, if that's what must happen.

I am not pleading my case but rather speaking up for my men, as their leader, it is what I should do as my final act..."

Zhang Su paused briefly before finally saying.

"I love the clan, vice clan leader, we all do.."

Zhang Guiren looked at him briefly, his eyes flashing with the same look of pity he had before. He sighed as he said.

"Fine, do as you will.."

"Thank you, vice clan leader.."

Chapter 868 Decay of the major families (6)

Yang Qing slightly raised his eyebrow when he saw the eight Zhang clan members show emotion, and it was one of relief when Zhang Guiren acquiesced to whatever Zhang Su wanted to say.

"First of all, just like I've just told our vice clan leader, whatever punishment the court deems fit, we wholeheartedly accept.

We all knew what we were doing, and we didn't necessarily go to great lengths to hide it either, otherwise, there'd have been no witnesses if we were looking to hide it.

I say this with utmost sincerity if the war with the Five Clover Kingdom ended today or even tomorrow, or whenever it ended, we would have voluntarily turned ourselves in.

I don't excuse what we did, but what we did, we did out of necessity.." Zhang Su calmly said.

"Judge, can I ask you something?"

"You can.."

"Why do you cultivate? To you what do you think the purpose of cultivation in its whole, especially when it comes to cultivation arts?"

"You want my personal opinion on the matter?"

"Yes, I would..."

"For me, it would be..." Yang Qing paused as he held his chin, his eyes and mind seemingly going elsewhere before clarity colored the eyes again.

"For me, it would be to live, and if I was to boil it down, it would be survival..." Yang Qing said as the memory of his younger years flashed in his mind when he was desperately clinging to dear life trying to survive his grandfather's experience, and later when he joined the Order, it was to survive the fiendish instructors, and presently it was surviving the storms raging outside the Order, within the Order, and within himself.

At the core of it, what fueled him was the desperation to survive.

Zhang Su was slightly surprised by Yang Qing's response which prompted him to smile as he nodded.

"The Order is embroiled in a bigger battlefield, of course, our thoughts would align..." Zhang Su said softly.

"I happen to think so too. However, for me and my brothers..." Zhang Su paused as he pointed to the seven clan members behind him.

"Our survival is hinged on murder. Another person needs to die for us to live, and for me, cultivation is nothing but another tool to ensure just that. It's a tool for murder... which is how I managed to rationalize using blood fiend arts..." he said with a wry smile.

"After all, our core art thrives in a field of slaughter, would using blood fiend arts be any different? We were using it on our enemies, not innocents. We were using it on those who would kill us.

Surely it's not wrong if I used it that way, right? They were all questions we asked ourselves to make what we were doing, okay and if I'm being honest, some part of me doesn't regret using it either..." Zhang Su said with a sincere smile on his face.

"The Zhang family, the spear of the Red Maple Empire, the river that separates the Empire from the terrors that lie on the other side, is what most within the Empire sing about us, and for us who came from such a clan... when we are small, all we do is obsess, fantasize, and romanticize about the day we too will get to step up on that stage and uphold the honor of the clan and have our exploits sung throughout the empire.

For us, there is no greater honor than being a Zhang family member on the front lines of war. When you're small, you don't think about the demands of war, all you think about is the glory it brings, it's only when you're there, in the thick of it, is when you see the side that those bards don't sing about, the ruthlessness of it.

There are seniors from the clan who talk to us about the seriousness of war, and touch on what it would demand of you, but when you're so young, who listens? We are all indomitable heroes and immortals in our stories, up until the absolute slap of reality smacks in the face and opens our eyes.

War takes a lot from you, even if you're prepared, and even living on the battlefield for years on end, doesn't take away the sting one feels when war collects its dues..." Zhang Su paused to rub his forehead, as a melancholic sigh escaped his lips.

"I've been there for sixteen years, and even now I've never been able to stomach seeing many of my clansmen die at the blade of the enemy.

Each loss cuts deeper, and it's even worse now..."

Flames of fury burned in his eyes as he clenched his fist.

"The Empire that we bleed and die for, the empire that countless Zhang clan members have given their lives to protect for thousands of years, is no more than a rotting corpse filled with greedy worms looking to tear each other up.

While we are at the border fighting, dying by the hundreds almost every other day, our fellow countrymen are busy squabbling with each other, letting their greed for power lead them, trying to devour each other at every turn, ignoring the fact that what they are doing is no different than a pig serving itself up to a pack of wolves.

They've completely ignored the wolf that is already at our doorstep, waiting to lunge at us and devour us whole.

Whatever is happening at the border, leave it for those brute bloodthirsty Zhangs to handle, they murmur in contempt..." Zhang Su paused as he took a deep breath to calm the erupting emotions raging within him, his emotions mirrored by his fellow clansmen who looked to be seething in anger too.

"We are continually paying the price for the Empire's greed, selfishness, and foolishness. Our cultivation base thrives in war but it doesn't mean we want to live there forever. I don't want to stay constantly surrounded by the death of my relatives and clan members, but that is what the so-called Red Maple Empire has consigned us to.

Before when the war started, the entire empire rallied as one united force and bared its fangs against its enemies, but now,.. but now those fangs are turned to each other.

The war would not have lasted this long had the Empire acted collectively and not entirely left the burden to us. The Five Clovers Kingdom even with the support of the Zou family would have never been able to gain the ground it did, as fast as it did, if we didn't give them the opportunity to, when we let our greed dictate our actions.

But look where we are now, struggling to maintain a stalemate with a kingdom we would have conquered years ago if only we did what we were supposed to.

The Chen Clan, a clan born from a peerless swordsman hides within its walls as they fight amongst themselves, instead of baring their edge against the empire's enemy. No wonder their sword hearts have rust, and are now moving to alchemy.

The Gui clan no longer supplies the potions needed for the war front, instead choosing instead to sell their wares to the highest bidders to rapidly amass their wealth and influence. They're more merchants than alchemists now, and it surprises them why they have never produced a blue-grade alchemist to date. If we all die out, and the border is lost, will they even be able to protect that wealth they are hoarding?

The Mo Clan spending all its time and effort trying to compete with the Duan Royal family for dominance and heritage, instead of trying to establish their prestige at the border.

The Gong family....they are the only ones who remained uninvolved in the rot, and while they still support the borders with armaments they provide, with the way the wind is blowing and how they have been distancing themselves from the other families including the royal families, I wouldn't be surprised if some time tomorrow there is news of them leaving the Red Maple Empire for good..."Zhang Su paused to relax his tense body as his presence turned tranquil.

"The Empire isn't called the Zhang Empire, but we are the ones bleeding for it. I stopped fighting for that empire a long time ago and started fighting to ensure my clan members don't die for that dying tree.

Left with no other option, we turned to blood-fiend arts. We didn't do it so we could grow our strength, we only did it because it was the only option in front of us that would help us protect our fellow clansmen.

It is why in as much as I feel sad for bringing the shame of being a blood fiend cultivator to my clan, I don't regret it. I would rather be a villain and ensure my clan members don't die a thankless death in that place.

Neither do they. Thank you for your time. I needed to explain why we did what we did and we gladly accept the punishment deserved for our acts. Be it death or any other form, we willingly accept it.." Zhang Su said as he solemnly cupped his fists.

Chapter 869 Decay of the major families (7)

Zhang Guiren sighed lightly as his gaze seemed to wander elsewhere.

"Maybe we should start acting a little selfishly, otherwise.." on reaching here he paused his thoughts slightly as a melancholic gaze fell on Zhang Su before it inadvertently fell on the other clan members. In his sight, their faces kept changing as they overlapped with the faces of other Zhang Clan members he had seen die over the years from the moment he was a youth just like them, fresh on the battlefield, to now when he was an aged senior of the clan.

He let out another exasperated sigh as a number flashed in his mind. It was one of the few things he never liked about his growing cultivation realm. Cultivators had superior memories which only became more absurd the further up the realms they moved.

At his realm, as a quasi-palace stage cultivator, he could remember with perfect recall even the sensation of what it was like to be in his mother's womb from the moment he gained sentience. He could also remember what the weather was like the day he was born, how many people were there, who they were, what they smelled and looked like, and what their reactions were like.

Every single sense from sight, to smell, to sound, to touch and taste, he could feel it with vivid detail and clarity as though it happened just a few seconds ago even though he all this happened 840 years ago.

From the moment he broke through to the core formation realm, he could remember things that happened to him when he was younger with such vividness that to him, it was no different than being there. That sense of sharpness even extended to inane and casual moments in life. Any single thing or person that came across his sight even just once, he would never be able to forget it or them, even if his interaction with them was a passing glance, or it happened over a hundred years back, he would remember it just the same as he would, something very important to him.

Looking at Zhang Su and the rest, all the deaths he had seen of his fellow clansmen came flooding back, every single face, and their last moments, and what that tally had added up to the current date.

Zhang Su and the other seven clan members were not isolated in their thinking and in what they felt. Their sentiment was something that was felt by most within the clan be they old or young. Provided they have stayed at the battlefield long enough, they would have the same misgivings.

The rot of the Empire had spread all the way to the border and their clan, despite not being involved in the decay, had been affected by it, and the price for that was the death of hundreds of Zhang clan members.

The higher-ups of the clan have been debating for almost a thousand years if they should just pack it up and leave. Zhang Su was right, be it him, or elders of the clan of the same stature as him, they had long seized fighting for the Empire. They were all fighting to ensure they had as few casualties as possible among their clan members, to the point that their clan leader, the only palace realm cultivator their clan had was constantly stationed at the border to the point that he couldn't afford to leave and come here for the case.

If he left, who knows the damage they would suffer as a consequence of it? Being the largest contributors to the war against the Five Clovers Kingdom left them praised within the territories of the Red Maple Empire, however, outside of it, a completely different tune was sung. The Five Clovers Kingdom absolutely hated their guts.

No one has killed as many cultivators from their kingdom as the Zhang Clan has to the point that Zhang Guiren sometimes wondered whether the kingdom fought so hard, was it to reclaim the territory they lost to them all those years back or was it to erase every Zhang clan member and pay back the blood debt?

It was likely both. Countless assassination attempts had been made on their key clan members both at the border and at the center of the empire. Another reason most of the Zhang clan members had long lost any sentimental attachment to the Red Maple Empire. Some of the assassination attempts conducted within the confines of the Empire were done with the assistance of some of the nobles, and the despicable part was that it wasn't even the newly ambitious noble families who conspired with those assassins, but the founding families.

Both within the Empire and at the border, nowhere was truly safe for them but at least at the border, they had each other. Feared and plotted against by their own nation, and hated by their enemy.

If he was asked who he feared the most out of the two, he wouldn't have an answer to it.

At this point, what kept them at the border was to honor the spirit of their ancestor Zhang Ren, and try to live up to the reputation he built. But even then with the way things were shaping up, honoring their ancestor would cease to be a motivating factor for them.

Speaking for himself, he was among those who had long grown tired of upholding that honor and if he was being perfectly honest some part of him resented his ancestor for it, especially when he learned part of the reason their ancestor fought so fiercely. Their ancestor fought so passionately because he was lovestruck and his target of affection was none other than the first empress, Duan Qui.

Sadly, it was an unrequited love, as the first empress had eyes for someone else, but their ancestor, unwilling to give up, showed his undying affection by using the one thing he was good at, fighting, and when that wasn't enough, he dragged his family to it.

Zhang Guiren, unlike his ancestor, cared more for his clan than the Duan royal family.

"Maybe it is time for us to leave this arena. We have already paid enough. The only problem is, will the Empire let us? Will the Five Clover Kingdom?" Zhang Guiren thought as his eyes flashed with worry and frustration at how stuck they were.

As Zhang Guiren was undergoing his internal turmoil, Yang Qing had overcome his as he was deciding what sentence was suitable for the eight Zhang clan members.

The circumstances surrounding them were not black and white. They had not used the blood fiend art a lot despite being on a battlefield. The reason for doing it was also another factor, with it being to protect each other's lives and there was also the fact that they used the art on foes who they were fighting to the death with and not some unrelated innocent victim.

But ultimately, blood fiend cultivation was taboo. No matter the reason, it could not be tolerated, if it was, the implications would be devastating. The chaos and destruction that blood fiend cultivators could cause if left unimpeded was something even the indifferent holy lands would not stand idly by and let happen, and as the watchdogs of the continent, it was especially so for the Order.

Once Zhang Su had rejoined his group, Yang Qing brought his palms together, with a solemn aura radiating from his body.

"The art you used, where did you get it from?" asked Yang Qing.

"We pilfered it from the corpse of one of the cultivators from Five Clovers Kingdom we had defeated. His name was Liu Gu from the Liu family of the kingdom, which is one of their major families, and Liu Gu was the grandson of one of their supreme elders.

I don't know where he found it, but what I do know was it was thanks to it that he had killed so many of my clansmen, and even after we cornered him, despite him being at the same level as me, it still took the eight of us working together to defeat him.." answered Zhang Su.

"You didn't come with that art, did you?" asked Yang Qing, though he already knew the answer to the question.

Smiling wryly, Zhang Su said, "After we had grasped the fundamentals, to avoid being tempted to cultivate it even deeper, we burned it and forcibly erased the memories of the latter parts.."

"After this, there will be someone assigned to you. You can share with him what you know about the art and that Liu Gu.."

Zhang Su cupped his fist as he nodded in acknowledgment.

"Thank you for your cooperation in advance. Now for the crime of practicing blood fiend arts, no matter the reason, all eight of you are guilty of it. While I do sympathize with the situation you were put in, a punishment must be given for what you have done. Now I have two options for you..." Yang Qing said as he leaned forward.

"You have two choices of sentence to choose from. One of the options is, I sentence you to a lifetime imprisonment in leaned forward.

"You have two choices of sentence to choose from. One of the Requiem where you will be locked until your last breath. You will never see the light of day, but you will live out the rest of yours afforded to you by your cultivation realms.

You can continue your cultivation, though it will be severely restricted, but when it comes to meditation there will be none.

To reiterate, the sentence is for life, so even if you somehow break through to a higher realm and your lifespan increases, the length of your imprisonment isn't firmly fixed on your present lifespan, but it is attached to your life in its entirety, whatever it may be now or in the future. You will be locked up in Requiem prison for all your days.

The other option is to face a treasure called the heavenly inquisition sword and undergo its judgment for 100 years. It will judge the weight of your crimes against your hearts..."

On reaching here, Yang Qing paused briefly as his gaze turned serious.

"Those 100 years will not be easy and there is a high chance you may lose your lives in the process, but if your hearts are clear and your willpower strong, you may survive it.

If you do, you may have a chance at some freedom. While you can never go back to the Zhang Clan, or go back to your lives as it was, you have a chance at a different life. If you survive the judgment of the sword, you have the opportunity to work for the Order on the various rehabilitation and restoration projects we have all around the continent.

So which option do you want?"

The eight clan members looked at each other in surprise before they smiled a second later as one of them said,

"Leader, would you please.."

"You're sure?"

"We are from the Zhang clan!" they answered in unison.

Their response left Zhang Su and Zhang Guiren smiling.

"We choose the second option.." Zhang Su answered without hesitation.

Chapter 870 Decay Of The Major Families (8)

"Thank you very much for your mercy."

After the delivery of the sentence and the choice made by the Zhang clan juniors, Zhang Guiren filled with emotion, cupped his fists at Yang Qing as he thanked him. Even though he had already prepared himself for their death as was expected for any matter with ties to blood fiend cultivation, even if they still had the potential of dying to the Heavenly inquisition sword, they at least had a chance at surviving it.

Just that chance alone was more than he could have hoped for. Despite spending over 500 years on the battlefield and seeing countless of his clansmen die, he never quite got used to it. It still cut deep every time he saw it happen. He was glad that the tally he had in his head would not be added to today.

The vice clan master and the eight clan members were given a brief moment to say their goodbyes. For warriors who had lived their entire lives on a battlefield, their goodbye went as much as Yang Qing had expected. No words were exchanged, they just nodded at one another, letting their gazes and bows convey whatever message they wanted to trade with one another.

With the goodbyes done, it was Xia Ting's turn. She had been the one put in charge of sending those charged to where they needed to be taken after their sentence had been administered.

Yang Qing and Yu Gen took a small break which Yang Qing used to do some house cleaning which was just basically him sending the recordings of the proceedings to the spirit council and the Judicial Review Committee.

Only when he was finally done did he motion for Yu Gen to bring in the participants of the next case which was the Gui Family, another one of the founding major families.

Unlike the first two founding families with combat-based backgrounds, the Chen Clan being sword cultivators, and the Zhang Clan following the path of slaughter like their ancestor, the Gui family rose from alchemy.

Their ancestor and founder, Gui Ling, during her life, was a blue-grade alchemist, and her talents were one of the key factors to why the Red Maple Empire had managed to expand so fast. Even though she wasn't a combatant, her alchemy skills were just as lethal.

Alchemists were highly sought after wherever they were, especially the established and skilled ones. A top tier orange grade alchemist with a cultivation base that was at the early stages of the core formation realm would be able to gain an audience with a palace realm expert than a no-name cultivator with quasi-palace stage strength.

They were just that valued. They were called creators and miracle workers in certain circles as they were able to do the extraordinary and unimaginable through a pill or a potion. They were able to transform dung into gold. Some no-name herb that was treated as a weed somewhere in their hands could be

transformed into a potion that could pull someone from the grip of death, or to another it would give them the chance to change their fates and ascend to heights they never thought possible.

The things they could achieve made them as precious as dao treasures to cultivators. Cultivators would do anything to gain their services, which made alchemy one of the best professions one wanted to get into if they wanted to be rich and or make tonnes of connections.

Provided you were a decent alchemist, a lot of doors would be opened to you. If Yang Qing had not been scarred by his clan to the point he would have faint tremors and mild panic attacks every time he was near a cauldron, he would have tried his hand at it and with the affinity his physique afforded him with various elements of nature, he had a feeling he would have been really good at it.

But alas, alchemy was a subject that required great concentration, even if one had a powerful soul. He could never quite concentrate long enough to actually successfully brew a potion. Every time he stirred the mixtures he would see the greedy crazy eyes of his grandfather and the other elders within the brew, which would always send him in a frenzy as he tried to exorcise those 'impurities' with his more than energized Yang flames.

After destroying a few cauldrons, Yang Qing gave up on it, reluctantly, though he did get back to it once he had a great handle on his emotions, but by the time he did, he had already found something else he was truly interested in and could not give alchemy the time it needed.

Though he doesn't regret jumping into archeology or studying the dissection and evolution of cultivation arts, especially the lost arts, some part of him, usually whenever he was low on funds, has always wistfully thought on the path not taken. What it would have been like if he had gone the alchemy route.

Some part of him envied that ability of theirs to brew wonder and fantasy with just a ladle, a flame, some ingredients, and a cauldron, and the ripple effect the things they created had in the world around them, and the pull they had because of it and it was those abilities that pushed the Red Maple Empire and the Gui clan to the heights they reached.

Red Maple Empire whose core territory once belonged to a powerful spiritual plant in the red maple spirit tree was a paradise to alchemists and herbologists alike because of the numerous and rare spiritual herbs and plants that grew in the area due to the red maple spirit's presence, and the dense wood energy it released along with the amplified and refined spiritual qi that promoted their growth and quality.

A competent alchemist would thrive in the area, and Gui Ling did just that when she became a blue-grade alchemist, and from it, the Red Maple Empire which was just a tiny bud, had enough capital to instantly bloom into a full-blown tree. A blue-grade alchemist could maximize their strengths by making full use of the strengths of their territory, i.e. the dense spiritual herbs, and because she was a blue-grade alchemist, countless cultivators joined up so they could gain her favor.

Bar the founding families, a good chunk of the noble families around the empire, those who joined up at the start, did so because of Gui Ling, a favor that extended well past her death, as presently, the Gui clan despite not producing another blue grade alchemist still held as much sway as the royal family, be it with the noble families or the regular folks, and even in terms of wealth, they were neck and neck with the royal family.

But Zhang Su had been right.