

## Daily life 891

### Chapter 891 Two Arrivals At Dawn

"With her temperament, if she had a better background, there is no doubt that her heights would have definitely exceeded mine.." Wu Mingli thought as his gaze fell on his mother before a resolute glint flashed in his eyes.

"Master did say there are treasures capable of doing stupendous things to the point of even undoing past mistakes. There is no lack of treasures capable of reforming and transforming one's body. The only issue is their rarity.

Once I reach the palace realm, opportunities to find those treasures will grow. Soon enough I will be able to repay you a fraction of all you have given me.." Wu Mingli thought as he gently looked at his mother.

While her circumstances were not as bad as his father's who was born in some village in some wilderness somewhere, his mother was born in the first town his father got stationed at as a garrison guard. While the town was moderately better than the village his father grew up in, it wasn't by much.

The town was a border town, and not highly populated or invested like the towns closer to the center of the Empire were. In loose terms, one could consider it a high-ranking village with a little bit of infrastructure and the Empire's influence on it.

Her mother was born there, to a father who was a blacksmith that made unranked weapons, and her mother was a semester. None of them ever cultivated past the qi refinement realm, and in terms of means, they didn't have the ability or know-how to provide their daughter with ample cultivation resources and guidance.

Just like his father, she ended up with flawed foundations too that hampered her journey forward. Had it not been for Wu Mingli's current station, she would have likely halted at the foundation establishment realm just like his father.

However, even with the countless resources, whatever was currently available to him could at most help her reach the middle stages of the core formation realm. Anything past that would prove almost impossible. His only option now was to search for those treasures that could mend those flaws or give her a chance to undo them.

But treasures that were capable of doing such a thing, at the very least were dao treasures. This meant they were difficult to get for a quasi-palace stage expert, and even if he broke through, the degree of difficulty may lessen slightly but it would still be there.

No matter the degree of difficulty, Wu Mingli had resolved himself to do whatever it took to get them. If being a palace stage cultivator wasn't enough then he would try for the domain realm.

Because of her improved cultivation realm, his mother could now live for at least another 3,500 years. If it took him 252 years to reach the quasi-palace stage, he hoped 3,500 years would be more than enough time for him to make that attempt to reach the domain. He was under no illusions about the enormity of the task, but he had to do it somehow.

Cultivators were blessed with enormous lifespans which could be a blessing or a curse, depending on how one looked at it. He didn't cultivate this hard all so he could end up alone.

If you had the strength to bring those that mattered to you to rise those heights with you, why wouldn't you do it?

Most said cultivating was defying the heavens, but was it? He always felt that was an erroneous thought somehow.

To him, cultivating was just another aspect of living. Cultivation was like a mirror and guiding light at the same time. It helped reflect what was in your heart and at the same time it helped illuminate doubts and expand your understanding of oneself through extrapolation of what was around you and within you.

Its goal wasn't to make one detached from all life but to sensitize and integrate one to all forms it takes and for him, his mother was a huge part of his and he would do everything to ensure it.

Whatever aspirations he had, none of it made any sense to him without his mother there, but first, he had to sort out some matters, one of which was to give his father a proper send-off as a dutiful son should, something he had not been able to do back then.

Pulling his thoughts back, Wu Mingli continued with his testimony.

"The night passed without incident. If I knew it would have been our last, I would have savored it more because when morning came, our lives as we knew it, got upended. Just when dawn hit, there were two people already at our door.

One of them was the captain of the Spring Plum city guards, and the other was the overall commander of all the city guards who handled the territories that were directly under the control of the royal family.

Both the captain and the commander were descendants of the Duan royal family and as for the reason why such an impressive lineup was at the doors of some foundation establishment city guard that early in the morning, it was to take my father in custody, though that was not how they put it back then..." Wu Mingli paused to contain himself.

That morning was the last time he ever saw his father.

"When they came they said they were there to confirm the version of events from my father and confirm a few details because of the sensitivity of the matter. At the time, I didn't think to question the absurdity of it.

There were countless witnesses there, over hundreds of them saw what Ding Xiaoli did, and what happened after. There was no need to come that early in the morning just to confirm the details.

They had a discussion with my father in the backyard whose details I don't know. The discussion was a private one between the three, and after, my father left with them, not before deceiving me that everything was okay, they were just going to finish up the remaining matter at the city guard offices.

It was only when dusk arrived and I still had not heard from him that I realized something was off. Just as I was about to head to their offices, the captain came back, but he was alone this time.

It was he who informed my mother and I, that to protect my father from further retaliation, he would have to be sent to the border frontline where the war between the empire and the Five Clover Kingdom was happening.

By his words, they had reached a compromise with the store owner of the Green Dragon General Store, and in that compromise, the city guards agreed they would relieve my father of his duties as a guard, and he would be transferred to the border as a soldier, a post he would serve until his very last breath.

Only this way could they guarantee his life..."

Chapter 892 The curse that follows

?Wu Mingli's tone and demeanor turned colder.

"They made it seem like they had done him and us an enormous favor with that proposition, with the captain even casually mentioning that Ding Xiaoli must have learned his cruelty from someone, insinuating that the store owner was probably just as vicious if not more so.

It never made sense to me. My father only did his job and somehow got the shorter end of the stick. All for doing something that the empire should have been doing in the first place: protecting its people.

No matter how much they tried to color it, sending my father to the borders to be a soldier was no different than sentencing him to death, especially when they said he would have to hold that post for life.

How was that any different than sentencing him to death? While he trained diligently, making him one of the strongest in his realm, in the end, he was still a foundation establishment cultivator.

How would such a strength guarantee his life on a battlefield where there was even a record of a quasi-palace stage cultivator losing his life?

The protection afforded to him by the empire was only against the Green Dragon General Store and wasn't against the opponents he would be facing at the border. Whatever opponents he faced, whether he lived or not, it would all depend on him.

After he was done, the captain left me a slip containing my father's voice.." Wu Mingli said as he took out a slightly discolored grey jade slip.

The materials used in creating the slip had been mediocre, and if it wasn't for him expending a few resources to upgrade it, the slip would have long disintegrated or the voice within would have been distorted somehow, with time.

Wu Mingli held the slip carefully like it was some precious treasure, as indeed it was, to him. He poured his spiritual qi into it, triggering it to play the recording.

Wu Mingli's mom finally showed some reaction when the slip appeared, as her pupils flickered with a sense of sadness, longing, and tender love. Using Wu Mingli's arm as cover, she deftly wiped the tears that had formed in her, before finally smiling with a nostalgic look to her as the recording played.

"Shan'er, I am sorry for the mess your foolish husband has left behind, but knowing you, I am sure you will handle it well from the years of experience of being my wife, hehehe..."

Having you and Mingli has been my greatest fortune. I am truly blessed to have been a partner and father to you both.

Mingli, there are so many things I hoped to teach you, but more than that, I had hoped to see the man you would become. But even without seeing it, I know you will make something amazing of yourself, better than your old man here.

I may not have had the best aptitude for it, but I think I developed a good eye for discerning those who had the potential for it, and you, my son, have one of the greatest talents I have ever seen, even when compared against those in Spring Plum City.

And I am not just saying this as a father, but as a cultivator who has interacted with all manner of talents. I just never thought to say it so you wouldn't get a big head, after all, I know it wasn't Shen Jue who peed in Auntie Ma's backyard trying to assert dominance against her yellow dog.

You were walking awkwardly all week. The excuse of you hurting yourself doing horse stance wasn't the most creative of excuses. Do not underestimate a foundation establishment cultivator's regular senses and spiritual sense. I could see the several bite marks and location..hehehehe..."

Wu Mingli wanted to quickly halt that part of the recording that somehow in the intensity of the emotions he was under, he had forgotten about. But it was already out, all he could do was bravely look at the ground like a man and hope that the ground would turn sentient and swallow him.

His neck reddened when he heard his mother softly chuckle as she murmured,

"Hero Mingli.."

It took Yang Qing all his willpower not to laugh or even show signs of it. It got even harder when he tried to reconcile the Wu Mingli before him, who looked like a valiant sword general in every which way, and the Wu Mingli who got bit severely by a yellow mutt, and judging by the insinuation of the recording, the location might have been an unpleasant one.

Caught in the spirit of nostalgia, Yang Qing couldn't help but recall the black dog he regularly fought with when he was small. The dog didn't have a smidge of cultivation, but its intelligence was no different than a spirit beast that had unlocked its wisdom pearl.

There was always this gloating look it had every time it saw Yang Qing wail as he tried to unsuccessfully escape the clutches of his grandfather and the other elders. At the worst moments of his life, it was always there with a smug grin, and worst of all, it was a thief who liked stealing his food, especially.

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh as he wondered if he was cursed. The moment he broke through to the silver body stage he got his revenge on the dog in kind. In the spirit of it, since it liked stealing his food so much, Yang Qing 'graciously fed' it the disgusting potions his grandfather used to feed him to improve his physique.

Back then he had thought that was the end, his life would never be disturbed by another animal again, but that curse followed him even when he came to the Order. Ellie stole from him all the time, the Celestial nesting weaver was an insufferable beast put on the planet to give him a heart demon, and then there was the dense starlight crab that attacked people without warning.

"I hope Haishi and Bolin don't end up turning like them. Surely they wouldn't, right?"

Chapter 893 Nobles live like dogs and fiends live like emperors

Yang Qing pulled his mind from the worrying thoughts as he focused back on the recording.

"But even with such an aptitude... Mingli, remember what I have always told you? Make sure you discern your heart always and confront the villains within, if you do, then the heights you reach will exceed what you or I could ever imagine.

But if you don't... There have been countless sons and daughters of destiny who left this world all too early. I don't want you to be among those numbers.

Act prudently, son, and above all, as a father, my hope for you is you live to the joys of your heart, whatever that may be, mine was marrying your mother, and being a father to you, as for you, whatever it is, know this, as long as its something close and dear to you, I will always cheer you on to attain it.

I left something with your mother. I had hoped to be the one to personally hand it to you, but with things as they are I think your mother should handle it. She's always been meticulous and the wisest person I know. Make sure to follow and trust her arrangements.

I love you both, and who knows, maybe we might get to see each other again when I break through to the palace realm.

Hehehe, I hope you're not laughing at your old man for saying that. Back when I was wooing your mother, my mind went blank and I ended up blabbing one of the deepest desires of my heart during that gut-wrenching fear.

She might have taken it as just the bragging ramblings of a youth trying to look good, but the words I said back then were true then and are still true now; It's my dream to reach the palace realm and sail among the skies like the figure who saved my life.

I know the flaws I made during my early years make it difficult and unlike you Mingli'er, I don't have the highest of aptitudes, but I hope to one day step into that mystical realm. Maybe the border might give me just that opportunity. I have been told that even though the border is fraught with dangers, there are countless treasures there, and even if my servitude here is due to special circumstances I can still earn merit points which I can redeem from the royal family.

Next time we meet maybe your old man will be a palace realm cultivator. I hope when we do meet you will be one too, Mingli'er.

Take care you two. Mingli watch over your mom for me in the meantime, will you? and Shan'er please don't throw our son in a pit filled with red-scale spiders, and if you really have to, because I know how he is sometimes, then at least don't let it go beyond two hours.

Be well you two, and Shan'er make sure you take Mingli to see where I was born. It might be good for him."

The recording stopped after those words, with Wu Mingli carefully storing away the slip in an ivory jade box before putting it away into his storage ring.

He took a deep single breath and then looked at his mother nodding to her in affirmation, before finally looking back to Yang Qing.

"While he did try to soften it and reduce the morbidity in it, as people closest to him, we knew that slip was his farewell to us. However, I do believe he was serious about hoping to become a palace realm expert, but the undertone within it wasn't that of someone speaking his ambitions but of someone expressing his regret.

It was the admission of someone who knew he was never going to achieve one of his dreams, and the reason for that failure had nothing to do with his flawed foundations or talent or external factors, but rather, he knew he would not be alive to attempt it.

Six weeks after he was apprehended, a soldier came to our home and informed us of his passing. The cause, he had died from the attack of a core formation expert from Five Clover Kingdom who self-detonated after being encircled.

That detonation not only took my father's life but the lives of 800 other soldiers from the Red Maple Empire.

I don't know how they came up with the figure, maybe they felt such a number would be able to make the news they delivered, slightly palatable..." Wu Mingli said with a sardonic smile.

"It worked... for a bit..." Wu Mingli added as his smile turned cold.



"It would have continued to work longer if that had been the real story..." Wu Mingli's gaze drifted slightly to Duan Hu before shifting back to Yang Qing.

"Before that bombshell was dropped on us, in those two months, I had tried to mobilize any help I could to try and reverse the decision made about my father.

In my naivety, I thought if enough voices spoke out about the unjust decision made against my father, it might maybe touch important people who may then speak at his behest and have him released from his fate.

With how many people my father helped over the years and the reputation he had built, I assumed those willing to speak up for him would be many. But the reality was different. I realized the ugliness of this world that day.

People will celebrate with you when things are going good for you, but the moment things go bad they will quickly desert you like the plague.

Our home ... me ... my mother ... we became that plague not a day less than the day my father got taken. Whether it was our neighbors or those 'friends' who so liked to call my father benefactor.

Before, all they kept saying was how they wanted to repay my father in whatever way to pay back a little bit on what he did for them, but when I called them on it, it was like they didn't even know who my father was, or what he did for them, there were even some who had the gall to try and turn on us so they could curry favor with the Green Dragon General Store.

They were all quick to draw the line between us and them. Not that I blame them, after all, their actions were a symptom of the extreme rot in the Empire, where those with good hearts live and die like dogs while fiends live like emperors..."

Chapter 894 Breaking the precept

While Duan Hu remained completely impassive to Wu Mingli's remarks, the same could not be said about the Gong clan's elder. Gong Jie had deeply clenched his fists as he cast a cold gaze toward Duan Hu.

"Didn't we tell you that your approach would do more harm than good? See what it bore. Is this what you truly wished for?" asked Gong Jie, as he used his palace sense to communicate with the former emperor secretly.

"What other choice did I have? The Five Clover Kingdom already had the backing of the Zou family, and we were all on our own. How did you expect us to contend against them when they had that sort of backing?" asked Duan Hu in a slightly frustrated tone, as part of his attention fell on Deng Wei, who still had the look of serenity and gentleness.

"There could have been a better way to handle it that didn't end up with us selling out the entire empire to the Golden Bamboo Pavilion.." Gong Jie said with a certain reluctance and regret in his tone.

"If only I had discovered the ancestor sooner.."he thought.

Back then after one of his regular clash with one of the elders, on a whim, he ended up deciding that he would leave the clan for a bit and roam the continent. He had stagnated at the realm of a peak orange-grade blacksmith for so long, that it left him feeling frustrated, stifled, and highly volatile. This not only had an adverse effect on his work but also his relationships within the clan.

Fights were a regular thing in the clan. It was something that had become part of their culture, but even if they fought regularly, it always had a substantial reason to it, and more often than not it was always centered on the art of blacksmithing.

Rarely, bordering on almost never, would clan members fight about a personal matter. It almost always had to do with blacksmithing; the measurement of an ingredient here, the temperature of an ingredient there, the better secondary material, the right smelting method, and many other things.

It was because of this that though the Gong clan members fought a lot, they were among the most close-knit clan in the empire. They would fight one minute and once one or both were proven right or wrong in what they were fighting about, the matter would be considered resolved, and immediately after those members would be sharing wine and laughs together until the next smithing-related argument came.

That fact was true for Gong Jie. While he got into a lot of fights, not once had those fights not been related to blacksmithing. But after the frustrations of languishing at the orange grade got to him, he began fighting just cause, all to vent that frustration.

People from the clan started avoiding him and it wasn't long before some of the senior figures of the clan, including the clan leader, talked with him. The conclusion of that talk ended up with him being given suggestions to help him deal with the frustration.

He wasn't the only one from the clan to get frustrated at getting stuck. Since their founder, they only ever managed to produce one other blue-grade blacksmith, who fortunately and unfortunately was from the same era as their founder. The world only knew they had one at the time, but only those from the clan knew there were actually two of them. The royal family may have had its suspicions, but they could never verify it.

Sadly, after the two of them, the Gong clan had never been able to produce another. A curse and a nightmare that haunted every Gong clan member since.

From the suggestions given, Gong Jie decided leaving the clan and taking a breath was the best solution for him. It was only after he made that choice and informed them of it that the news of one of the founders potentially being alive was made known to him by the clan leader and the two grand elders.

Of the six founders, Deng Wei was closest to their founder Gong Zhi. It was to the point that Gong Jie was surprised that their founder had even gone against Deng Wei's wishes to be anonymous. Despite not being a literary person, their founder had been the person behind the story that made certain highlights about Deng Wei. Like how the inheritance left to them by the Red Maple spirit had more to do with Deng Wei than Duan Qui.

He didn't know why, but Deng Wei didn't want the fame associated with the real events that happened that day, but their ancestor because of how close they were, was unable to keep it silent.

Before he left he was given an amulet Deng Wei had left their ancestor. Deng Wei had left that amulet for their ancestor or descendants as a means to find him if they ever found themselves in a desperate situation.

Before their ancestor died, he left vehement instructions behind, that the clan was only allowed to use it if they feared destruction of the clan, anything less and they should not use it.

It was with that amulet that he eventually found him. Though it took him close to six hundred years for him to do so. Using an invocation, the amulet released a glow that showed Deng Wei's general direction. He kept following that direction until it led him to the coastal towns next to the Bestial Churning Sea, and then the glow disappeared without him spotting Deng Wei.

It took several months before Deng Wei met him, and even then he had a feeling the only reason he met him that early was because Gong Jie, with his fiery personality, ended up angering someone he should not have, which left him being used as live bait by said person at the Bestial Churning Sea.

Deng Wei intervened just when he was about to torn apart by one of the spirit beasts that had taken a shine to him.

As for why the clan patriarch and the two grand elders decided to seek out Deng Wei, despite the clan not facing any clan-destroying peril, it was because of the state of the Red Maple Empire. The noble clans were at each other's throats, to the point that it had gone even beyond the point of just stealing each others' benefits, with lives being lost. Then there was the Golden Bamboo Pavilion which was deeply entrenching itself into the affairs of the empire via their subsidiaries and other means.

But more than that, the thing that made them desperate enough to ignore their ancestor's precepts on when to use the amulet, was because of the royal family, and the dangerous rift brewing within, that they had kept hidden from most.

That hidden bomb was dangerous enough to the point that the clan leader and the two grand elders felt that the Gong clan's future was at risk along with the rest who were unlucky enough to be caught in the explosion.

#### Chapter 895 Origins of the first empress, Duan Qui

While Gong Jie may have not known much about their founder, Deng Wei, or his deep friendship with their ancestor, he did know enough about the royal family and the troubles that were brewing within. All the top figures within the six founding families did. It was why some, like the Mo family, were emboldened enough to try and whittle down their power as they made an attempt for the crown.

The Duan royal family was split and while the core reason for that had to do with the Zou family, the Zou family coming into the picture served more of an impetus for that split more than anything else.

The royal family was currently split into two factions and the reason for that split had to do with their ancestry.

Their ancestor, Duan Qui may have been a rogue cultivator in her earlier years, but she also had another identity, which was what forced her into the life. She had been the bastard child of a noble scion from the prestigious Xin family, a rank-two family with a rich history, and one of the prominent families famous within the circles of alchemy and herbology.

As far as he knew, outwardly it was known that the family had seven gold-grade alchemists and at least five gold-grade herbologists making the family one of their giants in those particular fields. Their reputation was only less if compared to behemoths like the Medical Saint Garden Sect or the Flowing Valley Sect.

Them not measuring up to the two was fairly understandable. One was a rank-one sect renowned throughout the entire continent for its medical practices, and the other was a holy land, not much needed to be said about that. But when compared to their peers, the Xin family measured up and the first Empress, Duan Qui, was tied to them through her father who had been one of the rising figures of the clan.

Her story was not all that different from most stories which involved someone from a prominent background, getting involved with someone from a lesser background, except her story had a bit of a twist. In most common scenarios where both parents are of different standing, usually, one of the parents, the one with the better background, usually abandons and even mistreats the lower stratum partner and their child, but in Duan Qui's case, her father actually loved both her and her mother, dearly, to the point he wanted to forsake his family name and leave the clan and live with them both.

Despite his determination, things are never that easy, not when the object of his affection is a herbologist with no background to speak of. Duan Qui's mother was a farmer, who kept to herself and her little piece of farm where she took care of various kinds of spiritual plants and herbs, up until a young man who was casually flying around got drawn by the gentle and meticulous charm with which she worked, came and overturned her life.

The young man eventually fell in love with the gentle farmer, and the gentle farmer for the first time loved another person with the same fervor and honesty as she did her farm and the plants she so

attentively and graciously took care of and eventually after years together, a little girl was born to them in Duan Qui.

Her first three years were spent on that farm, and then as any parent would, in the hopes that she would have a brilliant future ahead, her father took her and her mother back to the clan. He wasn't disillusioned by the kind of reception he would receive from the clan when he went there with his new 'family'. It was the reason he didn't choose to go back immediately after becoming dao companions with Duan Qui's mother and only waited after she had been born and was slightly old, for him to make that decision.

No matter how prepared he was, his estimates of how they would react still fell short. He had been away from the clan for almost 120 years and in that period like most clans of such stature would do, they had an arranged marriage for him to the princess of one of the powerful rank three kingdoms that had subordinated themselves to the.

The kingdom in question was the Radiant Swan Kingdom. Even if it was subordinate to the Xin clan when compared to other organizations of similar rank, it was at the top of the crop.

The Red Maple Empire despite being of similar rank could not hold a candle to them. They had five palace realm experts, with the one with the highest cultivation base being Duan Hu the former emperor, who was a third-stage palace realm expert.

Meanwhile, the Radiant Swan Kingdom had no less than thirty palace realm experts, and rumor had it that among those thirty there was one who was already at the peak of the palace realm. The Red Maple Empire just could not compare at all.

Their strength was what made the Xin clan look favorably upon them to the point that they even wanted to marry off one of their main-line descendants. That descendant was Duan Qui's father, and the princess he was marrying was rumored to be a one-of-a-kind genius who drew even the attention of the Xin clan's senior figures.

Even if they admired the Radiant Swan Kingdom, no matter how strong they were, it would still have been insufficient for them to consider marrying a direct mainline member to them, at most they would have chosen someone from the branch, or if they were to choose someone from the main line, it would not have been Duan Qui's father. Her father was a prodigal genius who stood out even within the clan. He would be the last person they would ever consider to marry someone from a subordinate kingdom, no matter her rank. They only made an exception due to the talent she had shown.

Gong Jie didn't know the specifics when it came to the talent, he could only assume it had to be one of a kind for it to prompt the senior figures of a rank two clan to make such an exception. Everything was arranged perfectly and agreed upon unanimously with even the grandfather of Duan Qui's father, one of the gold-grade alchemists of the clan, also one of the domain experts, signing off on the arrangement.

What they didn't count on was that one of the main parties in the said arrangement was already married and that he even had a daughter to boot. His return which should have been a joyous occasion ended up triggering a storm, and it got worse when he vehemently rejected the marriage, slapping the faces of all who made the arrangement, with his grandfather being on the list.

But no matter how much he refused the whole thing, at the end of the day, he was just a palace realm expert and a junior within the clan. Even if he was a prodigious talent, he still had not grown to the point that he could do whatever he wished in a powerful clan like the Xin clan.

Despite his refusal, the clan was adamant about going on with the arrangement, and as for Duan Qui and her mother, there was only one way to deal with such a 'mistake' and that was to erase it completely. The clan would have killed them both had Duan Qui's father not threatened to take his life if they did which prompted his grandfather to step in.

In the end, both parties reached a compromise, Duan Qui and her mother would be allowed to live, but not within the Xin Clan. They were to be banished, and Duan Qui not to wear the Xin name, as for her father in exchange for the guarantee of their lives would agree to the marriage.

Thus the family of three was forever fractured and separated. Duan Qui's father started another life and as for Duan Qui and her mother, while the Xin clan promised not to act against them, the same could not be said of the Radiant Swan Kingdom.

With the chaos it created when her father brought them to the clan, and the passion with which he refused the marriage, even though the clan tried to put a lid on everything, news of it trickled to the kingdom. Whether by design or not, they became aware of Duan Qui's and her mother's existence, and the level of importance they held to her father's life, something the kingdom found intolerable.

As one would expect they did try to hunt the mother and daughter for years after finding out about them, luckily their father had left them with a lot of defensive measures such as artifacts and talismans, and debts owed by friends he had.

But even with such measures in place, with how potent those attacks were, Duan Qui's mom got a lot of injuries as she was trying to eke out a path to survival for her and her daughter. Even though she didn't succumb to those injuries, the accumulation left long-term trauma on her body, which coupled with the mental toll the separation from Duan Qui's father took, it shortened her lifespan immensely. She who as a core formation expert should have lived for thousands of years, ended up living for hundreds, leaving an orphaned Duan Qui, who ended up choosing to become a rogue cultivator and eventually struck a lifelong friendship with the other founders.

The clan that they ended up feuding with which led to them eventually running all the way to the territory of the Red Maple Spirit had been a clan with ties to the Radiant Swan Kingdom. It was as they were running away that Duan Qui decided to reveal her history to them, a risk on her part because one of them could have sold her out to curry favor with those from the Radiant Swan Kingdom trying to target her.

Luckily no one did, and eventually, they created an empire together. Duan Qui, maybe in the hopes to spare her descendants on, divulged her ancestry to them in the hopes that someday the Red Maple Empire would stand at the same heights as the Xin clan that spurned her and her mother.

She may have intended that, but her descendants had other ideas of their own. Already within them, some entertained the thought of going back to their roots. To them returning to the mighty tree that was the Xin clan was better than the prospects of the Red Maple Empire. Despite knowing the history between the Xin clan and the treatment they showed to their ancestor, they dared entertain the thought because they felt their circumstance was different from Duan Qui's and her mother's.

When the duo was brought back to the clan they were rootless weeds with no background to speak of, but if they did it, they would be going back as royals of an established rank three empire that obtained the inheritance of a long-lived peak palace stage tree spirit.

Going back under those circumstances, they were optimistic the Xin clan would welcome them, and as for the hostilities of the Radiant Swan Kingdom, they were not all too worried about it. As long as the Xin clan accepted them, the Radiant Swan Kingdom as a subordinate kingdom would have to act in line with the clan's wishes and if one looked at it closely, in terms of bloodline, they were closer to the Xin clan, than the Radiant Swan kingdom was, after all, their ancestor was the daughter of a mainline descendant and one who had great standing at that. They believed that by leveraging on those lines, their standing may even be better than the kingdom's.



Eventually, such thoughts slowly grew a life of their own among the Duan clan members who were not satisfied at being overlords in a 'pond' but instead wanted an entire ocean. The thought truly got its legs when two things happened, one was when the Xin clan celebrated welcoming a domain expert in their ranks by the name of Xin Guyi. Xin Guyi was Duan Qui's father.

The other impetus was when the Five Clovers Kingdom became a subordinate of the Zou Clan. That development gave them all the more reason to seek out the Xin clan and eventually, the royal family ended up getting split into two factions. One faction wanted to go back to the Xin clan, and the other hoped to honor their ancestor's wishes and develop the Red Maple Empire.

With time as the Five Clovers Kingdom grew in strength, the faction that wanted to rejoin the Xin clan slowly grew in number while those that wanted to remain, dwindled. The return to the Xin clan faction looked well on its way to dominating, that was until Duan Hu appeared and forced their hand by entering a partnership with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, essentially halting those plans.

But even with that move, there was still a divide among them. The royal family had three palace stage experts, and one of them supported going back to the Xin clan, the other remained neutral, and then there was Duan Hu.

The Empire was now in a precarious position which threw the Gong clan to desperation. They were stuck between two tigers..three, if the Zou clan was thrown into the mix. Whichever side wins, the empire stands to be the loser.

On paper, they were cooperating partners with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, but in reality is with how things were in the empire, everyone could see there was no partnership there, the Red Maple Empire couldn't even be considered a subordinate to the Pavilion with how dominated they were by mere subsidiaries of the Pavilion.

Would it fare any better if the Xin clan came into play? Based on its history with Duan Qui, Gong Jie felt things would even be worse with the Xin clan. Only the Zou clan offered them a respectable fate, at least with the Zou clan, they would all die, or be banished, but when it came to the two rank two organizations, being slaves was the fate that awaited them.

Luckily all those fates could be avoided. Gong Jie silently breathed a sigh of relief when his gaze fell on Deng Wei.

Chapter 896 Terms of the deal (1)

While Gong Jie was filled with relief at the potential turn of fate for the Empire, Duan Hu was filled with a different feeling. While outwardly he didn't show any change in emotion, inwardly, it was a different matter altogether.

The cooperation with the Golden Bamboo Pavilion could be considered his child. Everything from start to finish was planned by him. The return to the Xin clan faction was quickly gaining momentum to the point that even the neutral palace realm expert from the clan started entertaining such thoughts.

He didn't know why the neutral member was having a change of heart. Maybe it could have been because he could see how powerful the Five Clovers Kingdom was becoming and felt maybe the time to jump ship had arrived.

When the war started, the Five Clovers Kingdom only had a single palace realm expert, whom the Empire didn't know about up until the Kingdom came to their doorstep to declare war. Fast forward to the present, the Kingdom now had four palace realm experts while the empire had five. But while the empire had the greater number, it was just one extra palace realm, and if it had been in a different nation, one that was more unified, that extra palace realm expert would have been a significant asset.

But that was not the case with the Red Maple Empire. They all had their agendas, and having an extra palace realm expert meant nothing and if one looked at it critically, only two were genuinely committed to the war effort, and that was the Zheng clan patriarch and the neutral palace realm expert from the royal family. As for the remaining three, he was busy keeping the rival royal member at bay, and the Mo family patriarch was trying to seize the opportunity created by their feud.

It was no wonder the Five Clovers Kingdom was quickly gaining ground on them. They were united, and most of all, the Zou family gave them ample support. The reason they could produce four palace realm experts in such a short amount of time could only be because of their intervention.

But what about the Red Maple Empire?

Unlike the opposite faction, Duan Hu didn't believe they would have a good fate if they went to the Xin family.

Personally, even though he was in the faction that hoped to honor the wishes of their ancestor and help elevate the Red Maple Empire to stand at the same heights as the Xin clan, he did not believe it could ever be done. He even felt they might regress.

Other than the Mo Clan, the Zheng Clan, and the royal family, the other founding families had not produced another palace realm expert since their founders despite the resources at their disposal.

Tens of thousands of years have passed since all their founders passed, bar Deng Wei, and in that time, neither the Gui, Chen, or Gong clans, produced a single palace realm expert, and when it came to the rest the Mo and Zheng clan only had a single one each, and the royal family had three.

Duan Hu was cognizant of the fact that if they did not have the amount of resources they had at their disposal, they all six families would not have produced a single palace realm expert, and yet despite believing that, he was adamant at staying. Why?

It was because unlike the rest, blinded by greed and the prospect of joining a rank two clan, he strongly believed their fates would be far worse than whatever the Five Clovers Kingdom would do to them if they lost the war.

The Red Maple Empire was nothing in the face of a behemoth like the Xin clan. The Radiant Swan Kingdom wasn't the only rank three organization counted among their subordinate. There were sects and other organizations affiliated with them that were of similar rank.

Being a rank two clan didn't just mean having domain experts, it meant overreaching influence. It was just a single clan, but the territory it ruled over was a hundred times larger than the entire Red Maple Empire.

The Red Maple Empire could not compare to even a finger of the power they held. They would be no different than Duan Qui and her mother, in fact, their circumstances could be considered worse. At least when it came to their ancestor and her mother, they had the backing of her father, who was a prominent member of the clan.

What did they have? Their ancestor, Duan Qui? The same person who was chased out of the clan? Everybody sharing prominent member of the clan.

What did they have? Their ancestor, Duan Qui? The same her bloodline would be a constant reminder of what happened back then. A stain that the Xin clan would not want known to others. Going back was no different than giving the Xin clan, a chance to erase that stain.

Even if Duan Qui's father was now a domain expert of the clan and had some say, would he take them back. His affection was to his daughter, not to her greedy descendants that are a few generations removed from her.

What about his wife, the princess of the Radiant Swan Sect? What if she was still alive and a domain expert too? Her reaching the domain realm wasn't a stretch, after all, she was rumored to have a heaven-defying talent, and for it to catch the eyes of the Xin clan, that talent had to be talent that was capable of reaching the domain realm.

If she truly was a domain expert, that meant they had a domain expert for an enemy. She had grounds to despise them even more than the Xin family. After all, they served as a constant reminder that her husband once loved another woman more than her and had a child with that woman.

He felt that whatever fate awaited them at the doors of the Xin clan was bound to be a horrible one. Well, he might not hold much hope for the Red Maple Empire, he did not want his clan to be wiped out, or suffer a far worse fate.

#### Chapter 897 Terms of the deal (2)

?That desperation drove him to the doors of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion. As a matter of fact, they were the ones who came to him, citing their feud with the Zou clan as the reason for their help.

They did offer the Red Maple Empire to come under their umbrella as one of their subordinates. The terms of subordination were highly lucrative, but Duan Hu's pride and fear would not let him, and thus they settled on a loose partnership in which the Red Maple Empire would borrow just the name of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion and the promise that if for any reason the Zou clan became directly involved in their war against the Five Clovers Kingdom, then the Golden Bamboo Pavilion would intervene.

In exchange for borrowing their name, the Empire would firstly allow the pavilion to open a branch within their territory along with other subsidiaries, then the others were tributes and special discounts offered to the Pavilion for the various spiritual herbs they produced, especially the herbs grown in the core region of their territory, where the red maple spirit lair had been.

In addition, the pavilion also asked for one legacy from the red maple spirit. Other than pouring its life and nature essence into their ancestor along with its insights, it also left her the bulk of the treasures it had amassed. The Golden Bamboo Pavilion asked for the chance to pick one treasure from the pile, and they had to be the one to choose it.

Duan Hu had been reluctant to agree to that part of the deal until the envoy promised they would not take any cultivation arts or artifacts. They would only be taking a single item, and it was one of the founders who would be doing it. If he didn't find anything to his liking, he would leave the pile untouched and the deal would still be considered fulfilled.

Hearing that one of the domain leaders would be involved, Duan Hu had no option but to agree. He had no idea which leader came, or when he came, only that a few days after that, there was a continent-wide announcement that the Golden Bamboo Pavilion was in partnership with the Red Maple Empire.

He may have not known when the leader came but as someone who knew every single treasure within that pile, he knew what was taken. The item taken was a weathered sword that looked to have been made of some sort of jade material. But its luster was faded and looked no different than a weathered clay sword.

Before Duan Hu broke through to the palace realm, that sword never stood out to him and just looked like any regular old junk that had suffered the wear and tear of time.

It was only after he reached the second stage of the palace realm, that he felt there was something weird about it. Though the feeling was always fleeting and ephemeral, it sometimes gave him the sensation he felt when he faced his tribulation when breaking through to the palace realm. He always felt like he was staring into that calamitous cloud. The feeling wasn't as distinctive as the real thing and was subtle, and it didn't appear often. He only felt that way on the nights the clouds were heavy.

Over the years he did try to see if he could uncover any mysteries but other than that weird sensation he discovered nothing of note from it. When he realized that was what the founder had taken, other than slight curiosity about what mysteries it held, he wasn't all too bothered that was what was taken.

In fact, he felt relieved. Whatever mysteries the sword may or may not have held mattered little to him, especially when it seemed impossible for him to decipher those mysteries. He would rather trade it for tangible benefits, like gaining a partnership with a rank two organization like the Golden Bamboo Pavilion. Everything else was immaterial. He would not gamble the future of his clan and the empire on the potential of an unknown, not when they were staring down the barrel of possible eradication.

Thus, the partnership was formed. The branch was created, and the subsidiaries soon swarmed his cities. With it already announced, the return to the Xin faction's momentum was halted.

He may have succeeded in averting the fate he feared would await them if they went back, but in exchange he had brought another, right to their doorstep. As the weaker party in the partnership, he knew they would always be at a disadvantage with the Pavilion.

They needed the Pavilion's name for protection against the Zou family, but the Pavilion didn't need them. It was the reason he ended up turning a blind eye to the subsidiaries and all the things they did, and even getting personally involved in covering up their misdeeds.

The reason he tried to form a deep friendship with Yao De the branch manager who got assigned to the empire was in the hopes of leveraging that friendship to at least improve the circumstances a bit.

But looking at Wu Mingli, his mother, hearing his case, there were already millions of others in the empire experiencing a similar fate. Before he made the deal he had resolved himself to sacrifice anything and do whatever it took to ensure the Duan family and the Red Maple Empire remained standing.

But with how things devolved, he couldn't help but feel rather than saving it, he had accelerated the rate of decline of the Empire.

He couldn't help but sigh as he wondered what would be next for him, his clan, and the empire. Even with one of the founders alive, would he be able to undo the rot that had already seeped into every inch of the empire?

Only now, did he dare admit it to himself that the empire was genuinely and truly broken.

"Maybe it might be too broken to restore.."

Chapter 898 Terms of the deal (3)

?Almost everyone involved in the court was burdened with their thoughts. Whether it was Lin Duyi and his parents who did not know what fate had in store for them, or the previous emperor, Duan Hu, or the

Gong clan elder, or their founder, Deng Wei, they may not show it, but each one was plagued with the thoughts of what next.

Whether it was them, or the aggrieved. When the testimonies were done, they would all have to face whatever future today's deliberations had on them. The good, the bad, and the complicated

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Wu Mingli, without pause, continued with his testimony.

"With almost everyone having already turned on us, turning our home into a ghost town, after the notification of his death, we left. We didn't even get to see his body or give him a proper burial.

Like bandits, we left in the dead of the night, and after two days we were already at the village where my father was born.

I half expected us to be attacked on our way there by either those from the store or some 'do-gooders' but thankfully we were not.

In haste, my mother took me to the spot where my father had met the riverstone serpent. Whatever wasteland it had been, it was not that, when we went there. It was brimming with life, whether it be lush vegetation, with even a few sky-grade herbs growing in the midst, or the crystal clear river that flowed with vigor.

My father had hidden the serpent's wisdom pearl in that river. I still don't understand why he never used it himself.." said Wu Mingli.

"From the moment it was given to him, he had already decided it would be yours before you were even conceived..." his mother softly answered from the side with a gentle loving smile on her face.

"Old man.." Wu Mingli muttered with a smile as he recalled the face of the simple-faced man with a resolute air about him, which alternated with clumsy where snakes were involved.

Wu Mingli took a second to regulate his emotions, before continuing with the tale.

"With the wisdom pearl in hand, we left for parts unknown, leaving the borders of Red Maple Empire to go start a new somewhere.

I only came back about thirty years ago, when I was at the peak of the core formation realm, to an empire that had grown far worse than it had been when we left.

I don't know, maybe out of nostalgia, or out of hope that maybe my father's death may have sparked a positive change in the empire, I decided to sneak back and take a look.

What greeted me was just ..... sorrow.." Wu Mingli said with a despondent sigh.

"The cities were filled with people, and they had grown far beyond how I had left them. But even with all that going for it, they were devoid of the flavor of life. All that hung there was a cloud of bitterness, pain, and endless sorrow born out of an empire that left its weak and helpless to the vicious wolves around them.

I should have expected it.." Wu Mingli said as he shook his head sideways.

"Unwilling to linger anymore in such an environment I decided to pay a visit to our home, one last time. Everything was as we left it, the only difference being it now had different occupants.

As I was lost in the memories of that place, some unknown figure appeared and threw a jade slip toward me, as he left the following words before leaving. 'If you want to know what happened to your father, the truth is in that slip.'

I couldn't sense his appearance or disappearance from start to finish. He was like a phantom.

I had thought with my peak stage core formation cultivation base I could roam around freely around the empire without fear, even against the owner of the Green Dragon General Store, but that figure upended that confidence with just a few milliseconds.



I couldn't tell the slightest thing about them. Had they wanted to kill me, I have no doubt they would have been able to do it with extreme ease. I do not doubt that figure was more than likely a palace realm expert.."

Duan Hu's eyes flickered with a mysterious glow at the remark.

"Upon realizing the disparity in our strengths, whatever reservations I had about the slip being a trap, were gone. Though even if it were, I would have gladly fallen for it if it involved my father.

But luckily or unluckily, what was in the slip turned out to be true.." said Wu Mingli as he took out a grey jade slip. Without a waste of movement and time, Wu Mingli immediately poured his spiritual qi into it, playing its contents.

The recording showed a short middle-aged man whose facial features resembled Wu Mingli walking alongside another man who looked to be in his early forties and had a regal bearing on him. The color of his hair matched that of the Duan Hu. It was an almost dusk orange color, similar to that of autumn maple leaves.

The duo were inside a quaint courtyard. They were seated quietly beneath a cherry blossom tree before another person joined them. The person in question looked to be in his early thirties, with long flowing black hair, a thin build, and a face and an aura that was of a banished immortal walking the mortal realm.

It wasn't long before those wondering as to his identity, were made aware of it when the middle-aged man with the regal bearing addressed him as store owner Shao Ren. Even in the manner he talked, he talked gently but there was an ethereal power to it.

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"So this is him?" asked Shao Ren as he casually pointed at the simple-looking middle-aged man.

"It is," answered the regal-looking middle-aged man.

Shao Ren gently sighed as his gaze fell on the simple man before going back to the regal-looking man.

"Xiaoli may have been a good for nothing, but he was my nephew. If it had happened to any other person that wasn't him, I would have gladly let the matter go and let you handle it as you saw fit, but since it was him... We are both in a difficult spot...

I am sorry Commander He for putting you in a position where you have to deliver one of your own, but certain things though distasteful have to be done.." Shao Ren said with a sympathetic sigh, as the duo sat across from him stewed in silence.

"Thank the Emperor for accommodating my selfishness. I, Shao Ren will not forget it.." he added.

"What do you plan to do with him?" the regal man, thus named Commander He, asked, as he pointed toward the simple man. One could sense the hesitation in his tone.

"Don't worry Commander, I am not a thankless brute. I am not my nephew, I have some propriety. If I wasn't, I would not have settled for just him. But to set your mind at ease, I will deal it here, in your presence.." Shao Ren lightly said as his attention drifted to the simple middle-aged man.

"Your name is Wu Fang?"

"It is," the simple middle-aged man calmly answered.

Shao Ren's eyes shone with interest as he asked, "You don't seem afraid. Many would be in your position. I wonder why is that. Or you just don't feel fear, or you have already resolved yourself to what will happen. Did Commander He, tell you?"

"I didn't, but there was no need for me to. He could already guess. He is one of our best-performing city guards for a reason.." Commander He said as he cast a sympathetic look toward Wu Fang.

Wu Fang on detecting the gaze, smiled.

"You shouldn't feel guilty, Commander. From the moment I decided to act, I was prepared for this eventuality. I would still do it again," Wu Fang said with a peaceful smile on his face, which had the opposite effect on the commander, who ended up averting his gaze.

"To answer your question, store owner Shao Ren, It is not that I am not afraid. There are a lot of things I am afraid of, disappointing my son and wife is at the top of that list, closely followed by regrets, and then snakes.." Wu Fang said as he chortled slightly before he turned calm once again.

"Unlike those brave warriors, I won't say that I am not afraid of death either. I am afraid of dying but for me, the life that leads to it is what affects the degree to which I will be afraid when the moment comes. If I am swarmed by regrets to the moment of my death, then I would be frightened, but now...I have lived a full life, store owner Shao Ren.

It's why I can face my end with a thankful heart, and a peaceful spirit.."

"I admire your spirit, City Guard, Wu Fang. I wish you a fair turn, in your next life.." Shao Ren gently said as he waved his sleeves producing a mirage-like light that gently swept up Wu Fang instantly disintegrating him both body and soul.

"Have a pleasant night, Commander He, I am sorry I will not be seeing you out. Please tell the Emperor, I will visit him tomorrow, to personally give my thanks for him accommodating my selfishness..." Shao Ren said as he got up to leave.

"Also I will talk to the rest of my workers. They will behave better.." he added as his body disappeared and the recording ended.

#### Chapter 899 Terms Of The Deal (4)

"A palace realm expert..." Yang Qing threw a curious glance in Duan Hu's direction. Based on the foundations Wu Mingli had, Yang Qing was inclined to believe that the person who handed him that recording was indeed a palace realm expert, a quasi-palace stage expert would not have been able to sneak on him undetected, after all, just from the undulations he released, Yang Qing could already tell that Wu Mingli was someone with a gold core.

With such foundations, a quasi-palace stage cultivator would find it difficult to sneak on him undetected. Anyone with a blue core and above would have a robust spiritual sense, courtesy of their spiritual core.

For someone to sneak up on Wu Mingli without his awareness, during its first instance, someone could maybe make a case that it could have happened because he was distracted. He was back home, bombarded by the place's strong emotions and memories. In such a state, being distracted is expected, but the figure managed to disappear as easily as he appeared with Wu Mingli unable to sense or do anything about it.

For someone to be able to do that they had to be vastly more powerful than him, or had a powerful treasure on them that gave them that ease. That same person also managed to record the deal between the commander and the store owner of the Green Dragon General Store.

The recording had enough clarity to the point that one could sense the strengths of the individuals recorded in it. Shao Ren and the Commander of the city guards were both quasi-palace stage experts, and they both had no clue they were being recorded.

This was what convinced Yang Qing that the culprit was more than likely a palace realm expert. Only they would be able to sneak up on two quasi-palace realm experts, and a peak stage gold core expert without any of them being aware of it.

And if it was a palace realm expert, then the suspect pool was a small one. The Red Maple Empire didn't have that many palace realm experts to begin with. They only had five, and he could already eliminate Duan Hu from those five, leaving four; the Mo clan patriarch, the Zheng Clan patriarch, or one of the two remaining palace realm experts from the Duan royal family.

Whoever it was, it was evident they had something against Duan Hu. Otherwise, why leak the information?

"It seems like he has some ideas as to who it might be," thought Yang Qing as he caught the former emperor's subtle reactions.

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After the recording was done, Yang Qing took custody of the slip as per Wu Mingli's wishes, who no longer wanted to keep it.

He had replayed that recording over and over till it became an obsession which quickly evolved into a heart demon. Everything from this point was geared towards the elimination of that obsession if he ever wanted to have a life or reach the palace realm.

Today's proceedings were as him seeking reprieve for his father, and at the same time laying him to rest thus laying the groundwork for the life that lay ahead.

"I could hardly come to terms with what I saw neither could I believe it. I replayed that recording over and over, my disbelief, and denial growing with every replay. I kept thinking to myself, surely this has to be a lie. Yes, the empire is messed up in more ways than one by letting the subsidiaries however they pleased, but surely they would not resort to even selling out one of their own.

But the cold hard evidence was there, staring me in the face and I could not believe it. I only accepted it as real when I took the slip back to my master and he and his colleagues verified that it wasn't doctored and that everything written there was real.

The moment I got the confirmation, it was like a rewind switch had been hit, and I was mourning my father over again. .." Wu Mingli said with sorrow in his voice.

"I still struggled to believe it or understand it, but I buried those feelings, and only came to revisit them seven years later when I reached the quasi-palace realm expert.

Whatever doubts I had, there was one sure way of confirming them and that was asking the people involved. I couldn't reach the Emperor.." Wu Mingli said with a coldness to him.

"But I could sure as hell reach Shao Ren or so I thought. By the time I had made up my mind to seek him out, he had already left the empire, that left me with only other choice, that was to seek the commander.."

Duan Hu's pupils instantly constricted, as he asked,

"It was you?.. You were the one who killed him?"

"Yes.." Wu Mingli softly answered with an apathetic demeanor about him.

Wu Mingli's look turned reminiscent.

"Given his role in it, I would have still killed him, but the events that transpired leading up to his death were all his doing.

He asked for a duel to the death. If he won, then he would have eradicated a potential thorn in the empire's back, but if I won, he would verify the truth of the recording I was given through a soul stone.

I won and I got the soul stone.." Wu Mingli said as he politely nodded his head to Yang Qing who produced a milky white stone that looked to have been made of a gelatinous substance and was dancing with silver, golden, azure, and cyan lights, giving it a mystical charm.

Said item was a soul stone, a unique natural treasure that someone could use to store memories. Soul stones were mercurial in that before they were used, they looked no different than a pebble, and when it came to durability, they were as fragile as glass, but once someone branded it with their soul, and poured their memories into it, the stone would achieve a transformation, into what it was now. An object of ethereal beauty, and when it came to hardness, it could self-

repair itself, and the only way to destroy it was if the power used was vastly superior to the full strength of the person whose soul was branded on it.

In the case of the soul stone in Yang Qing's palm, for it to be destroyed, it could only be at the hands of a palace realm expert. If it was Yang Qing's soul stone, it would need the strength of at least a middle-stage expert.

When the stones were branded, they not only absorbed the memories they were branded with but the qualities of the person's soul, and in Yang Qing's case, his soul stone would be tainted with a dense aura of vitality.

The commander's soul stone was similar in that regard too. Owing to the red maple spirit's bloodline that flowed within them as a result of the deal between the red maple spirit and their ancestor, every Duan clan member had a dense life aura, and that soul stone showed signs of it.

"Emperor Duan Hu, and the team from the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, please feel free to examine its contents. The Order verifies that the contents of the soul stone have not been tampered with in any way.." Yang Qing said as he passed the soul stone over to Duan Hu first for his perusal.

Using a soul stone was just as similar to reading someone's soul for the memories branded within, except it was less intrusive and had fewer risks, however, they were also prone to tampering, if one was skilled enough.

It took a moment for Duan Hu to compose himself. He still looked visibly shaken from the revelation about the death of the commander. When he passed, it triggered a storm within the empire.

Because of the growing line of betrayal within the Empire, he could never pinpoint who did it. He suspected the other clans of the deed just as much as he did his own clan, after all, the commander had been one of his persons, and he wouldn't put it past the rival faction within the clan to have him killed to deprive him of loyal helpers and support. He had even killed a few royal members as a result of it.

Pushing the complex emotions that were brewing within him to the side, he quickly poured his spiritual essence into the soul stone, examining its contents.

The process was swift and smooth. In three minutes or less, Duan Hu was already done and was handing the soul stone back to Yang Qing who passed it over to the side of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion team, before handing it to Deng Wei out of courtesy.

All parties present were in agreement that the soul stone had not been tampered with, and the memories contained within were authentic. Those from the Golden Bamboo Pavilion may not have known the commander, but they did know Shao Ren, and looking through a soul stone was no different than reliving the commander's memories.

Everything he felt or sensed was contained in its raw authentic form within that soul stone and as for Deng Wei, he may not know anyone within that memory, but he was a domain expert. It was child's play for someone of his rank to authenticate the memory of a quasi-palace realm expert, whether he knew the person or not.

Duan Hu was the surest of all that the memory was real, after all, he was featured in that memory. The memory did contain the version of events as showed by the jade slip Wu Mingli had produced, but it also showed the events that happened before and after which was him signing off on Wu Fang being handed over to Shao Ren and the meeting that happened after, when the commander reported that the deed had been done.

It was an otherwise damning indictment of his role in the whole affair.

Once everything had settled, Wu Mingli spoke.

"Every debt has a debtor, and as the son, it falls on me to collect on the debt owed to my father.." Wu Mingli said as he turned to face Duan Hu. Even without hearing what he had to say, just from his looks, Duan Hu already knew Wu Mingli's goal.

"My father's only crime was being loyal to a nation that did not deserve it. Instead of being awarded for his integrity, he was punished for it.

I may have not had the ability to do anything about it back then, but I do now.." he added as his gaze trailed over to Lin Guiren and the rest.

"A life for a life, that has always been the rule of the world, and my father is owed one. With the Order serving as the witness, you said Shao Ren should be out of seclusion in three years or less, right?

I will give him an extra year to solidify his foundations, so he has no excuse. In four years, with the Order as the witness, I challenge Shao Ren to a life-and-death duel.

Of course, he is free to refuse it, but if he does, I will still come for him, and if your pavilion interferes..." Wu Mingli paused as he took out a scroll that radiated with an otherworldly energy. The source of that energy came from the binding on that scroll. It was a white branch that stirred the spiritual qi around them, almost as if breathing life and wisdom into it.

Lin Guiren, his wife, the Imperial household manager, and even Deng Wei had a sense of seriousness to them as their attention fell on the branch.



Wu Mingli muttered an incantation that reacted with the branch as it opened itself, allowing the scroll to be unfurled. The scroll was revealed to be blank, without any writing. Not a second later, the branch branded itself onto the scroll, and a drawing of a majestic white tree filled with leaves that abounded with wisdom was produced, as colorful lights were produced by those leaves.

One could hear the voices of sages and scholars discussing countless mysteries and truths of the way of the dao emanating from those leaves. Those present could feel their spirits stirred, and their minds racing, guided forth by a transcendent power that was as old as creation.

"If the Golden Bamboo Pavilion interferes, then the Jade Leaf Academy will involve itself in the matter.." said a voice, coming from one of the leaves within the scroll. The voice was akin to a whisper of wind, trailing countless eons, containing the essence of countless secrets and truths collected throughout those eons.

#### Chapter 900 Terms of the deal (5)

?Even with the faintness of the voice, everyone could feel the grand presence and power within. All, from the core formation experts present to the domain experts, were slightly affected by the sense of majesty and power within that voice.

How could they not, when said voice was delivered through one of the most powerful dao natural treasures known in the entire continent, the Ten Thousand Dao World Jade Tree, the foundation of the behemoth that was Jade Leaf Empire and the aforementioned Jade Leaf Academy. A natural treasure rumored to have escaped the confines of a saint-grade treasure.

Feeling just a tiny bit of the profound power it contained, Yang Qing couldn't help but feel curious about how it would feel like standing before the real thing if just a tiny portion of its aura was this impactful.

Just this tiny exposure left him feeling like his mind had been given a sudden jolt as countless ideas that he had been ruminating on over the past few months were suddenly being transformed from a jumbled mess with no clear path, and now they were being smoothened out and he could roughly sense the path he should tread on.

Yang Qing's look turned pensive as a certain memory surfaced in his mind, triggered by his current state.

"This feeling.. it is eerie similar to the feeling I got from that book. However, the reaction is different. The book's effect was much more tyrannical. It seemed to have had a demand on one's comprehension.

My comprehension isn't bad even when compared to those from the Order, but even with old Lei reducing the book's effect, the flood of insights rushing into my mind made me feel like my brain and soul were about to explode, but the jade tree's sensation is different. It is milder, more like a patient and kind teacher meeting the student at the level they are at.

With such a treasure, no wonder the Jade Leaf Empire has existed for so long. With its effects, who knows how many hidden dragons and tigers lurk within it? Them being dubbed a quasi-holy land may be an underestimation of their true strength.." thought Yang Qing as his attention drifted off to the rest.

They all had mixed reactions with the most intense being on Duan Hu, whose impassive look finally had strong emotions reflected on it, and it was of fear and shock.

When he walked into the courtroom, he instantly recognized Wu Mingli and his mother. When Wu Fang's matter happened, he investigated everything related to him, and that of course included his family.

Before he gave the nod to have Wu Fang handed to the store owner of the Green Dragon General Store, he had personally paid them a visit on the day of the incident and saw the family sitting together in their backyard, as Wu Fang leisurely drank his wine while sharing his tales with an attentive Wu Mingli.

He only ever saw them that once, and it was over 200 years ago, but with the sharp memory of a palace realm expert, anything he saw even just in passing, whether it happened yesterday, 10 years ago, 100 years ago, or 1,000 years ago, the memory of that moment would be as vivid as someone reliving that memory in its entirety.

He may have not thought about Wu Mingli, or his father for those 200 years, but the instant he saw him, even though he had changed from the youth he was with a qi refinement cultivation base, and transformed drastically, into a young man with a quasi palace stage cultivation, Duan Hu still instantly recognized both him and his mother, despite the changes that had happened to both.

And the moment he did, all he could think about was how horrible his luck over the past few months had been. He clashed with an official of the Order when he, Lin Duyi, and Yao De were attempting to capture Ellie. The act landed them a beating, and imprisonment, which in turn led to the uncovering of a whole heap of worms, and now one of those uncovered worms had grown into a dragon that was after his head.

He could already tell Wu Mingli's foundations were much stronger than he had been at his stage, and he did not doubt that if Wu Mingli broke through to the palace realm, he would not be his match.

The turn out of the battle would be just as similar to what happened when they fought against Yang Qing, if it could even be called that. He was a third-stage palace realm expert, Yao De was at the second stage, while Lin Duyi was at the first stage, but with the treasures he had on him, he could hold his own against a regular third-stage palace realm expert like himself.

But despite all three of them working together, they were still slapped around by Yang Qing. With the powerful fluctuations Wu Mingli released, he felt fairly certain that there was a possibility he could replicate that same feat, and even if he couldn't defeat all three as Yang Qing, at the very least when facing one of the three, he would be able to defeat them with the same ease as Yang Qing did.

The instant he came to that conclusion, he began to worry. His worry wasn't at the prospect of being defeated. Wu Mingli may have contained his emotions well, but Duan Hu had been an emperor facing treachery on all sides, Wu Mingli was a thousand years too young to hide his true thoughts from him.

He knew the look of a man seeking vengeance, and considering the history, he knew he was one of the targets of that vengeance. With the choices he made, and the direction he led the Empire in, and the things that happened, he knew one of those choices would come back to haunt him at some point in his life if he lived that long.

He had long surrendered himself to the possibility that someone may one day come to collect on the many debts he owed, and he had made his peace with it. When that moment came, he would face it head-on, and if he died in the process, so be it.

As long as he was the only one to pay that price, he was okay with it, but Wu Mingli had him worried, and it wasn't the defeat that had him worried, but rather the implications behind his strength.

Someone doesn't just become that strong, in such a short amount of time, without a force behind it. Over 200 years ago, Wu Mingli was just 16 years old and in the qi refinement realm, but jump forward 200 years, he was already a quasi-

palace stage expert, with terrifying foundations.

Such a result could have only been the work of something powerful. Either a powerful treasure that can do astronomical things such as give a 16-year-old youth a stupendous transformation to the quasi-palace stage, or there was a powerful organization behind the transformation. He was more inclined to believe the latter. Such an implication terrified him because it meant whoever his backer was, they could produce a powerful quasi-palace realm expert like him in a short 200 years.

By his guess, not many organizations could pull that off, and those that he thought could, were bound to be organizations that the Red Maple Empire could not afford to offend. As an emperor and the chaos surrounding him, he had long grown accustomed to assuming worst-case scenarios, rather than best-case scenarios, so he is not caught flatfooted, and in his worst-case scenario, he had Wu Mingli belonging to an organization that was maybe at the same caliber as the Golden Bamboo Pavilion, not once had he thought he would have a behemoth like the Jade Leaf Academy backing worth.

The Red Maple Empire wasn't worth a fart when compared to such an institution. Wu Mingli belonging to some rank two organization already made him nervous to no end, as he thought of the possibility of Wu Mingli using said backer to not only punish him, but the entire Empire, ...but the Jade Leaf Academy ....his mind was shocked beyond comprehension, to even contemplate the implications of having created an irreconcilable feud with one of their members.

He had gone beyond just feeling frightened. Even their founder, despite his domain-level strength, would not be able to subvert the danger if the Academy was dead set on destroying the Empire. The threat factor of the academy was at a different level. It was to the level that even figures like one of the leaders of the Golden Bamboo Pavilion Lin Guiren, or a haughty person like Cai Hong, or the Imperial Household Manager of the Gold Leaf Empire, a rank one entity, itself, the same as the Academy, all of them without exception had grim expressions on their faces, when that warning was issued.

All Duan Hu could think of was in trying to avoid a mess he had ended up creating a disaster. He wondered at this point if his life was even enough to quell a bit of that disaster.

The fact that the Academy was willing to threaten a renowned rank two organization like the Golden Bamboo Pavilion meant that Wu Mingli was valued by them. It was for this reason that Duan Hu didn't feel his worries about the Empire currently hanging at a precipice, being too outlandish. It was a very real possibility.

"What kind of luck is this?" he bitterly thought as he hoped Wu Mingli's ire would just be on him, Shao Ren, and the deceased commander.

