

Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?!

#Chapter 1 - 30th Birthday Celebration. - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 1 - 30th Birthday Celebration.

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Coldwind City.

Atop Phoenix-Soul Pavilion, the wind stirred silk banners gilded with golden thread, embroidered with the Fang clan's sigil: a soaring raven entwined with lightning.

Below, a garden of jade lilies and crimson peonies spread out like a painting, deliberately maintained to perfection for this very moment.

Fang Yuan turned thirty today.

And yet, it was not the scent of blooming flowers or warm incense that filled the air.

It was tension.

"The Four Great Families are here," a servant whispered, bowing so low his forehead brushed the marble.

Fang Yuan stood by the edge of the terrace, hands folded behind his back.

His black robes fluttered lightly, embroidered in deep violet sigils that only a cultivator of the Golden Core Realm could wear.

His expression, as always, was unreadable, serene, yet cold beneath the surface.

"Let them in," he said.

Today was not just a celebration. It was a performance.

To show how stable his family was under his reign and prove that his family was eligible to stand shoulder to shoulder with the great four families.

From the great marble steps came four figures, each followed by their entourage of cultivators in robes bearing the marks of their clans, He, Zhao, Lin, and Wu.

Four pillars of Coldwind City.

Four aged lions who had ruled longer than Fang Yuan had lived.

He cupped his fists politely.

"Elder He, Elder Zhao, Elder Lin, Elder Wu... I am honored."

Elder He, of the He Clan, chuckled first. "Fang Yuan, my boy! Thirty already? Time flies like a soaring crane. If your father were here, he'd be proud."

"Indeed," said Elder Zhao, his beard as white as snow, eyes sharper than daggers. "You've done well. The Fang Clan has flourished under your... energetic leadership."

Each word was dipped in honey and laced with poison.

Their smiles were wide, but their spiritual pressure coiled like venomous snakes beneath their sleeves.

Fang Yuan smiled back, unfazed. "I am merely walking the path laid before me by the generations that came before. If my humble progress impresses the four venerable families, then I am blessed."

It was a web of lies. Everyone here knew it.

Each one of these so-called 'guests' had, at one time or another, tried to undermine his rise. Rumors.

Assassins. Poisoned trade routes. Even silent provocations within the city's cultivation circles.

But none had succeeded.

Because Fang Yuan was not just a genius, he was a transmigrator from earth.

Elder Lin stepped forward, his expression the very picture of grandfatherly delight.

"My Lin Clan offers a humble gift to mark this special day. A Blossoming Thunder Orchid, plucked from the peaks of Mount Skyhowl. It blooms only once every thirty years, much like the talent of a certain young clan head."

A servant in silver robes stepped forward, carefully holding a crystal case.

Within, nestled in velvet, lay the orchid.

Its petals shimmered with arcs of violet lightning dancing across their tips.

A priceless treasure. And a subtle message.

Fang Yuan's smile didn't twitch. "The Lin Clan's generosity is boundless. I shall plant it in the east courtyard and tend to it personally."

"Good, good!" Elder Lin nodded, his long sleeves swaying as if applauding himself. "Treat it gently. It dislikes harsh wind... or betrayal."

Across the garden, the other elders chuckled politely.

Elder Wu clapped his hands, summoning a servant carrying a heavy lacquered box.

"We, of the Wu Clan, thought a more practical gift would suit. A furnace from the Ember-Heart Monastery, capable of tempering third-grade pills."

Another treasure.

"How thoughtful," Fang Yuan said with a slight bow. "I had just been considering refining the Eight-Hundred Soul Tempering Pill for my family juniors. This will help."

He turned, eyes sharp like a blade just sheathed.

Elder Zhao raised a cup of peach blossom wine. "To our fifth family... May Coldwind's stars rise together, and may our harmony remain unbroken for another hundred years."

"Hear, hear," Elder He chimed in, already sipping.

The crowd, clan heads, cultivators, merchant lords, and sect envoys cheered. Laughter rose. Servants bustled with wine.

Jade instruments played gentle melodies by the koi pond. Everything sparkled with the golden hue of decorum.

It was perfect.

Too perfect.

Fang Yuan raised his cup last.

"To Coldwind City," he said. "May the roots of our five families intertwine for generations... and may no wind, however cold, uproot us."

A beautiful lie. Spoken like a prince, with all the poise of a sage.

The music softened. Platters of spirit beast delicacies were brought out, lotus-steamed crane, cloud-braised boar, and shimmering blue carp that danced lightly in golden broth.

The banquet flowed like wine itself.

But Fang Yuan knew the most dangerous offerings tonight were not on plates.

They were questions.

And soon, one arrived.

Elder Wu set down his wine cup, its surface still rippling from the motion.

His face wore a pleasant calm, but his eyes, coal-dark and calculating never left Fang Yuan.

"I've heard," Elder Wu began, voice smooth as aged tea, "that the Fang family's Spirit stone mines in the Eastern Ravine have flourished despite last winter's collapse. Remarkable, truly. My own family mines barely scrape by these days."

Fang Yuan offered a mild, polite smile. "Heaven provides in mysterious ways. We were fortunate that the mountain spirits were not angered."

"Still," Elder Wu continued, leaning in slightly, "your monthly output has increased threefold. Surely you've found some... technique? A formation perhaps? Our families are bound by alliance. We could prosper together if such methods were shared."

He raised his wine again in half invitation, half challenge.

Around the pavilion, conversations dimmed slightly, eyes drifting toward them.

Fang Yuan tilted his head, as if considering.

Then he laughed, soft, melodious, utterly disarming.

"Elder Wu flatters me far too much. If only the Fang family were so clever! In truth, the ravine's fortunes rose after a minor reshuffling of laborers and a particularly loyal stone-seeker we took in from the borderlands. An old man with half his teeth and twice the luck. He says the stones sing to him. Who am I to question heaven's favorite fool?"

The others chuckled. Elder Lin raised a brow, unconvinced.

"Surely it cannot be luck alone," Elder Zhao said, swirling his wine.

Fang Yuan turned toward him, expression composed.

"Then let it be the blessing of ancestral spirits," he said, lifting his cup. "For if our mines are truly this fortunate, we shall offer incense to our ancestors twice a day instead of once."

Elder Wu's lips curved in something almost like amusement. "Truly, Young Master Fang is as skilled with words as with cultivation."

Fang Yuan inclined his head. "I merely follow the river's current, Elder Wu. Anything else would be arrogance."

Another perfect parry. The pressure eased, and the music picked up again.

The banquet drifted onward in a haze of cordiality.

Until—

Fang Yuan stood up abruptly as he yelled,

"...What?"

Chapter 2: Golden Finger.

All eyes turned to Fang Yuan.

A beat of stunned silence passed before Elder He coughed gently into his sleeve. "Young Master Fang... is something the matter?"

Fang Yuan blinked.

He had been staring at thin air just now because it was no longer just air. In front of his eyes, invisible to everyone else, floated a translucent golden panel.

[Heavenly Clan Building System Activated.]

Welcome, Host: Fang Yuan.

Synchronizing spiritual signature...

Binding complete.

Congratulations, cultivator! Your path to dominance begins now.

His mind buzzed.

A system.

A real one.

He wasn't hallucinating. This wasn't one of those strange dreams from his early transmigration days.

No, this was it. The cheat. The golden finger!

The thing every transmigrator from Earth dreamed of when waking up in a strange, mystical world with spirit roots and sword-beaming lunatics.

It had finally arrived.

Late, yes. Thirty years too late. But who cared?

Better late than never!

Still, he couldn't let them see his excitement.

Fang Yuan composed himself instantly, clearing his throat as a small smile returned to his lips. He raised his wine cup high and laughed, refined and effortless.

"Ah, forgive me, elders," he said smoothly. "I was simply... overcome with joy. Thirty years old and still standing strong under the heavens, surrounded by venerable guests and honored friends. I'm truly... blessed."

The crowd exchanged uncertain glances.

Elder Lin narrowed his eyes slightly. "Is that so? You startled us for a moment, Clan Head Fang."

Fang Yuan chuckled again and waved dismissively. "I assure you, Elder Lin, it was nothing more than sentimentality. We cultivators don't always show it, but... even we have hearts, no?"

Elder Lin chuckled inwardly, the corners of his eyes crinkling just so. *To exclaim joy by shouting "what"? Hmph. As expected... still young, still impulsive.*

To his left, Elder Wu observed Fang Yuan with a pleasant smile, calm as still water. Yet behind that facade, his thoughts were sharp and cutting. *Is this fool really the one who always outmaneuvers us? Where does his cunning come from? He looks like a startled goat. He can't even maintain proper decorum as a distinguished family head.*

Meanwhile, Elder Zhao and Elder He merely sipped their tea in practiced silence, betraying nothing.

Their eyes, half-lidded and serene, offered no judgment but their indifference spoke volumes.

Laughter rose again, softer this time, hesitant but accepting.

Yet in the depths of Fang Yuan's pupils, something had shifted.

He wasn't listening to them anymore.

[New Feature Unlocked: Quest Tab.]

[Host. You have unread mails.]

[Open them for tasks and rewards.]

His fingers trembled ever so slightly behind the folds of his robe.

A quest system. Tasks. Rewards.

Fang Yuan stood amidst fake smiles and poisoned words, but his heart thundered with anticipation.

He had fought for years with only wit, caution, and mortal planning.

But now—

Now the heavens themselves had tilted the board.

Fang Yuan's eyes flicked across the golden panel still hovering faintly in his mind's eye.

His fingers twitched.

But now was not the time.

With practiced ease, he exhaled through his nose and gently dismissed the interface with a mental flick, pushing the excitement into the deepest chambers of his soul.

He straightened his posture, rebalancing his expression into something effortless and serene.

"A marvelous evening, Elder Zhao," Fang Yuan said, his voice smooth as jade-polished wine.

"The weather today truly favors celebration. Perhaps your clan's offering to the heavens last solstice brought us this calm breeze?"

Elder Zhao, ever reserved, inclined his head mildly. "Perhaps. Or perhaps the heavens are simply smiling upon your thirty years of peace, Clan Head Fang."

"Unless the Divine Ice Sect itself descends, nothing will shake this place," Elder Wu added in jest.

From another corner, Elder He muttered a chuckle into his teacup.

The atmosphere returned to its measured flow, curt nods, harmless jests, mutual observations on Coldwind's trade routes and the seasonal spirit herb bloom.

But just as the surface smoothed—

Pat-pat-pat—

The hurried sound of footsteps echoed from the corridor outside.

Light, quick, but unrestrained.

A beat later, a girl in sky-blue robes darted into the hall, her silken sleeves fluttering and her long black hair barely pinned in place.

The music stuttered. The crowd turned. Brows furrowed.

Whispers rippled like pebbles tossed in still water.

"Who dares to interrupt the banquet?"

"Is that... a servant girl?"

"No manners..."

"Who let her in here?"

Fang Yuan, however, smiled warmly.

He stepped slightly forward, voice carrying with a calm that silenced the murmurs.

"Oh? Fang Mei, why are you in such a hurry?"

The girl halted, cheeks flushed, not from embarrassment, but excitement.

She clasped her hands before her chest and bowed briefly before raising her head with bright eyes.

"Brother!" she called out.

The room stilled.

Shock swept through the guests like a silent gale.

Brother?

Did she just call the family head of the Fang clan—Brother?

Even Elder Lin's wine cup paused halfway to his lips.

"Brother," she continued, her voice clear and ringing through the hall, "the entourage of the Divine Ice Sect has arrived. They request an audience."

A stillness swept through the pavilion.

It was as if the world itself took a breath and forgot to exhale.

For a moment, even the wind halted.

The Divine Ice Sect.

One of the most powerful sects in the entire Tharz Kingdom, a true colossus that stood above countless clans and factions like an immortal palace in the clouds.

Their disciples alone were worth more than armies. And their elders were said to be at the Golden Core realm at least.

No one had expected them here.

Not at a small family banquet, in a mid-tier city like Coldwind.

The elders of the four great families—the He, Zhao, Lin, and Wu—stiffened in their seats.

Their eyes narrowed as they all turned, almost in unison, to study Fang Yuan.

There was no hostility yet but there was something sharper than swords.

What sort of relationship does the Fang Clan have with the Divine Ice Sect?

Did they forge some alliance in secret?

Behind their elegant expressions, countless thoughts raced.

Meanwhile, Fang Yuan was still looking at Fang Mei.

His expression remained serene, poised. A picture of dignified calm.

But inside—

He was screaming.

The Divine Ice Sect!? Here!?

What the hell do they want with my birthday!?

I didn't even send them an invitation!

His mind whirled as fast as any formation array.

This has to be a mistake... right? Did they take a wrong turn? Are they lost!?

He blinked slowly, as if pondering something trivial.

Then he offered Fang Mei a small nod.

"Very well," he said, voice even. "Invite them in. Let us not keep such distinguished guests waiting."

Inside, his soul practically flipped the banquet table.

Chapter 3: Divine Ice Sect.

The entire Phoenix Soul Pavilion seemed to hold its breath.

Not a leaf rustled. Not a flute dared chirp. Even the koi in the pond had stopped swimming, as if they too were bracing for the arrival of the uninvited titans.

Servants stood frozen mid-step. Cultivators exchanged quick, silent glances. Tension clung to the air like thick incense.

And in the middle of it all stood Fang Yuan, perfectly composed on the outside.

On the inside?

Complete and utter chaos.

What do they want? Why are they here?

In an attempt to do something other than stand like a confused statue, Fang Yuan cleared his throat and looked toward the calmest elder in the room or so he thought.

"Elder He," he said with a respectful bow, "You're the oldest among us. Do you perhaps have any insight as to why the Divine Ice Sect might grace us with their presence today?"

A sharp breath was drawn somewhere in the crowd.

Oh no.

Even the wind paused again.

Elder He slowly turned to face Fang Yuan. His eyes narrowed slightly. His fingers gently tapped his teacup—tap. tap. tap.

Elder He had been called many things over the years—Fossil, Gramps, Antique, even Relic of the Past.

He bore these names with silent indignation.

After all, he was the oldest among those present. That much was undeniable.

But what made it worse, what truly gnawed at his pride, was that he was also the weakest.

A mere middle-stage Golden Core cultivator, seated among peak rank golden cores.

He stared at Fang Yuan, his gaze long and unreadable.

The boy's words echoed in his ears,

"You're the oldest among us..."

A twitch. A pulse of inner flame. The familiar ache of age and ego stirred in his chest.

And yet—

Elder He exhaled slowly through his nose.

He chose, with all the dignity of a hundred years of back pain, not to take offense.

Not today.

With a deliberate slowness honed over decades of ignoring disrespectful juniors, he turned his gaze toward the horizon.

And pretended Fang Yuan didn't exist.

Elder Zhao looked away, stifling a cough that suspiciously resembled laughter.

Elder Lin stared intently at a nearby peony bush, suddenly very invested in botany.

Elder Wu clenched his jaw so tight his mustache twitched.

Fang Yuan, still smiling, blinked at the silence.

"...No thoughts, Elder He?" he asked, with the hopeful enthusiasm of a man about to dig his own grave.

Elder He sipped his tea.

Loudly.

Then placed the cup down, firmly.

"I have no idea, Fang family head," he said, voice calm yet laced with the weight of millennia-old grudges.

The silence was now physically painful.

Fang Yuan, after a brief pause, nodded slowly and murmured, "..Looks like we can only wait."

The tension in the room escalated as the doors to the pavilion opened, and a chill breeze swept through.

The air shifted, as if the very atmosphere had become charged with the weight of the unexpected guests.

Into the room stepped the Divine Ice Sect's entourage.

A figure in front led the group with an air of imposing dignity.

His robes were a glistening white, streaked with strands of ice-blue, and his long silver hair cascaded down like a frozen waterfall.

His eyes were sharp, his expression lofty, as if he looked down upon all beneath him both literally and figuratively.

He raised his chin slightly and scanned the room before his gaze fell on Fang Yuan.

"Greetings," Elder Mo said, his voice smooth, but carrying a distant, almost aloof tone. "I am Elder Mo, emissary of the Divine Ice Sect, here to pay my respects to Fang Yuan, Clan Head of the Fang family."

The way he spoke Fang Yuan's name was deliberate, measured, yet with a touch of respect that felt almost... begrudging.

Behind him, a small group of disciples stood, but their gazes were all firmly on the ground, silent, their presence a mere shadow compared to Elder Mo's overwhelming force.

Fang Yuan felt the weight of the moment as Elder Mo's eyes lingered on him.

For a brief moment, the room seemed to tilt ever so slightly until Fang Yuan's mind cleared and he forced himself to smile.

He stepped forward, raising his cup in greeting, maintaining his composure with effort. "Elder Mo, it is an honor to have you grace my humble abode. Please, make yourself comfortable."

His eyes flicked briefly to the other elders, who were all still frozen, caught between polite curiosity and suppressed shock.

Elder Mo, however, gave a slight nod, but his gaze never left Fang Yuan.

Fang Yuan's senses immediately sharpened, and the casual greeting became a subtle examination.

Elder Mo was no ordinary cultivator. His aura was immense, and Fang Yuan, with his sharp eye for power, immediately noticed the weight behind it.

Peak stage of Golden Core... no doubt about it.

Fang Yuan's heart skipped a beat, as he recognized the implications. Elder Mo stood just a hair's breadth from the Nascent Soul Realm, a half-step Nascent Soul cultivator.

That level of power was not something to be taken lightly, especially in the dangerous political landscape of the cultivation world.

For a moment, his mind wandered. *How had such an individual even found his way here? And why?*

But he pushed the thought away, keeping his smile in place.

Elder Mo, still standing proudly with his hands clasped behind his back, finally spoke again, this time with a touch of mockery in his tone.

"A fine place, Clan Head Fang. Though..." His eyes flicked briefly to the four elders, before returning to Fang Yuan. "I would have expected a more... grand celebration for such an important occasion. But perhaps the Fang family does things differently?"

Fang Yuan met his gaze, his smile unwavering. "We prefer simplicity," he replied, "especially in the company of such esteemed guests."

There was a flicker of something, surprise, perhaps, or admiration, in Elder Mo's eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it came.

"Indeed," he said, his voice cool once more. "A fitting response. Clan Head Fang, I trust you are ready for the opportunity our Sect brings?"

Fang Yuan's heart gave a small jolt, but his face remained perfectly composed.

He raised his cup again, this time to Elder Mo's words, responding with genuine curiosity laced with caution.

"I am honored by the opportunity, Elder Mo. Please, let us discuss how we may be of service to each other."

Chapter 4: Gu Xin.

Elder Mo's lips curled ever so slightly as he lifted his hand in a casual gesture.

A soft rustle of robes followed as a young woman stepped forward from the Divine Ice Sect entourage.

She moved with an elegance that silenced the air again with cold and composed like falling snow.

Her presence didn't scream for attention; it simply made others step back without realizing why.

She wore pale cyan robes with silver embroidery shaped like blooming lotuses, and her dark hair was bound by a thin band of froststeel.

Her expression was as still as a winter lake, her gaze calm and unflinching.

"This is Gu Xin," Elder Mo announced, turning just slightly so the entire pavilion could see her clearly. "She's a Direct disciple of our sect Master and also happens to be the one engaged to your younger brother, Fang Tian."

When Elder Mo mentioned that Gu Xin was the direct disciple of the Divine Ice Sect's Sect Master, the entire pavilion trembled, not with sound, but with suppressed disbelief.

Whispers bloomed like wildfire behind silk sleeves.

Even the four great elders, who had maintained the poise of weathered stone until now, couldn't help but lean subtly toward one another, voices lowered to the barest hum of spiritual transmission.

"Did he say... direct disciple of their sect master?"

"Impossible. A girl like that... engaged to Fang Tian?"

"She must be a decoy. No way the Divine Ice Sect would throw a pearl at a pig."

"Unless... the pig is holding something we don't see."

Their eyes flicked toward Fang Yuan with sharpened calculation.

This changed everything.

If the engagement was genuine, if the Divine Ice Sect truly intended to bind themselves to the Fang clan through Gu Xin, then the balance of power in Coldwind City had just shifted.

No longer would the Fang family be the convenient "fifth wheel" among the great families.

This wasn't a political maneuver from a mid-tier sect or a perfumed alliance from a noble house.

This was the Divine Ice Sect, a force recognized by the imperial court itself.

And the girl they sent wasn't just any inner disciple, she was the personal protégé of the Sect Master.

Even if Fang Tian was talentless, no, especially because he was talentless, the gesture now seemed intentional, symbolic.

Which meant Fang Yuan... was no longer just a fellow family head.

He was a potential bridge to the highest peaks of power in the Tharz Kingdom.

The elders exchanged slow, deliberate glances across their lacquered seats, each smile a little tighter than before.

Whatever came next, one thing was clear.

If this marriage went through they would all need to reconsider their approach to the Fang family.

But at the same time Fang Yuan blinked in confusion.

Gu who now?

He looked at her again, this time with a polite nod and the perfectly neutral expression of someone whose mind was screaming I've never seen this woman before in my life.

But before his thoughts could stretch too long, Elder Mo offered a helpful nudge, his tone light but cutting. "Ah... Perhaps Clan Head Fang has forgotten. Years ago, your late parents formed a marriage alliance between the Gu family and the Fang clan. This was when Gu Xin was still a child. The engagement was made in writing, I believe."

Fang Yuan's fingers twitched behind his back.

Oh.

Now that Elder Mo mentioned it... yes. Something tugged at the back of his memory. A dusty jade scroll from over a decade ago.

His parents had spent weeks fussing over the alliance. It had been considered a tremendous gain at the time.

The Gu family was a noble cultivator lineage in the northern reaches. In fact he still recalls that his father and the current head of the Gu family were like brothers.

Fang Yuan exhaled slowly through his nose, keeping his expression composed. "Of course. I remember now. My father and mother often spoke of their hopes for Fang Tian's future. It seems the heavens are finally moving that piece forward."

A flicker of emotion touched Elder Mo's expression which disappeared the instant it appeared.

The crowd, however, was stunned.

Fang Tian?

That *Fang Tian*?

The entire pavilion was too polite to gasp, but many choked on their wine.

Fang Tian, the younger brother of Coldwind's most famous cultivator, had always been a sore subject.

Born under high expectations, raised under Fang Yuan's towering shadow.

Where Fang Yuan had advanced with terrifying speed.. Qi Realization at age seven, Qi Condensation at twelve, Qi Transformation at seventeen, Golden Core at twenty, and by twenty-five, already a half-step Nascent Soul realm cultivator...

Fang Tian had... not.

Now twenty years old and still languishing in Qi Condensation, he lagged behind even the average outer court disciples. His spiritual roots were shallow, and his battle sense was mediocre at best.

Some whispered he had no talent at all.

Others, crueller, suggested the heavens had balanced the scales, if one brother soared, the other must crawl.

But for Fang Yuan, he actually never really bothered much about what his brother had become.

He had simply smiled when Fang Tian brought up spirit herbs, or asked questions about sword forms, or stared too long at passing mortal girls instead of cultivating.

Fang Yuan only hoped his brother could one day find happiness.

And now...

Here stood Gu Xin, cold and graceful, representing a sect powerful enough to erase Coldwind City from the map with a sneeze... and she was engaged to that same Fang Tian.

Fang Yuan's thoughts spun like a storm cloud behind his calm smile.

But was this really a marriage alliance... or a test? A warning? Or something more?

Still smiling, he raised his cup again and addressed Elder Mo with perfect composure.

"The Fang family is honored by the Divine Ice Sect's faith in this union. Though my brother is... modest in cultivation, he is sincere and loyal. I trust Lady Gu Xin will find him a worthy partner in time."

Gu Xin's expression remained unreadable.

She simply bowed her head in acknowledgment, offering nothing more.

Chapter 5: Fang Yuan.

Elder Mo turned ever so slightly, lifting two fingers in a subtle gesture.

One of the Divine Ice Sect disciples stepped forward.

He was a tall young man, sharp-featured and dressed in the standard glacier-blue robes of the sect. His steps were precise, his demeanor respectful—no arrogance, but

certainly no humility either. The kind of calm only those raised in the presence of power could naturally carry.

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed faintly.

Middle-stage Qi Transformation.

And barely twenty years old, if that.

His mind flicked back to the sect elders of the Fang clan. Most of them... were still lingering around that same stage.

He couldn't help but sigh quietly in his heart.

This was the difference between a colossus like the Divine Ice Sect and a regional family like his.

The disciple bowed politely, a crisp ninety-degree arc, and placed a long jade box upon the polished pavilion floor with careful reverence.

Then, without a word, he turned and stepped back into the line of disciples, eyes downcast once again.

Elder Mo offered a thin smile and gestured toward the gift.

"Clan Head Fang," he said coolly, "this is a token from our Divine Ice Sect to the Fang family. A humble gesture in recognition of old ties."

His voice was calm, measured.

But there was something guarded behind it, as if waiting for a response before he committed further.

Fang Yuan's smile bloomed instantly, wide, bright, and full of thorns.

"Ah, how generous!" he exclaimed, folding his hands behind his back as he stepped forward. "I must say, I truly appreciate the betrothal gift. It warms this humble brother's heart to see the Divine Ice Sect honoring such a cherished agreement."

He looked around, allowing his voice to carry just enough for the elders of the four families, and their spies hidden among the guests, to hear.

"The engagement between Fang Tian and Lady Gu Xin was arranged so many years ago," he continued with a wistful sigh. "It's touching to know that the prestigious Divine Ice Sect still honors the promises made between two sincere families."

Elder Wu almost choked on his tea.

Elder Zhao's fingers paused mid-fan stroke.

Elder Lin raised a brow, sharply amused.

And Elder He—well, he simply looked away as if this didn't concern his ancient bones.

Fang Yuan, of course, was lying through his teeth.

He had already pieced together the real reason for this sudden, uninvited visit.

The Divine Ice Sect didn't come bearing gifts to strengthen an engagement.

They came to annul it.

He was certain of it.

But instead of resisting outright, he'd chosen to strike first.

To take the stage.

To flip the board before the players even sat down.

Because now, if Elder Mo did say anything about annulling the arrangement... it would appear they were going back on a noble pact.

That they were the ones breaking tradition. Undermining sincerity.

And in front of four influential families, dozens of powerful guests, and countless subtle ears?

That wasn't a position even the Divine Ice Sect would walk into casually. Their reputation was at stake.

Elder Mo's expression didn't shift much.

But for just one fraction of a breath, the corner of his left eye twitched.

A single flicker of frustration.

Fang Yuan smiled even brighter.

Checkmate?

Maybe not.

But the first strike had landed.

Elder Mo's fingers curled just slightly behind his back.

A minor motion. But to Fang Yuan—who had spent his entire life navigating Coldwind's spiritual courts and poisonous banquets—it was as loud as a slammed teacup.

The old man was annoyed.

Good.

Elder Mo gave a light laugh, elegant and practiced. "Ah... Clan Head Fang certainly has a flair for words. Your hospitality is as bold as your cultivation."

Fang Yuan inclined his head with a modest smile. "One must always show proper respect when receiving guests bearing gifts of such... significance."

Across the pavilion, several clan heads and foreign envoys exchanged barely hidden smirks and quick whispers behind silk fans.

They could already taste the political tension—this was better than any duel.

Elder Zhao leaned slightly toward Elder Lin. "He's drawing blood with a smile. That boy might be more dangerous than we thought."

Elder Lin grunted softly. "He's cornered a dragon and offered it wine. Let's see if the beast drinks... or breathes fire."

Back near the center, Elder Mo stepped forward, each step slow and deliberate, his hands clasped behind his back in a position of absolute composure.

"I must clarify," he said lightly, "the Divine Ice Sect treasures sincerity. However, time changes many things. Circumstances shift. Promises made in youth... are not always suited for the world as it becomes."

A murmur passed through the crowd, no longer whispers, but rustling winds of curiosity and thinly veiled amusement.

Fang Yuan's smile didn't falter.

"Oh? Then I must be terribly outdated," he said with mild surprise. "I had thought that cultivators, of all people, would treasure vows and legacies above passing convenience."

Elder Mo's gaze sharpened ever so slightly.

The ice behind his eyes glittered.

He had come to Coldwind expecting a simple procedure—hand over a gift, explain the annulment, offer a polite compensation, and leave with the engagement dissolved.

Instead, he was being publicly forced into the role of the side breaking an oath.

To do so now would mean disrespecting not just the Fang family but every custom held sacred among noble clans.

And worse... it would give the impression that the Divine Ice Sect feared a mere low-tier alliance.

Fang Yuan pressed the advantage with gentle sincerity. "Of course, if the sect feels the engagement no longer suits their aspirations... we would be saddened. But we would not complain. After all, not all gifts are given with intention to keep them."

Gu Xin remained silent, her expression frosted over, still no emotion, not a flicker of disagreement or support.

But even that silence spoke volumes.

Elder Mo exhaled slowly, the faintest mist escaping his lips.

"Perhaps," he said softly, "we spoke too soon."

A small victory.

And Fang Yuan knew it.

He bowed just enough to be courteous but no more. "Your wisdom, Elder Mo, is as clear as glacier springwater. Let us drink together, and leave the rest for the young ones to decide in time."

Chapter 6: Fang Tian.

The tension in the Phoenix Soul Pavilion had barely begun to cool when the sound of deliberate footsteps echoed through the entranceway.

Everyone turned.

A young man stepped into the hall, his white robes trailing slightly behind him, his long black hair tied in a careless half-knot, and a silver tassel dangling at his waist.

His features were striking.

High cheekbones, straight nose, and eyes the color of midnight reflecting starlight. He wasn't dressed in grandeur, but his very presence turned heads.

The whispers started immediately.

"Is that Fang Tian?"

"So handsome..."

"No wonder she got engaged to him..."

"A peerless beauty and a peerless face—it almost makes sense."

Elder Wu muttered under his breath, "Hmph. Shame all that beauty went to the one with no cultivation."

Indeed, the man was none other than Fang Tian—Fang Yuan's younger brother.

Fang Yuan blinked once.

Then twice.

Didn't this brat say he had something 'important' to do today? Refused to come to my banquet, said he'd be out of the city? What's he doing here now of all times? And with this timing...

His thoughts whirled as Fang Tian slowly approached the center of the pavilion.

Then, before anyone could address him, Fang Tian's gaze fell squarely on Gu Xin.

"Gu Xin," he said, calm but direct.

Gasps rippled in Fang Yuan's head.

He recognized her?

Gu Xin gave a slight nod in return.

Cool, composed, expressionless but there was no mistaking that she acknowledged him.

Even Elder Mo's brows lifted slightly.

Fang Tian turned next to Fang Yuan, eyes solemn. "Elder Brother."

Fang Yuan braced himself.

"I wish to annul my engagement with Gu Xin."

For a split second, absolute silence.

Then—

BOOM.

Not literal, but the emotional detonation was palpable.

Elder Mo's face lit up like someone had just handed him a Nascent Soul pill wrapped in flattery. The joy practically radiated off his cheeks.

Fang Yuan's calm exterior remained intact—but only barely. Internally, he was flipping banquet tables and throwing spirit melons at the walls.

What!? You little—! Didn't I just secure a beautiful potential marriage partner for you?!

He forced a smile, but his brain was already calculating 800 different reasons this might have happened.

Did someone threaten him? Is he in love with someone else? Or has he lost his mind?

Meanwhile, the four family elders were reveling in the misfortune.

Elder He, sipping tea with the serenity of a petty cultivator, thought, *Serves you right, brat. Call me old again and the heavens themselves shall respond.*

Elder Wu sighed dramatically. *Tsk. If only the boy knew when to shut up. This is why you don't tempt fate.*

Elder Zhao gave a quiet chuckle into his sleeve. *And here I thought the great Clan Head of the Fang family could at least control his own house. How embarrassing. Look who came to jeopardize his own preparations.*

Elder Lin turned away, pretending to cough—his shoulders shaking far too rhythmically. *I can't laugh. Don't laugh. Stop smiling. Don't let him see—damn it, I'm smiling.*

Fang Yuan's eye twitched, just slightly.

His inner voice roared: **Tian, I swear to every ancestor in our bloodline: If you are threatened, I'll protect you. If you're in love, I'll support you. But if you're just being a clueless idiot! I will skewer you myself and offer you to our deceased parents souls as an apology gift!**

Still, his face remained the same tranquil mask of elegance and control.

He slowly turned to face Fang Tian.

"Oh?" he said, voice calm, measured. "And may I ask what brought this sudden change of heart?"

Fang Tian, oblivious to the internal storm he had just unleashed, simply folded his hands respectfully and said—

"...It didn't feel right, my heart belongs elsewhere, Brother. I can't lie about it."

Fang Yuan's smile faltered for exactly one-third of a second.

Didn't feel right? Didn't feel right!? I just played political chess with a dragon and you brought a wooden spoon to the match!?

Elder Mo, sensing the shift, stepped forward once more, this time with a much more cheerful tone.

"Well," he said pleasantly, "it seems the young man understands the wisdom of the heavens. The Divine Ice Sect respects the sincerity of your brother's wishes. Perhaps... it is for the best."

Fang Yuan's smile was still in place.

Barely.

Earlier, Elder Mo had been the one forcing a cordial expression, suppressing frustration beneath layers of grace.

Now?

The roles had reversed.

Elder Mo's face was a placid winter lake, serene with satisfaction.

Fang Yuan's, meanwhile, was the carefully composed mask of a man who had just watched his own plans burst into flames and now had to smile through the smoke.

He slowly turned his head, locked eyes with Elder Mo, and nodded ever so slightly.

"...Fang Mei," he said, voice calm, almost resigned. "Go to my chambers and bring the jade scroll."

"Yes, Brother!" Fang Mei beamed, practically skipping away.

It was in that moment that Fang Yuan noticed it.

He had been too caught up in political footwork, in maneuvering through a banquet laced with landmines and frosted smiles, to pay attention to the details.

But now, standing amidst broken expectations and elegant betrayals, he saw it.

Fang Mei was glowing. Her steps light. Her cheeks flushed. And Fang Tian—he was looking at her.

With warmth.

With gentleness.

With... love.

Fang Yuan blinked.

Oh.

His irritation dulled ever so slightly.

Hmph. Fine...

He gave an inward grunt. *At least he's not being a complete idiot.*

A touch of relief seeped into his thoughts as he folded his arms behind his back, letting out a subtle sigh.

So that's what this is. Love makes idiots of us all... but at least it's a reason I can understand.

Still, his analytical mind didn't rest.

Fang Mei... right, the girl Uncle Fang Liu brought in from the outside. She's not our blood relation so... technically. Hm.

Biologically... should be also fine. Legally... probably depends which elder you ask. But culturally?

He thought back to his past life on Earth.

I've seen worse. Step-siblings marrying was barely taboo where I came from. In fact, the dramas made it romantic.

He nodded inwardly.

Very well. I approve... provisionally.

But just as peace began to return to his inner world—

A new voice cut through the rising calm, shrill and sudden.

"Three years!"

Chapter 7: Three Years Promise.

Fang Yuan's mind blanked.

What?

He turned just in time to see Fang Tian step forward with unexpected intensity.

The crowd stirred.

"I, Fang Tian," the young man declared, "vow to train with all my strength. And in three years, I will personally challenge Gu Xin... and reclaim the honor my family lost today!"

Fang Yuan's composure cracked.

Huh? WHAT?

He stared at his brother.

What the hell are you doing!? This was already a done deal! The engagement is off! Everyone's saving face! Why are you throwing down a challenge now!?

He wanted to scream. *Tian! Are you STUPID!?*

The entire pavilion froze for the second time that day.

Whispers began again but this time, far less respectful.

"...Did he just... challenge the direct disciple of the Divine Ice Sect?"

"Reclaim... honor?"

"Was there even honor lost?"

"Oh dear heavens..."

Elder Mo blinked. He hadn't expected this.

Gu Xin turned her head slightly just enough for a subtle furrow to form between her brows.

Fang Yuan stared dead ahead, face neutral.

While there was an utter tremors in his brain

Three years? THREE YEARS!? What am I supposed to do with that? Are you declaring war? An open challenge to one of the four great sects!? And what honor? No one insulted us!

He closed his eyes briefly, inhaled through his nose, and exhaled slowly.

Then opened them and smiled.

"I see," he said.

No, I don't see. I can't see anything. I've gone blind from secondhand embarrassment.

The entire room watched, waiting for his reaction.

Would he disavow his brother?

Would he spin it?

Or would he commit spiritual seppuku from sheer shame?

But Fang Yuan was nothing if not a master of banquets and blades.

He straightened his back.

Lifted his chin and with the best of his strength.

And said in a somewhat calm voice, "Then I shall look forward to seeing what my brother becomes in three years."

Elder Mo let out a slow, measured chuckle when he heard Fang Yuan.

It was the kind of laugh that held neither mockery nor warmth, merely the chilly amusement of someone who'd just been handed an unexpected gift of comedy.

"What fortuitous timing," he said, folding his hands behind his back. "In three years, the Divine Ice Sect will indeed be holding our next Sect Examination. If... Young Master Fang Tian here can pass the entrance, then perhaps—*perhaps*—he may be eligible to challenge Gu Xin."

He turned to the crowd with an elegant nod, as though sealing a royal decree.

The implication was clear.

You want to duel our sect leader's direct disciple? Then climb the mountain first.

Around the pavilion, the guests didn't even bother hiding their reactions this time.

"Oh heavens..."

"That's not just any examination—"

"Even geniuses struggle to enter..."

"Challenge Gu Xin? She's already...!"

They didn't say it aloud, but the conclusion hung heavily in the air: *This boy has no chance.*

Gu Xin, standing to the side like a sculpture of snow, didn't react at all.

Because she didn't have to.

At the age of eighteen, she had already reached the late stage of Golden Core realm.

A feat so absurd it would sound like fiction to most small cities.

And more critically... it was two years younger than when Fang Yuan himself touched golden core realm.

The audience didn't miss the comparison.

If Fang Yuan was hailed as Coldwind's unrivaled genius... then Gu Xin was something greater.

Peerless.

Untouchable.

Divine.

Fang Yuan felt the room's perception shift in real-time.

The glances thrown at Gu Xin weren't just respectful, they were reverent.

And the ones aimed at Fang Tian?

Pitying. Curious. Amused.

Even he had to admit it: **Yeah... my brother is about to dive headfirst into a cliff without any sort of protective gears. Especially a cliff he dug out himself.**

He glanced at Fang Tian again.

The boy stood tall, fists clenched, determination practically leaking out of his pores.

And yet, Fang Yuan's eye twitched.

Why? You have Fang Mei already!

Brother, be for real!

Fang Yuan closed his eyes briefly and sighed.

Then, unbidden, a line surfaced in his memory.

A song from Earth.

"Only know you love her when you let her go... and you let her go..."

He opened his eyes, dead inside.

Ugh. That's so cringe.

He glanced back at his brother, who was currently staring at Gu Xin.

And then over to Fang Mei, who had just returned with the jade scroll, looking between the two with conflicted eyes and an awkward little smile.

Fang Yuan sighed again.

Fine. Let's say this is love. I won't interfere.

But three years, Tian. Three years. If you're still in Qi Condensation by then, I'll send you and Fang Mei far far away, remotely far away and have you two settle down.

Still smiling, Fang Yuan stepped forward and gently took the scroll from Fang Mei's hands.

He offered it to Elder Mo with a light bow.

"The contract," he said.

"Thank you for honoring it... and for giving us the opportunity to rewrite its terms under clearer skies."

Elder Mo received it with a calm nod.

Their fingers touched briefly on the exchange.

No more words passed.

But the smile behind Mo's eyes said it all:

Looks like I win this round, clan head Fang.

Fang Yuan clicked his tongue while Elder Mo offered a shallow bow.

"Then we shall not linger," he said, voice clipped and smooth. "The Divine Ice Sect has spoken. In three years... let fate decide."

Gu Xin didn't speak, not even once during this whole exchange.

She gave one last glance towards the mountains beyond the city walls as if this entire visit had been little more than a passing flake in her winter-bound path.

She turned with the elegance of a falling snow petal and followed Elder Mo.

The disciples of the Divine Ice Sect moved with silent precision, their departure as seamless as their arrival.

And just like that...

They were gone.

Only the frost in the air remained.

The moment the last of their figures disappeared past the grand pavilion gate, the atmosphere collapsed in on itself.

Awkward coughs, stiff shifts of posture, and the scraping of chairs followed like a delayed echo.

Chapter 8: Fake Realm.

Fang Yuan stood in place for one breath longer than necessary.

Then, with an elegant wave of his sleeve and a measured smile, he faced the remaining guests.

"Well then," he said warmly, as though nothing strange had happened at all, "though the banquet was... unexpectedly lively, I must thank all of you for coming to celebrate my birthday."

Some chuckled. Others gave polite nods.

Fang Yuan clapped lightly.

"Mei'er, Tian, see that our guests receive their parting gifts. I had the boxes prepared personally—may the heavens grant that they taste better than Tushan's cooking."

A few elders laughed at that, the tension loosening slightly.

Elder Wu muttered into his cup, "The boy still knows how to close a scene."

Elder Lin stood, smoothing his sleeves with grace. "Your hospitality is appreciated, Clan Head Fang. May Fang Family remain calm under your watch."

Elder Zhao nodded and followed without another word, while Elder He simply muttered, "Hmph," and limped out, though there might've been a smirk beneath that beard.

As the guests slowly filed out, carrying silken-wrapped gift boxes filled with spirit teas, frost-lotus pastries, and a bottle of Coldwind Brew each, Fang Yuan remained at the door to personally bow to every single one.

He bowed to the men who had doubted him.

He bowed to the elders who had laughed at him.

He bowed to the wives who had already begun whispering their own clan strategies for the next alliance.

And all the while, his expression never changed.

Calm. Warm. Composed.

It was only when the last guest had left and the heavy doors of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion finally thudded shut behind him... that Fang Yuan's smile vanished.

He exhaled deeply, the weight of the evening dropping across his shoulders like a cloak soaked in frost.

"...I should've just faked a closed-door cultivation and skipped my birthday this year," he muttered.

From behind, Fang Mei peeked around the hall's curtains, giving him a sheepish smile.

Fang Tian stood next to her, trying very hard to look like someone who hadn't just messed up his elder brother's birthday banquet.

Fang Yuan stared at him.

His eyebrow twitched but he said nothing.

"Mei'er, Tian," Fang Yuan said, rubbing his temple as the last of the guests filed out, "I expect to see you both in my chamber... after you help clean up the banquet hall with the other family members."

The emphasis on after was sharp enough to cut a spirit fruit.

Both of their smiles faltered.

But Fang Yuan didn't wait for their protests.

With a graceful pivot that screamed I'm too old and too important for this nonsense, he swept away from the mess, leaving the two lovebirds and a crowd of stunned elders behind.

"Let the youth handle the cleaning up," he muttered to himself as he made his way down the lantern-lit path to his private courtyard. "At least I don't have to do manual labor. Small victories."

By the time he stepped into his chamber and closed the door, the exhaustion hit him like a silent formation seal.

He slipped off his formal robe, letting the deep purple silk cascade to the floor in a soundless ripple of grace.

With unhurried movements, he donned a loose inner robe before turning to the glass container atop his desk.

From the discarded robe, he carefully removed the embroidered sigil stitched in deep violet, the mark of a Golden Core cultivator.

Deception? Naturally.

What's a cultivator without a few good lies?

He placed the sigil back into its concealment array, then sat cross-legged before the black jade screen hovering silently above his desk.

With a flick of his spiritual will, the screen shimmered to life.

[Host: Fang Yuan

Realm: Peak Nascent Soul]

Fang Yuan stared.

A long breath slid from his lips as he leaned back slightly, arms crossed.

"What's a cultivator without trump cards? A farmer, get it?" he added to himself with a smug smirk.

Then paused.

"...That was terrible."

Silence reigned.

Clearing his throat, he continued scrolling.

[TALENT: Heavenly Root

MARTIAL TECHNIQUES:

Swift Step Footwork (Low-grade Black)

Golden Shell Armor (Mid-grade Black)

Tyrant's Light Sword (Low-grade Black)]

"...Huh?" Fang Yuan blinked. "I thought Tyrant's Light Sword was at least mid-grade. Low-grade? Are you kidding me?"

He clicked the technique for details, but the system refused to argue.

With a bitter laugh, he closed the technique tab and finally opened the blinking notification at the corner of the screen.

[UNREAD MAIL: x2]

"Open," he muttered, and the first mail unfolded like an ancient scroll.

[QUEST: Stop your brother from annulling the marriage]

Reward: Hollow Spirit Realm Pill x10

Status: ✕ Failed.]

Fang Yuan stared.

The screen blinked innocently back at him.

His jaw slackened slightly.

"...Ten Hollow Spirit Realm Pills..."

And then, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he slowly slumped forward and faceplanted into the desk.

Thud.

His spiritual pressure wavered with the force of disappointment.

"...You little donkey of a brother..." Fang Yuan groaned into the wood.

He didn't move.

His dignity remained on the floor along with his cultivation pride.

"I was this close to getting ten pills that even Nascent Soul old freaks would kill for. And you... you..."

He exhaled like a dying phoenix.

Then, from under his arm, came a muffled whisper.

"...I hope she was worth it, you lovestruck idiot..."

Rolling onto his side, Fang Yuan cracked one eye open and jabbed a finger at the glowing screen hovering overhead.

"Next mail," he muttered. "Let's get this over with before the heavens smite me again."

Just as he braced for more disappointment, a soft chime rang in his mind.

A second message slid gently into view, the golden interface shimmering with quiet significance.

[Clan Building Starter Pack Received]

Bone Marrow Tempering Pills ×10

Qi Realisation Pills ×10

Qi Condensation Pills ×10

Qi Transformation Pills ×10

Golden Core Pills ×10

Fang Yuan's eyes lit up, a faint gleam chasing away the fog of defeat.

"Oh?" he murmured, sitting up like a puppet whose strings had just been yanked by fate itself. "Now we're talking..."

His earlier despair began to thaw like winter snow under the first kiss of spring.

Ten pills for each realm advancement, from Qi realisation to Golden Core!

Chapter 9: Bone Marrow Pills.

The pills materialized from the system in shimmering flashes of light, five neat rows, each bottle perfectly aligned on the table before Fang Yuan like a miniature army awaiting orders.

He blinked, slowly reached out, uncorked one of the jade vials, and gave it a cautious sniff.

His eyes widened when he realised they were real.

Genuine.

High-purity, spirit-concentrated cultivation pills.

Fang Yuan's expression melted into something dangerous, somewhere between lunacy and bliss. Like a man who had just fallen hopelessly in love... with treasure.

But the moment was cruelly short-lived.

The door creaked open behind him.

And the two lovebirds entered: Fang Tian and Fang Mei, walking in like guilty kittens who had just knocked over an expensive vase.

Instantly, Fang Yuan's entire body straightened.

The crazed grin vanished, replaced by the solemn, weary look of an elder about to pass final judgment on two unruly juniors.

He motioned toward the cushions in front of him with an elegant flick of his hand.
"Come. Sit."

The two obeyed, heads slightly lowered, silent and demure.

You dare act timid now?! Fang Yuan screamed internally as he watched them settle in like well-behaved children.

You both ought to! For heaven's sake—I treat you like family! And you go ahead and challenge the very limits of my mental endurance?!

But he said none of this.

He only breathed deeply.

And then again.

And again.

The silence stretched awkwardly. The only sound was Fang Yuan's increasingly heavy breathing, like a cultivator seconds away from spontaneous combustion.

Finally, Fang Tian broke the silence, voice firm but soft. "Brother... please forgive me. I'm in love with Fang Mei. I wish to marry her."

Fang Yuan closed his eyes for a long moment. He opened them again, calm but dead inside.

He turned to Fang Mei.

"...And you?"

The girl gave a timid nod, barely above a whisper.

Fang Yuan stared at them.

Again.

Of course. Of course this is happening.

He turned to Fang Tian and his tone shifted, sharpened like a sword half-drawn.

"Tian. Do you know what you did today was foolish?"

Fang Tian blinked, confused. "But brother, I didn't want the engagement—"

"Not that, you donkey." Fang Yuan's voice dropped to a low hiss, laced with spiritual pressure. "The three-year agreement. What were you thinking when you said that in front of Elder Mo?!"

Fang Tian sat straighter, trying to channel nobility. "But brother, they came to annul the marriage... at your birthday banquet. They were being disrespectful."

Fang Yuan's internal monologue lit up like a fireworks display.

Yes. Yes they were. And I was handling it *perfectly*. *I maneuvered them into a corner! They couldn't even mention it without losing face.... until you barged in and threw them the escape ladder like an idiot with a death wish!*

He held back a groan and buried his face in one hand.

"Tell me, Tian," Fang Yuan said slowly, painfully. "How... do you plan to defeat Gu Xin in three years?"

The question sat there like a mountain.

Fang Tian opened his mouth.

Closed it.

And then silence ensued.

But then Fang Mei placed her hand on his arm, her voice quiet but steady.

"Tian... I believe you can. If you try hard enough... I know you can do it."

Fang Yuan stared at them.

His heart did something strange. Something warm. Something he did not approve of.

Oh, my poor heart, he thought. *You're right... how dare these two flirt in front of me like this.*

He gripped his teacup, steadying himself.

Followed by a small sigh, he reached toward the row of bottled pills he had received from the system and plucked out two glossy, jade-green ones from one of the bone marrow bottle.

He held them between his fingers, letting the light catch the shimmering swirl within.

They were so rare even he himself didn't know what a Bone Marrow pill was until today.

"These are Bone Marrow Pills," he said simply, holding one out to each of them.

Fang Tian blinked. "Wait... Brother, the Bone Marrow Pills? The ones that temper and purify the marrow, enhancing the body for cultivation?"

Fang Mei tilted her head, confusion written plainly on her face. "What's... bone marrow?"

Fang Yuan raised a brow at her, then looked back at his brother.

Fang Tian was clearly stunned, still staring at the pill as if it might vanish. The awe in his eyes wasn't faked. He knew what this was.

Which... caught Fang Yuan off guard.

Huh. I didn't even know what it was before the system dumped it on me. And this guy does? Interesting... he mused.

Then, naturally, the question came.

"Brother... where did you get this?" Fang Tian asked, eyes still wide.

Fang Yuan's smile didn't falter. His thoughts, however, spun like a sword formation.

Ah, right. An opportunity.

He waved a hand with practiced ease. "From the Divine Ice Sect. You know, they came with a gift earlier."

Internally, his mind was already racing.

Actually, I should go check what's in that gift box later. And even if I don't find anything useful...

I can just say every unexplainable resource I get from the system space 'came with the Divine Ice Sect's goodwill package.'

And it's not like they'd be shameless enough to come back and claim it.

Two birds. One gift box. That's actually pretty good.

He finished the thought with a faint grin on his lips only to realize that his two guests were still sitting in front of him, watching.

He immediately snapped back into solemn mode, expression sharpening as he pointed toward the door.

"What are you two waiting for?" he barked. "Go cultivate already!"

Fang Mei blinked. "M-Me too?"

Fang Yuan gave her a pointed look.

"Especially you. You should be the stronger one between the two of you."

He flicked a look at Fang Tian.

"That way, you'll have the strength to beat him up properly if he starts spouting nonsense again."

Fang Tian's expression twisted, halfway between a wince and a pout.

Fang Mei, however, tried to suppress a smile and failed miserably.

"Now go." Fang Yuan waved them off like mosquitoes. "And don't come back until your bones feel like they've been steamed by a thousand-year tortoise."

The two hurried out and Fang Yuan finally allowed himself to lean back, one arm behind his head as he stared at the ceiling.

"...And people say being a clan head is glamorous," he muttered. "Come on system, I deserve atleast a Hollow soul pill just for enduring this much drama. Don't be stingy."

Chapter 10: Eastern Ravine [1].

After Fang Tian and Fang Mei left the chamber, the atmosphere gradually settled.

The doors shut behind them with a soft thud, and peace returned; quiet and undisturbed.

The only sound now was the gentle rustling of the wind brushing against the silken curtains.

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly, exhaling through his nose.

"System," he said aloud, voice low, "do I have any tasks?"

A familiar golden glow shimmered into being before him, forming a translucent screen in the air. Lines of text began to unfurl smoothly across the surface.

[QUEST: Complete the pile of pending administrative tasks on your desk.]

Reward: Spirit Gathering Formation (High-Grade Black Rank)

Status: Ongoing

Fang Yuan's gaze drifted to the right, toward the wide, lacquered desk tucked beneath the window.

A truly tragic sight awaited him.

Documents, petitions, resource requests, training schedules, supply orders, and incident reports from the outer branches had all gathered into a towering stack of unreviewed paperwork.

Some were so old the ink had faded at the corners.

He rubbed his temples and sighed. "So this is the price of throwing a banquet..."

He sat down, the chair giving a faint creak under his weight, and picked up the first scroll from the pile.

Inkbrush in hand, he began working through the backlog. Methodically. Deliberately.

Stamp. Approve. Deny. Amend.

Despite the tedious nature of the task, Fang Yuan remained focused because the reward was no trivial matter.

A Spirit Gathering Formation, and not just any—this one was a high-grade black rank, an immensely valuable cultivation support array.

With it, the spirit qi concentration of any area it was placed in could be elevated far beyond normal thresholds, accelerating cultivation progress for everyone within range.

To a clan leader managing the development of an entire family, this wasn't just useful, it was transformative.

Fang Yuan's expression remained composed, but his movements were swift. Efficient.

Page after page was reviewed. Stamp after stamp pressed down in red.

Outside, the golden hue of the late afternoon sun began to shift, melting slowly into the deeper oranges of early evening.

Shadows stretched long across the polished floor.

Fang Yuan didn't look up.

He simply murmured to himself as he flipped to the next document, "I'll finish this before nightfall."

A soft knock echoed at the chamber door, pulling Fang Yuan from his focused scribbling.

He set his brush aside and glanced toward the entrance. "Come in."

The door creaked open, revealing a young maid dressed in pale blue robes. She stepped inside with a graceful bow, hands folded neatly in front of her.

"Family Head," she said respectfully, "here is the item you requested. Also, Elder Chen, your uncle asked me to inform you that he's planning to plant the Blossoming Thunder Orchid in his garden."

Fang Yuan blinked, briefly shifting his focus.

"The gift from the Lin family?" he asked, just to confirm.

The maid nodded. "Yes, sir."

He waved a hand. "Let him do as he pleases. Oh and send the alchemical furnace to Aunt Jingyi. She's been eyeing it since the banquet."

Another nod. The maid stepped forward, placed a slim lacquered box on the edge of the desk, and quietly turned to leave, closing the door behind her.

Left alone again, Fang Yuan let his gaze fall to the box now sitting in front of him.

This was it... the Divine Ice Sect's so-called "gift" to the Fang family. The one they had presented so ceremoniously in front of the entire pavilion. He arched a brow.

Surely, he thought, they must have brought something of substance if their intention was to break a longstanding engagement smoothly and maintain face.

He unlatched the box with a light flick of his finger.

The lid opened with a soft click, revealing... a single pill.

Fang Yuan stared at it.

Then blinked.

And stared again.

Inside was a single bone marrow pill.

if you could still call it that.

The surface was uneven, the lines of refinement broken like a student's failed calligraphy.

Its glow flickered dimly, like a lantern moments from dying.

Fang Yuan stared. Then scoffed.

"Ah yes," he muttered, "the Divine Ice Sect's legendary generosity. How blessed we are."

If not for the timely arrival of my system... he mused, I might have actually been excited to see this. Might've even handed it to Fang Tian with a proud smile, thinking I'd done my duty as an older brother.

He leaned back and slid the box to the side and picked up the next scroll from his stack, dipping his brush once again into ink.

When the moon reached its zenith, casting a pale silver glow through the lattice windows, Fang Yuan was still seated at his desk.

The room was bathed in soft candlelight, the flickering flames casting long shadows against the polished wood and stacks of scrolls.

He let out a long, weary sigh, massaging the bridge of his nose.

He had clearly underestimated the sheer weight of internal clan affairs.

His brush hovered over a half-reviewed scroll, the characters crisp and formal.

"To the Esteemed Family Head,

We humbly request additional manpower to be dispatched to the Spirit Stone Mines with urgency.

During excavation, we have uncovered what appears to be the remains of a Level Three Alchemist.

Preliminary inspection suggests a potential hidden chamber beneath the lower shaft.

However, there have also been repeated sightings of unidentified beast tracks near the entrance.

For safety reasons, excavation efforts have been reduced to half-capacity. We await your directive on how to proceed."

Fang Yuan furrowed his brows as he scanned the signature and stamped seal at the bottom.

The request had been submitted five days ago.

"Five days?" he murmured. "Why wasn't this brought to my attention sooner?"

Before he could dwell on it further, a knock came at the door.

He set down the scroll. "Enter."

The door opened, revealing the same maid from earlier. She bowed swiftly, her expression tinged with urgency.

"Family Head," she said, "a message from the outer perimeter. There's been an incident in the Eastern Ravine. Elder Chen and several others have already departed to investigate."

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed, the pieces connecting in his mind.

Eastern Ravine... That's where the Spirit Stone Mine is located.

He was already on his feet before she finished speaking.

"Thank you for the information, while I'm gone make sure no one enters my chamber. Also bring me my robe."

The maid bowed again and moved quickly to fulfill the order.

Fang Yuan reached for his sword and strode toward the door, his earlier exhaustion vanishing like mist.