

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

#Chapter 121- Scar-Lip [1] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 121- Scar-Lip [1]

Chapter 121: 121- Scar-Lip [1]

The Blackridge Pass narrowed, cliffs of jagged obsidian leaning in like disapproving sentinels.

Mist coiled around the wagon wheels, muffling sound and reducing visibility to hazy silhouettes.

Inside the lead carriage, Fang Lian's senses extended far beyond the plush interior.

She noticed the shift in the wind, the sudden hush of bird calls, and the unnatural stillness in the scrub along the cliffsides.

An ambush point? she wondered.

Opposite her, Fang Ruì shifted, her own Qi subtly flaring as she sensed it too.

Her knuckles whitened on the scroll she still pretended to read.

Outside, Fang Bong's heavy, resentful footsteps near the carriage faltered, replaced by the tense hush of drawn breath from the junior guards.

A sharp, artificial whistle split the mist, high, mocking, the universal bandit call to arms.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Figures dropped from crevices overhead, landing with practiced ease on the path ahead and spilling from side gullies, blocking the caravan's advance and flanks.

Twenty, maybe thirty.

Rough leathers, scarves obscuring faces, eyes gleaming with avarice.

At their head stood a hulking man, a livid scar splitting his lip, radiating the unstable aura of a newly minted Qi Transformation cultivator.

He hefted a serrated axe that glinted dully in the weak light.

"Well, well," rumbled the scarred leader, his voice like stones grinding. "Lin Hao. Fancy meeting your trinket train here. And you brought puppies to bark for you?"

His gaze swept dismissively over the visibly tense junior Fang cultivators before landing with contempt on Fang Rui's face, visible through the carriage window.

"What's this? You are hiring childrens to guard caravans now? How quaint." Raucous laughter echoed from his men.

Lin Hao stepped forward, hands raised placatingly, though his Peak Qi Condensation aura tightened defensively. "Honored Brother Scar-Lip! The toll was paid in Coldwind! Let us pass peaceably—"

"Peaceably?" Scar-Lip spat. "The toll's tripled. And we'll be taking that spirit-iron ore. Looks heavy. We'll lighten your load."

He gestured crudely towards the heavily guarded third wagon.

Fang Rui pushed open the carriage door, stepping out with deliberate calm.

Her Qi Transformation aura, previously restrained, bloomed subtly, a cool, steady pressure that momentarily silenced the bandit jeers.

"The agreed toll was paid. The cargo is not negotiable. Stand aside." Her voice was steel wrapped in silk.

Scar-Lip's eyes narrowed, momentarily assessing the young girl's power.

Then his gaze slid past her, landing on Fang Bong, who stood rigid beside the carriage wheel, fists clenched so tight his knuckles cracked.

The bandit leader's lip curled into a sneer. "Or what? Your little flower will wilt? Or maybe your big, angry pup there will try to bite?"

He pointed his axe at Bong. "He looks like a kicked mongrel ready to piss himself! Pathetic!"

The dam broke.

"PATHETIC?!"

The roar wasn't just loud; it was a physical wave of fury and pent-up humiliation.

Months of resentment towards Rui, the searing shame of his public defeat by Lian, the weight of his own perceived failure, it erupted from Fang Bong in a torrent of pure, unadulterated rage.

He didn't wait for Rui's order. Strategy vanished. Catharsis was all that mattered.

His sword flashed from its sheath not with technique, but with raw, terrifying momentum.

He didn't charge at Scar-Lip.

He launched himself at the nearest cluster of flanking bandits, the ones who had laughed the loudest.

Qi Condensation power, unrestrained and fueled by berserk fury, exploded outwards.

A bandit raised a buckler, still smirking.

When their swords connect.

Wood and bone disintegrated. The bandit screamed, hurled backwards into two companions, sending them sprawling.

Fang Lian watched, impassive from the carriage doorway.

Her eyes, cold and analytical, tracked every movement.

She saw the openings Bong left in his fury, the wild expenditure of Qi, the complete lack of defense.

She saw the brutal efficiency born purely of overwhelming power and unleashed emotion.

So many openings, she observed dispassionately. Well, it's good that you are wasting your energy on them.

Fang Bong became a whirlwind of destruction.

He didn't parry; he smashed through spear thrusts, his reinforced body ignoring glancing axe blows.

A bandit lunged with a poisoned dagger; Bong seized his wrist, snapped it like dry kindling, and used the shrieking man as a flail to bludgeon another into unconsciousness.

A third tried to flank him; his sword whistled in a brutal horizontal arc, carving through leather and flesh, painting the mist crimson.

It wasn't combat; it was exorcism by violence.

The bandits' laughter died, replaced by shouts of alarm and raw fear.

The sheer, primal ferocity of the Fang cultivator's assault shattered their bravado. Scar-Lip's eyes widened, the mockery replaced by wary shock.

Fang Rui stood firm beside the carriage. She didn't intervene.

Her gaze flickered from Bong's rampage to Scar-Lip and his core group.

Her own Qi stirred, a gathering storm held in check.

Let him burn it out on the chaff, she decided, a tactical choice emerging from her initial surprise. He weakens them, expends his strength. And then we can safely handle the head.

Lin Hao ducked behind a wagon, eyes wide.

"By the ancestors..." he breathed, equal parts horrified and impressed by the brutal efficiency.

Scar-Lip, seeing his flank collapsing under the berserk assault, snarled.

He raised his axe, his Qi Transformation aura flaring aggressively. "ENOUGH! Kill the mad dog! The rest, slaughter the guards, take the—"

His command was cut short.

Fang Bong, having pulverized the last bandit in his immediate vicinity, whirled.

His chest heaved, spattered with blood not his own. His eyes, burning with released fury and a terrifying, feral light, locked onto Scar-Lip.

He dropped the broken bandit he'd been using as a club like discarded refuse.

"Your turn," Bong growled, the words thick with spent rage and dark promise.

He leveled his sword, dripping with blood, directly at the bandit leader. The air crackled with unspent violence.

The crushing weight of his humiliation was momentarily forgotten, replaced by the savage, simple clarity of facing a worthy target for his rage.

Fang Lian's hand finally moved, resting lightly on her sword hilt.

The real threat was engaging.

Fang Rui's voice cut through the tension, clear and commanding:

"Bong! Contain him! Juniors, defensive perimeter! Protect the wagons!"

Her eyes met Scar-Lip's, her own Qi Transformation aura rising to meet his, a silent challenge issued.

Chapter 122: 122- Scar-Lip [2] (BONUS)

Fang Bong exhaled, chest heaving, blood dripping from his knuckles.

His sleeves were shredded, revealing bruises and gashes, but the fire in his eyes hadn't dimmed.

He looked back once at Elder Rui.

"Fang Bong, stand down for now," she said, her tone brooking no argument.

He stepped back, his hands clenched.

Scar-Lip wiped a trickle of blood from his cracked lip, smirking. "So, you're the one in charge, huh? Thought you'd keep hiding behind brats and come out only when I'm exhausted."

Fang Rui's robes rustled as she stepped forward, silent and precise.

She drew her sword, not flashy, just a slender curve of spiritual metal that shimmered faintly with condensed light.

Scar-Lip cracked his neck.

His aura flared, the early stages of Qi Transformation, raw and unrefined, but still dangerous.

Spiritual pressure thickened the air, sending dust and debris into swirls.

"You know," he said, sliding into a low stance, "if you hand over your cargo, maybe I'll just break your arms instead of your neck. And of course, give me that boy as compensation."

Fang Rui didn't reply. She closed her eyes for a breath.

Then she opened them, focused, calm, and cold.

The Tyrant Light Sword ignited.

A beam of sharp radiance snapped into place along the blade's edge, humming with dangerous restraint.

"First Form—Divine Line."

She thrust forward.

A streak of light shot from the tip of her sword, thin as thread, sharp as judgment.

It pierced through the air in a straight line, whistling toward Scar-Lip with lethal precision.

Scar-Lip's eyes widened.

He barely tilted his head aside as the light grazed his cheek, slicing a shallow but clean cut from jaw to ear.

"Cheeky bitch! As expected of the Fang family!" he roared.

He lunged with a spinning crescent axe, spiritual force swirling around the weapon in a wave of violence.

Rui's hand flashed into a different seal.

A golden shimmer erupted around her.

"Golden Shell Armor—First Form: Cowardice."

A radiant shell of golden light enveloped her body, opaque and gleaming like molten coin.

The axe slammed into it with a resounding clang, sparks flying as the shield held firm.

She gritted her teeth.

The energy drain was immense.

Holding this form for long was suicide.

She pushed forward, dispelling the shield the moment his axe rebounded.

Her sword flashed again.

"Tyrant Light Sword—Second Form: Star Form."

Two beams of light shot outward and spiraled around her sword, meeting above its tip like twin arcs forming a half-star.

She slashed downward.

The paired lines dove in an intersecting arc, striking Scar-Lip's chest in a brilliant explosion of light and sound.

His spiritual armor cracked, but didn't break.

The bandit leader roared and retaliated.

His axe became a blur, wind and pressure exploding outward.

Fang Rui stepped back, barely evading.

The Cowardice shield flickered on again, briefly catching one more blow before flickering dangerously.

Her breathing grew heavier.

She was fast, clean, and deadly.

He was wild, powerful, and relentless.

Blow for blow. Technique for brute strength.

They fought to a standstill.

Minutes passed, though it felt like hours.

The ground around them bore gashes and scorches, the trees behind were splintered, rocks melted where her beams had struck.

Finally, both stepped back.

Rui's hair was disheveled, the hem of her sleeve torn and smoldering.

Her shield had long since collapsed.

Scar-Lip bled from a cut over his brow and clutched his side, breath ragged.

"Not bad... for a pampered noble of the Fang Clan," he spat.

Rui didn't answer. She raised her blade again, ready.

But before either could resume, a cold shadow fell over them both.

Scar-Lip blinked and then froze.

A girl stepped forward. Her eyes, flat as still water, locked onto him.

She hadn't moved once during the entire battle, but now her killing intent was unmistakable.

She drew her sword.

"You two are taking too much time," she said.

And the air turned sharp.

Fang Lian's blade gleamed like moonlight, eerily calm in the midst of the chaos.

She didn't move an inch yet the sheer pressure that emanated from her presence made even the low-ranked bandits behind Scar-Lip stagger back instinctively.

She turned to Fang Rui, her voice polite, almost gentle.

"I don't mean to disrespect you, Elder Fang Rui. But if the Clan Head, my master were to hear that you engaged in a fair, one-on-one battle with a mere bandit..."

Her words paused, just long enough to twist the knife with poise.

"He would surely be disappointed."

Fang Rui's jaw tightened.

Her sword hand flexed, then relaxed. A dozen justifications swirled in her chest.

He was a Qi Transformation cultivator. It was the correct decision. Better I face him alone than risk the juniors.

She opened her mouth—

But then closed it again.

The words wouldn't come.

Because... she knew Fang Yuan wouldn't be pleased.

Not because she fought hard but because she fought alone.

But because she had fought a bandit on a one on one when she could have asked for the help of those she had brought along.

A bitter taste rose in her throat.

Fang Lian gave her a slow, respectful smile, one that, despite the courtesy felt edged with thorns.

Then she pointed her sword at Scar-Lip.

"Elder Fang Ruì," she said clearly, for all the wounded and watching to hear,

"My master adores your hard work. But he has asked me to remind you—"

"To rely on others more."

She took a step forward.

"That's also the the task my master gave me, if you're still curious."

"So..." Her voice dropped to a deadly softness.

"Will you join hands with me and take down this fiend?"

Scar-Lip's face contorted with rage.

"YOU DARE!?" he roared, spiritual pressure flaring in a storm of raw Qi. "A brat and a half-dead matron think they can—"

He didn't finish.

Fang Ruì stepped beside Lian, raising her sword again.

Her eyes no longer burned with isolated resolve, they shimmered with clarity and cooperation.

She inhaled once and said softly, "Let's do it."

(4/9 BONUS)

Chapter 123: 123- Scar-Lip [3] (BONUS)

Scar-Lip's instincts screamed.

And he instantly lunged first, erupting forward with a wild sweep of his twin cleavers.

Qi crackled down the curved blades like lightning across rusted iron, each strike leaving jagged scars in the earth.

Fang Ruì stepped in, her sword glowing gold.

"Tyrant Light Sword – First Form: Divine Line!"

A radiant beam exploded outward in a straight path, slicing across Scar-Lip's advance.

The sheer force drove him back a step but he twisted, snarled, and surged forward again, his eyes bloodshot with fury.

"You think your fancy light tricks scare me!?"

But his second charge was interrupted.

From the side, Fang Lian moved without flourish, without warning.

Not flashy, it was just fast... and terrifyingly so.

Her blade left trails of frost through the air as she struck with frightening precision, forcing Scar-Lip into a defensive scramble.

He blocked one slash, barely.

Then two.

But the third came from behind.

He roared as her sword spun low and grazed his ribs, frost blossoming along the torn fabric of his shirt.

He snarled and backed away but Fang Rui was already moving again, golden light blazing from her sword's tip.

"Divine Line!" she cried again, forcing Scar-Lip to leap aside.

He landed heavily, teeth bared, cleavers crossed in front of him.

"IS THAT ALL!?" he howled.

Fang Rui's voice then suddenly rang out across the battered field, clear and commanding, "Fang Bong, Fang Li, Fang Wen, Fang Rin, what are you waiting for? Lend a hand."

And in that very instant, Fang Bong clicked his tongue but moved nonetheless, dragging his blade behind him. "Tch... Once I reach Qi Transformation I'll pay you back."

Fang Li and Fang Wen, siblings with matching green sashes, exchanged a nod and rushed forward with determined eyes.

Fang Rin, the quietest of the four, stepped out without a word, her eyes focused like a drawn bow.

All four were at Qi Condensation Stage, barely a match for Scar-Lip alone, but enough to keep the incoming bandit reinforcements at bay.

Opposite them, Scar-Lip snarled.

"Tch. So it's to be a farce, is it?"

He spun on his heel, spitting blood, and shouted:

"Oi! You lot! They're bringing in kids now. If you've ever wanted a piece of Fang silver or a noble scalp, now's your chance!"

A scattered cheer rose behind him, uneven and hoarse.

Half a dozen bandits stumbled into view, none over Qi Realisation.

Their auras flickered like guttering candles.

A few trembled from injuries, others clutched mismatched blades with more desperation than intent.

Still, Scar-Lip grinned, raising his crackling crescent axe, spiritual pressure swelling once more.

"Let's see if united trash can still match raw power."

Fang Li and Wen took the flanks, parrying blades with barely-contained nerves.

Rin weaved between strikes with a dagger in each hand, her footwork steady and precise.

While Fang Bong fought like the bandits owed him a year's worth of debt.

While they held the line, the true clash raged between Fang Ruì, Lian, and the bloodied Scar-Lip.

Scar-Lip lunged toward Fang Lian, his crescent axe glowing with wicked red light, spiritual energy whipping around him like flame.

But Fang Ruì met his charge head-on, stepping forward in a golden blur.

"Golden Shell Armor: Cowardice!"

A full-body energy shield snapped into place as she blocked Scar-Lip's downward slash, the ground beneath her feet cracking from the force.

"Divine Line!" she called out once more, thrusting her sword forward.

A straight beam of radiant energy lanced out, catching Scar-Lip along the ribs and forcing him to stumble back.

"Again?!" he spat blood and glared. "You pests—I'll carve you up!"

With a roar, he lunged forward.

His massive crescent axe spun with brutal momentum, aiming straight for Fang Rui's head like a falling star.

Fang Rui instinctively raised her sword and shouted, "Golden Shell Armor: Cowardice!"

But—nothing.

Her heart dropped. She had drained her qi reserves. No shield formed. No golden shell encased her. She had not maintained her qi reserve!

For a breathless moment, death rushed toward her.

In desperation, Fang Rui turned her gaze toward Fang Lian.

And that's when she saw it, a quiet smile resting on the girl's face.

Amid the storm of dust and danger, that smile was impossibly calm.

It wasn't arrogance. It wasn't mockery.

It was assurance. Steady and still.

Something in Fang Lian's expression, so composed, so unshaken that it reached into Fang Rui's chest and untied the knot of panic there.

Just like that, her fear eased.

She didn't know why, but in that moment, she felt safe.

Then—

Clang!

A sharp, ringing sound echoed through the air.

The spinning axe halted, not on Fang Rui's skull, but against a small, circular shield of golden light that had materialized between her and the blow.

It held firm, absorbing the full force of Scar-Lip's strike.

Not the full-body Cowardice form.

A refined, precise barrier. 2nd form of the golden shell armor, Bravery.

Fang Rui stared in disbelief, her breath catching.

On the other hand, Scar-Lip's eyes slowly widened, his axe quivering.

"You... you're at the Qi Transformation Realm?"

Fang Lian's gaze didn't waver from Fang Rui.

Ignoring him, she spoke softly, "Elder Fang Rui... it's too early to be surprised."

"By the way, Elder Fang Rui," she said, her voice cutting through the lingering shock, "Observe carefully, I want to show you something."

She raised her sword, not with struggle, but with elegance.

"Tyrant Light Sword: Star Form."

A single line of light appeared, then another.

Then three.

Then four.

Then the final one.

Five radiant beams crossed the air like drawn constellations, locking together mid-flight.

A perfect, luminous star formed in the sky, its radiance humming with concentrated spiritual force.

The whole battlefield stilled.

Even Scar-Lip's eyes widened.

For a while, there was complete silence on the battlefield.

Fang Rui stood rooted, her lips parted. Her sword lowered slowly.

"She... completed the star?" she whispered.

From behind, the juniors, Fang Li, Fang Wen, Rin, and even Fang Bong, stared with wide eyes.

"...Impossible," Fang Bong muttered.

(5/9 BONUS)

Chapter 124: 124- Scar-Lip [4] (BONUS)

Fang Lian, unaware of what the others were thinking or perhaps simply unconcerned, acted first.

Without a word, she released the Tyrant Light Sword: Second Form – Star Form.

Five blazing beams of radiant energy arced out, converging with deadly precision into a perfect, burning star.

It whistled through the air, heading straight for Scar-Lip.

Sensing the lethal intent in the technique, Scar-Lip's eyes widened.

In a flash, he bit down on a pill hidden in his molars and swallowed.

The effect was instantaneous.

His muscles bulged grotesquely, veins pulsing with unnatural strength as his body swelled to twice its size.

A crimson aura burst from his skin as he roared, raising his crescent axe high.

"Cut through the heavens!" he bellowed.

But Fang Lian did not flinch. Her face was expressionless, her gaze calm as the blazing star struck his axe—

BOOM!

A violent shockwave rippled outward, kicking up a storm of dust and rock.

Scar-Lip was launched backwards like a ragdoll, tumbling through the air before crashing into the ground with a thunderous impact.

She didn't hesitate.

Drawing her sword, Fang Lian soared forward in a streak of silver light, riding her qi without reserve.

In one fluid motion, she landed beside the downed bandit leader and, with a single thrust, drove her blade clean through his neck.

There was no hesitation. No second guesses. She ended it right there, swift and quick.

His body twitched once and then stilled.

Fang Lian stood, withdrawing her sword without a flicker of emotion.

Her blade bloody stained.

She turned toward Fang Rui.

"Elder Fang Rui," she said softly, as if she hadn't just slaughtered a man seconds ago.

"It's best if you rest. I'll make sure none of the bandits leave here alive."

Even as she spoke, Fang Bong had finally joined the fray, grimacing but still striking down one of the fleeing enemies with a half-hearted grunt.

The rest of the bandits, seeing their leader fall so easily, lost all courage.

"He's dead! Retreat! Run!"

They broke ranks, abandoning weapons and comrades alike as they scattered across the plains.

But Fang Lian had no intention of letting them go.

Her figure flickered, once, twice, thrice.. like a mirage on the battlefield.

"Mirage Step. Mirage Step. Mirage Step."

Over and over she used the first form of Swift Step footwork, blurring through the bandits faster than they could cry for mercy.

Each step left another corpse.

Each breath brought another flash of steel.

She didn't spare a single one.

To the young Fang clan cultivators watching in stunned silence, it wasn't valor they saw.

It was butchery.

The way her sword moved, the way her eyes never wavered, the way the fallen piled up behind her without remorse, it was too much.

In that moment, Fang Lian no longer looked like a clan disciple.

She looked like a demon.

And somewhere behind her, someone whispered the word that had been hanging on all their tongues.

"... she's nothing like the clan head....."

Fang Lian stepped lightly over the bloodstained earth, her sword still in hand, but her expression calm, as if the chaos moments ago had been no more than a passing breeze.

Her eyes, steady and unblinking, swept over the battlefield.

One... two... three...

She counted as she walked.

By the time her steps slowed, she reached the last body, number twenty-seven.

She halted.

"Good. All accounted for," she murmured under her breath, sheathing her sword in a fluid motion.

A faint glow shimmered across her eyes as she turned her senses inward.

Her dantian pulsed steadily. *Half my qi reserve remains. Not bad.*

Her brow furrowed slightly. Strange.

Elder Fang Rui only used her qi a few times, and yet she burnt out so quickly. Was it nerves? Or something deeper? She let the thought drift as her eyes moved toward the elder's still form.

She approached calmly.

"Elder, do you need healing?"

Fang Ruì blinked, still seated against a broken cart wheel, her breathing uneven and her expression dazed.

She was staring at Fang Lian, not with fear, but something closer to awe.

Her eyes, wide and shimmering with disbelief, remained locked on to Fang Lian as if trying to convince herself the scene hadn't been an illusion.

"That star..." Ruì breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"You actually manifested... a perfect Star Form..."

Fang Lian said nothing and instead, she simply turned her head, expression cool and unreadable, and called out, her voice cutting clean through the stillness.

"Lin Hao."

The merchant jumped where he stood and ran forward like a child summoned by the headmaster.

"Y-Yes, Senior! How may I be of help to you?" he said, bowing deeply, his voice tight with nervous reverence.

Lian arched a brow and let out a soft giggle, amused by the stark shift in tone.

Indeed, she thought. *In this world, strength reigns supreme.*

"Bring me some first-aid supplies," she said lightly, almost teasing.

"And gather the injured here. No delays."

"Yes! Right away!" Lin Hao turned and bolted like his life depended on it.

Lian returned her gaze to Fang Ruì, her expression softening.

"Elder Fang Ruì—"

"Just Ruì," Fang Ruì interrupted, exhaling slowly.

"I prefer it. And besides... with that display, it's only a matter of time before you're made an elder too."

Fang Lian laughed again, light and honest this time.

"I'm still not quite there yet," she said with a tilt of her head. "But... I'll consider it. Since we're friends now, Ruì... you can call me Lian'er."

Rui gave a weary smile and nodded. "Lian'er it is."

Then she leaned back against the wheel, letting her eyes close for a moment. "I'm drained, physically, emotionally. I'll leave the group in your hands for now. If that's alright."

Fang Lian grinned, stretching her arms slightly.

"I'm okay with that," she replied. "You're making my job easier. I can't believe elders usually work in such roundabout manners."

Rui chuckled hoarsely.

"That's the secret art of age and experience... mostly paperwork and headaches."

Fang Lian raised a brow, then grinned. "If that's really true, then this old grandma right here should've gone extinct years ago."

The two stared at each other for a beat, then burst into laughter, the sound light and genuine, echoing off the blood-stained stones.

For a moment, amid the carnage and ash, it was as if they were just two girls teasing each other after a spar.

And perhaps, in that instant, that's all they needed to be.

(6/9 BONUS)

Chapter 125: 125-Hero Fang Tian.

The shout shattered the stillness like a thrown stone through glass.

"Shao ge! Shao ge! Wake up! Urgent!"

Fang Yuan jolted upright in his bed, the deep, clinging tendrils of sleep ripped away violently.

His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat in the sudden silence that followed the shout.

Blinking heavily, the world swam, the familiar shapes of his chamber blurred and doubled.

Weariness clung to him like a second skin, a heavy, sodden cloak. Every muscle protested, screaming for the oblivion he'd barely tasted. .

He ran a hand roughly over his face, fingers scraping against the stubble on his jaw, trying to banish the fog.

Groaning, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, the cool stone floor a shock against his bare feet.

He fumbled for a simple outer robe, pulling it on with sluggish movements.

The urgency in the shout suggested he couldn't ignore it, exhaustion be damned.

He shuffled towards the chamber door, each step feeling like wading through thick mud.

As he opened the door, the dimly lit corridor outside seemed to pulse. Standing there, practically vibrating with suppressed excitement, was Xiao Pei.

But it wasn't just Xiao Pei. Beside him, two servants strained under the weight of an enormous, ornately carved wooden chest.

It looked ludicrously large and out of place in the quiet hallway at this hour.

"Fang Yuan!" Xiao Pei beamed, his eyes wide and bright, completely oblivious to Fang Yuan's disheveled state and palpable fatigue.

He gestured grandly at the chest. "Look! Look what arrived! Just now!"

Fang Yuan squinted, his brain struggling to process the scene.

The chest dominated his bleary vision.

"Xiao Pei," he rasped, his voice thick with sleep.

"What... is that?" He gestured vaguely at the monstrous box.

"A gift!" Xiao Pei declared, puffing his chest out slightly as if he were personally responsible for its delivery. "A huge gift!"

"A gift?" Fang Yuan echoed, the word sounding foreign and nonsensical in the context of his exhaustion and the late hour.

He leaned against the doorframe for support, rubbing his temple. "Who... why... now?"

"From Tushar Village!" Xiao Pei explained, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. The servants grunted, shifting the chest's weight.

"The messengers just left! Apparently, your younger brother, Fang Tian pulled off something incredible! Somehow, he routed a bandit group that's been plaguing the

western ridge near the village! Wiped them out, single-handedly they say! The villagers are calling him a hero! And this," he slapped the side of the chest with a resounding thump, "this is for you! A show of respect! Can you believe it? Tushar Village!"

Fang Yuan blinked slowly.

Fang Tian? Bandits? Tushar Village?

The names floated through his sleep-fogged mind like drifting leaves, sluggish and half-formed.

Then it clicked, like a pebble dropping into still water.

Ah... right. I did send him to clear them out, he thought, rubbing his temple as the memory settled into place.

A faint, weary chuckle escaped him. He pushed himself off the doorframe and approached the chest.

His movements were slow, deliberate, like a man moving underwater.

He placed a hand on the cool, polished wood, his eyes still half-lidded, shadows deepening the hollows beneath them.

"Respect, huh?" he murmured. With a sigh that seemed to come from his bones, he closed his eyes for a brief moment.

When he opened them, a subtle, unseen pressure filled the air around the chest, his divine sense, a fine, invisible net cast over the contents within.

He leaned down, undid the simple latch, and heaved the heavy lid open.

Inside, nestled on rich, dark cloth, lay a single, large object.

Fang Yuan stared at it for a beat, then let out another soft, breathy chuckle, devoid of real humor.

He reached in and hauled it out.

It was a pig's head. Perfectly preserved, eyes glassy, snout pointed upwards.

Greasy and stark in the dim corridor light.

"It's a pig head," Fang Yuan stated flatly, holding it up by one ear, his voice utterly matter-of-fact.

The absurdity of the situation, the grand chest, the late hour, his crushing fatigue, this grinning porcine offering seemed lost on him, or perhaps buried too deep beneath the weariness.

"I know!" Xiao Pei replied, his enthusiasm undimmed by the grotesque reveal.

He pointed an emphatic finger at the head in Fang Yuan's hand.

"That's not the point! Look past the snout, Fang Yuan! Tushar Village! Sending you a gift! After years of barely paying their tithes on time and grumbling about every Fang who ever set foot there! They're the most stubborn, suspicious lot under the family's banner! This," he gestured wildly between Fang Yuan and the pig head, "this is a breakthrough! They're finally opening up! Showing deference! Focus on that!"

Fang Yuan looked from the pig head to Xiao Pei's earnest, excited face.

A slow, tired smile spread across his lips. He hefted the head slightly, its dead eyes seeming to stare blankly past Xiao Pei.

His voice, when he spoke, was low, calm, and perfectly deadpan.

"Thanks, Da Pang. Appreciate the optimism."

He paused, letting the nickname hang for a heartbeat.

Then, still holding Xiao Pei's gaze, he gave the pig head a little shake. "But see this? This is your little brother's head. Why aren't you sad?"

He held the eye contact, his expression completely serious, only the faintest tremor at the corner of his mouth betraying him.

Xiao Pei's smile faltered, confusion replacing excitement.

He blinked, looking from Fang Yuan to the pig head and back again, the gears turning slowly in his head.

"...My... brother...?" Xiao Pei repeated slowly, his brow furrowing deeply.

Fang Yuan couldn't hold it.

The absurdity, the exhaustion, the utter ridiculousness of Xiao Pei's earnest interpretation of the pig head as a diplomatic triumph, and the perfect setup of his own joke... it broke through.

A snort escaped him, then another, escalating rapidly into full, shoulder-shaking laughter.

He doubled over slightly, the pig head dangling forgotten in his grip, his weary eyes crinkling shut as genuine mirth, rare and bright, momentarily banished the fatigue.

Xiao Pei's face went through a spectacular transformation, confusion to dawning horror to blazing indignation.

His jaw dropped, then snapped shut. His cheeks flushed a deep, furious red.

"FANG YUAN!" he roared, the sound echoing down the stone halls, loud enough to wake anyone who hadn't already been disturbed.

He jabbed a furious finger at his laughing friend. "HOW DARE YOU CALL ME A PIG! I'M A HUMAN, DAMN IT! A HUMAN!"

The echoes of Xiao Pei's furious roar still vibrated in the stone corridor when a new sound shattered the fragile aftermath, the frantic slap of running feet on stone.

Felicia, her usually neat braids coming loose, her face pale and eyes wide with urgency, skidded to a halt just behind Xiao Pei, gasping for breath.

Fang Yuan's laughter died instantly, choked off as if a hand had closed around his throat.

He straightened, the lingering mirth vanishing from his eyes, replaced by sharp, immediate focus.

The pig head hung forgotten in his grip, its grotesque grin suddenly obscene in the new tension.

"Felicia?" Fang Yuan's voice was clipped, authoritative, cutting through her panting. "Did I not expressly say today was your day off? What are you doing here? Disobeying orders now?"

Felicia waved a dismissive hand, her chest heaving.

"That... that doesn't matter now, Clan Head! I just heard... I ran as soon as I..."

She sucked in another breath, her gaze darting between Fang Yuan and Xiao Pei, registering the strange tableau, the enraged Xiao Pei, the weary Fang Yuan, the absurd pig head but her terror overrode it all.

"A bad news! Terrible news!"

The shift in the air was palpable.

Fang Yuan's weariness seemed to solidify into something cold and hard.

Xiao Pei's indignant flush drained away, replaced by wary stillness.

The servants holding the now-empty chest shuffled nervously, sensing the sudden, profound gravity.

"Speak," Fang Yuan commanded, his voice low but carrying an undeniable weight.

All trace of sleepiness, all residue of humor, was gone. The Clan Head stood before them.

Felicia swallowed hard, her voice dropping to a horrified whisper that somehow carried further than a shout. "It's... it's about your brother Fang Tian, Clan Head."

Fang Yuan didn't move, but his knuckles whitened where he gripped the pig's ear.

Xiao Pei leaned forward slightly, his earlier outrage completely forgotten.

"What about Fang Tian?" Fang Yuan asked, each word precise and icy.

Felicia looked like she might be sick.

"He... he has... kidnapped the Third Princess."

The word hung in the air, monstrous and impossible. "They say... he's taken her. And... and he's currently on the run."

There was silence in the hall.

Heavy and tense but not for long.

Xiao Pei leaned in slightly, voice barely above a whisper.

"Brother Fang... I've read in stories that heroes usually have a princess by their side. Perhaps—"

He trailed off there, testing the waters.

Fang Yuan slowly turned his head, eyes narrowing as he stared at Xiao Pei.

For a long, thoughtful moment, he said nothing.

Then, a sigh stirred from deep in his chest.

Perhaps... this is karma, he thought bitterly, for making fun of brother Da Pang just now.

Chapter 126: 126- Clan meeting [1]

The phoenix soul pavilion thrummed with a suffocating tension, thick enough to choke on.

Torches guttered in wall sconces, casting long, dancing shadows that made the stern faces of the assembled elders look even more severe, etched with exhaustion and apprehension.

The air was cold, smelling of old stone and the lingering scent of hastily brewed, bitter tea.

They'd been roused from their beds, Fang Mei still adjusting her hastily pinned hair, Fang Sun stifling a yawn behind a weathered hand, Fang Chen rubbing sleep-grit from his eyes.

Even Fang Yin had been recalled with urgent haste from overseeing Tushar Village.

She stood stiffly by the door, dust still clinging to her boots, her expression grim.

Fang Yuan stood at the head of the heavy obsidian table.

His own weariness was a deep bruise beneath his eyes.

"I am profoundly sorry," he began, his voice rough but carrying clearly in the hushed hall.

"To have disturbed your rest, dear Elders, at such an hour... it is not done lightly. The matter demands our immediate counsel."

Fang Chen leaned back in his chair, dark smudges like bruises beneath his eyes.

"It's... acceptable, Nephew," he rasped, the words sounding dragged over gravel.

"These old bones... can handle... more task." He added, almost too low to hear, "...Probably."

A weak ripple of strained acknowledgement passed through the room, quickly swallowed by the oppressive silence.

Fang Yuan felt the sting of their fatigue, the unspoken questions hanging heavy.

The guilt was a cold stone in his gut, but the urgency was a blade at his throat.

He couldn't falter.

Taking a deep, steadying breath that did little to calm the tremor in his hands, he met the collective gaze, his own filled with a dread that mirrored theirs.

"Dear Elders," he started, the formality a brittle shield. "I am... deeply grieved... to report this. The situation is grave beyond measure."

He paused, the words catching.

"My... my dear younger brother, Fang Tian..." He forced the name out. "...has committed an unspeakable offense against the Kingdom."

A collective intake of breath.

Eyes widened.

Fang Jingyi, Fang Yuan's aunt, swayed in her seat, her hand flying to her chest as if struck.

"Offense? What offense?" she whispered, her voice thin with dawning horror.

Fang Yuan pressed on, the sentence a death knell. "...He has kidnapped the Third Princess. And is currently... on the run."

Silence.

Not the quiet of contemplation, but the stunned, airless silence of a tomb after the final seal is closed.

Fang Jingyi gasped, a sharp, wounded sound. Her knuckles whitened on the armrests, her face draining of all color.

For a terrifying second, she seemed to list sideways, nearly toppling from her chair before catching herself, trembling violently.

Around the table, reactions were visceral, each reflecting a unique shade of terror:

Fang Mei had her hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide with utter disbelief, shaking her head minutely as if denying the words themselves.

The other elders, too, shared that same stunned expression, wide-eyed, motionless, silent.

And amongst them, elder Joshua, known for his gentle nature and frayed nerves, lurched to his feet.

His chair scraped harshly against the stone floor.

"Clan Head!" His voice was a desperate, trembling plea, cracking on the edge of hysteria.

"Please! This... this is too late an hour for such... such dark jests!"

Tears welled in his eyes, unshed but glistening. "You're... you're jesting to lighten our spirits, yes? After this rude awakening? Right? Tell us it's a jest! You will make for an amazing clown, clan head. Please!"

Fang Yuan couldn't bear to look at Joshua's pleading face, nor at the collective devastation mirrored around the table.

He stared fixedly at the obsidian surface before him, seeing not the stone, but the yawning abyss Fang Tian had plunged them into.

He had expected disbelief, denial, panic.

The reality was worse.

It was the raw, unvarnished terror of people realizing their entire world, their legacy, their lives, were balanced on the edge of a royal executioner's blade.

Who in their right mind? The thought echoed in his skull, a silent scream clawing through disbelief. *Who courts annihilation so casually?*

Why would anyone challenge them?

The Tharz Kingdom was not some idle power, it boasted one of the most formidable lineups in the entire continent, let alone the kingdom.

Their strength was evident in how they had subdued not one, but all three of the great sects within their domain.

The first sect being the Divine Ice Sect, a sect renowned for its cold-blooded discipline and spiritual power.

Rumors claimed they housed no fewer than six Nascent Soul realm cultivators.

Their Sect Leader, known simply as the Frost Sovereign, had reached the peak of the Nascent Soul realm over a century ago.

Even today, her strength was whispered about with awe.

The second sect was the Verdant Dragon Sect, a sect deeply rooted in beast taming and spiritual arts.

Their roster included at least four Nascent Soul cultivators, with their Sect Master standing at the high stage of Nascent Soul, wielding a spiritual beast said to rival even an initial nascent soul expert.

And the third was the Astral Blade Monastery, a martial order famed for their ascetic sword doctrine and brutal cultivation trials.

They too had five confirmed Nascent Soul realm cultivators, and their Abbot, while only at the mid-stage was a feared battle-hardened monk with a body honed like star-metal.

For the Tharz Kingdom to have not only subdued these sects but bent them into loyal vassals, that alone spoke volumes.

Their royal cultivation lineup had to be monstrous.

Any force that could tame such titans wasn't merely powerful... they were terrifying.

No sane man would provoke them lightly.

They were terrifying.

Fang Yuan exhaled slowly, a tired breath threading through clenched teeth.

He realised he didn't understand his younger brother anymore. *Fang Tian, what are you thinking? What path are you walking now?*

Before the silence could settle, a voice suddenly tore through the hall—

"Quick! Someone call Doctor Mu!"

It was Fang Chen, his voice sharp with urgency.

"Fang Mei has fainted!"

Chapter 127: 127- Clan Meeting [2]

Fang Yuan turned sharply, the weight of chaos still heavy in the room.

He snapped his fingers with quiet finality. "Felicia."

The doors eased open before the echo had faded, and Felicia stepped through with practiced grace.

Without needing to ask, she assessed the scene, the crumpled figure of Elder Mei on the floor, breath shallow.

Fang Yuan's voice lowered, gentle yet commanding.

"Take Elder Mei to Doctor Mu. See that she's tended to carefully."

Felicia bowed, a deep, respectful nod. "As you wish, Clan Head."

Then, with surprising strength for her slender frame, she knelt and cradled Elder Mei, lifting her effortlessly into her arms.

Fang Mei's head lolled lightly against Felicia's shoulder.

Not a word more was said.

Her footsteps were soft as she carried the unconscious girl out of the hall, the air behind her parting like silk.

Only once she was gone did Fang Yuan turn back to the gathered elders, his expression unreadable.

Fang Yuan stood at the front, composed as always, his robes immaculate, his hands behind his back.

But this time... there was weight behind his presence, an unspoken density in the air, like the moment before a thunderstrike.

"Before we prepare and plan for any countermeasures," he said calmly, "I want to share a secret of mine with you all."

The room shifted, uneasy.

All eyes turned toward him by instinct.

Fang Chen paused mid-step and Elder Jingyi lowered her cup, frowning faintly.

Fang Yuan closed his eyes briefly, inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

His voice came even, yet carried like a bell struck in the heart:

"I am currently at the peak of the Nascent Soul Realm, not the initial stage."

soundless beat followed, a moment so heavy it seemed to crush thought itself.

The air hung motionless, thick with revelation.

Every elder in the room sat frozen, their minds blank, their breath caught mid-chest.

All their fears, their strategies, their doubts... suspended.

No one dared speak. No one even blinked.

They weren't just shocked.

They were overwhelmed.

Except for one.... Elder Yin was the first to crack the spell.

She opened her mouth, closed it, tried again, and finally blurted, "Clan head! You're amazing!"

Her words weren't elegant, but they were honest.

The strangeness of hearing sense from the clan's most unpredictable elder hit a few of the others like a welcome slap, and even Fang Yuan couldn't help but let out a sudden, unguarded laugh.

Emboldened, Elder Yin spun to the others, her voice ringing:

"Hey, it's good news, what are you all jaw-dropping for?"

For once, she seemed to be the only one who could speak plainly, as if chaos had found her right at home.

The cultivation hierarchy was clear: Qi Realisation, followed by Qi Condensation, then Qi Transformation, Golden Core, and finally, the Nascent Soul Realm.

Among those present in the hall, the elders were all firmly established at the Qi Transformation stage, a realm already considered formidable across most clans.

But Fang Yuan...

He stood two entire major realms above them.

He hadn't just broken into the Golden Core Realm, which alone would have placed him in the upper echelon of the kingdom.

No, he had ascended to the Nascent Soul Realm. And not just the early stage. Not mid. Not high.

Peak.

The final step before the next great ascension.

Initial, mid, high... and then peak.

It was a path that broke geniuses, drained sects of generations' worth of resources, and buried countless hopefuls under the weight of their ambition.

And Fang Yuan had climbed it alone.

The air in the hall was thick with disbelief.

The elders, all seasoned cultivators in their own right, struggled to digest the weight of what they had just heard.

Expressions flickered between awe, intimidation, and quiet uncertainty.

Except for Elder Fang Yin.

She wore no mask of confusion or envy. Only a soft, almost proud smile.

As though, for her, it had never been a question.

Of course their clan head was at the peak.

Of course the heavens would bend to him.

Some elders blinked as if trying to clear a dream: knuckles easing from the white grip of anxiety, eyes darting from Fang Yuan to each other as if silently asking for permission to believe.

Fang Chen, managed to stammer out, "Clan head, c-can you honestly tell me when you reached that realm?"

His words wavered, his composure far from him. Fang Yuan inhaled, held the world quiet for a breath, and answered his uncle, "A month before my thirtieth birthday."

Fang Chen stared, stunned. A beat of silence hung, heavy and uncertain.

Then he sat.

Sipped his tea.

Rose, paced a tight square, jumped, once, twice, thrice and then sank down again, and clasped trembling hands in his lap.

"I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay," he whispered, a mantra more to himself than anyone else.

Others watched, teetering on the edge between laughter and disbelief.

But it was Fang Jingyi who steadied them, her gentle, dignified voice carrying unexpected certainty.

"Well, nephew Yuan, if what you've said is true...I believe we have a bit of breathing room in this disaster then...."

Her smile, tired yet genuine, seemed to snap a cord: the weight in the room shifted palpably.

At her words, murmurs, so tentative only moments ago swelled into life.

The elders straightened; for the first time, the lines of worry on their faces eased.

Where their thoughts had been claws digging at the possibility of disaster, the room now hummed with the first tremors of hope.

Just moments ago, dread had hung heavy in the hall, every elder weighed down by the looming threat of the Tharz Kingdom, their thoughts haunted by images of ruin, war, and helpless surrender.

And then all of a sudden, those thoughts had vanished, blown away like mist under the sun.

Fang Yuan's words struck not like thunder, but like the sky itself shifting.

Their minds had reeled. Their hearts pounded furiously.

How could their attention not be shaken?

This wasn't just a matter of good news, it was a revelation that fractured everything they thought they understood.

In the entire recorded history of the Tharz kingdom, only one cultivators had ever reached the peak of the Nascent Soul realm.

The reclusive sect master of the Divine Ice Sect, an ancient monster of power rumored to freeze rivers with a sigh.

And now there's was a second one....

Fang Yuan.

Chapter 128: 128- Clan Meeting [3]

The boy who once practiced under their very guidance.

The youth they had continuously scolded for sneaking into restricted baths only meant for females.

The young man who once bowed low and called them "Elder" with bright, eager eyes.

And now he stood there, calm and composed yet impossibly distant, like a mountain that had grown too tall to see the peak of.

Shock gave way to awe.

And awe to something dangerously close to reverence.

What use were worries of life and death, of war and survival when the boy they had watched grow now walked with the weight of legend?

He wasn't just changing their clan's future.

He was rewriting the kingdom's history.

Right before their eyes.

An almost suffocating silence lingered, thick with reverence and distant awe, as if Fang Yuan no longer stood among them but upon some celestial peak, untouchable.

Then, like sunlight cracking through a stormcloud, Fang Jingyi let out a soft chuckle and placed a delicate hand over her chest.

"Dear nephew," she said, trying to maintain a teasing smile, "I'm heartbroken, truly. To think you'd hide something so monumental even from your dear aunt, did you not say I was like a mother to you?"

A few elders blinked, startled from their trance.

Someone exhaled a breath they hadn't realized they were holding.

Fang Jingyi's words weren't just playful, they were deliberate.

She was trying to pull Fang Yuan down from that pedestal in their minds, to remind them all that he was still their clan head, still flesh and blood, still family.

But Fang Yuan didn't smile.

His gaze sharpened, like the still edge of a sword.

His voice cut through the flickering amusement with cool steel.

"Elder Jingyi," he said as he took another deep breath, then spoke slowly, each word heavy, grounded, true.

"Because destruction waits at every step toward the heavens," Fang Yuan said quietly. His gaze swept across the room, measured, unblinking. "And arrogance... is the quickest way to fall."

The words landed like iron, each syllable tightening the air.

He exhaled, slow and heavy.

"I may stand at the peak of the Nascent Soul realm," he continued, "but I have no illusions. The kingdom undoubtedly possesses weapons capable of slaying even someone like me."

A pause. His voice darkened.

"And I suspect they have more, perhaps even cultivators who've stepped into the Hollow Spirit Realm, simply hidden from plain sight."

A ripple of unease passed through the room, as if the walls themselves had gone colder.

Elder Jingyi's smile twitched... tight, brittle. Her expression was all serene warmth, but her thoughts were shrieking.

Nephew, please!

Her jaw clenched as her inner voice howled: *You're freaking out the elders! Their faces have gone pale! Morale is collapsing—what happened to that cunning little boy with the silver tongue and unshakable charisma?*

She forced her smile wider, teeth gleaming like a cracked porcelain mask. *Pull it together, Fang Yuan. You're the clan head. Breathe life back into them before they drown in your shadow.*

Just in time, Fang Yuan glanced at her.

Fang Jingyi didn't say a word, but her eyes screamed loud enough to shake mountains: You messed up.

Fang Yuan blinked.

Then, with practiced ease, pivoted.

"—Which is precisely why," he continued smoothly, "I intend to expend all the resources I've gathered over the years. Effective immediately, all elders are to enter seclusion and focus solely on breaking through. I will personally provide Bone Marrow Pills to aid your cultivation."

He added with a charming smile, "Do note, they're most effective the first time. Diminishing returns apply, so don't throw a tantrum if the second one feels like a glorified snack."

A few elders blinked, momentarily disoriented by the sudden mood whiplash.

Elder Joshua, squinted. "But... Clan Head, with respect, we don't have enough resources for—"

Fang Yuan waved a hand dismissively. "All these pills were refined by Xiao Pei."

A beat passed.

"Him again?" Fang Chen muttered.

Fang Yuan caught the faint flicker of life in the old man's eyes, a spark of recognition, or perhaps irritation.

Has he already regained some clarity? Fang Yuan wondered, though he couldn't be sure.

Fang Chen locked eyes with Fang Yuan, exhaled like a man who'd accepted fate long ago, and grumbled, "Whatever you say, Clan Head. Your words are miracles to my ears."

Just then, a golden screen shimmered into view before Fang Yuan's eyes.

[You have 3 unread mails.]

Fang Yuan blinked.

Of course, no one else could see it. With a mental nod, he decided to check it on the spot.

Learn from your mistakes, he reminded himself. Don't miss out on 10x Hollow spirit pill by ignoring the immediate system message.

He opened the first message:

[Alert! The clan's collective faith is wavering. Current Faith Level: 56%, Do something before the clan staged a revolt!]

Fang Yuan frowned.

The second message immediately followed:

[Update: You have successfully raised your clan faith to 70%. Well done, Host!]

[Note: A minimum of 60% clan faith is required to lead a clan.]

He gave a subtle nod. Close one.

Then the third message appeared:

[Congratulations! Fang Chen has placed his unshakable faith in you. He believes you can resolve any crisis that comes their way. His Faith Score is an unshakable 100.]

[Reward: Your Spirit-Gathering Formation has been upgraded to Heaven Grade.]

[Claim] [Delete]

"Obviously, I'm gonna claim that," Fang Yuan muttered as he tapped the [Claim] button.

Fang Sun, standing nearby, furrowed his brows.

"What exactly are you claiming?"

Fang Yuan flashed him a calm smile. "Oh, nothing for you to worry about, Elder Sun."

Then he turned to another elder. "Elder Joshua, I want you to allocate every spare resource we have to build cultivation rooms. As many as possible. No need to embed formations."

Elder Joshua blinked. "Without formations? Clan Head... that would make the cost of building cultivation rooms practically without a cost..."

Fang Yuan's smile widened, the kind that made people nervous.

"Exactly. Even better."

Because in his mind, the plan was already forming.

He wouldn't hoard faith points just to have it collect dust in the system anymore.

Instead, he would make use of them, purchase minor resource wells and plant one in every single cultivation cave.

Chapter 129: 129- Clan Meeting [4] (BONUS)

The silence stretched after Fang Chen's grumbled acceptance, thick but no longer suffocating with dread.

Fang Yuan's gaze swept the table, meeting each elder's eyes in turn, Fang Joshua's dawning hope, Fang Chen's weary resolve, Fang Sun's stoic nod, Fang Yin's bright, trusting stare.

Even Fang Jingyi had smoothed her expression into one of grim support, the earlier panic masterfully buried.

"Does any elder," Fang Yuan asked, his voice calm but carrying the full weight of his position, "have further questions or objections before we proceed?"

He let the question hang.

Fang Chen merely took another sip of tea, his earlier hopping frenzy replaced by a deep, resigned stillness.

Fang Sun shook his head minutely.

Fang Ra mumbled, "None here."

One by one, the others signaled their assent, a shake of the head, a low murmur of agreement, Fang Yin's vigorous nod.

The unified front, forged from shock, awe, and the desperate promise of power Fang Yuan offered, was complete.

"Good," Fang Yuan said, a single syllable that held the weight of their collective future.

He gave a firm nod, and for the briefest moment, a genuine warmth touched his eyes, a flicker of satisfaction that softened the lines of weariness around them.

To the elders, it looked like the relief of a burden shared, the pleasure of a plan accepted.

But the true source of that fleeting joy was a torrent of knowledge flooding his mind.

As he had mentally claimed the system reward, the intricate, universe spanning blueprint of the Saint Grade Spirit Gathering Formation had seared itself into his consciousness.

It was not just knowledge; it was understanding, down to the vibrational frequency of each energy channel, the unique alignments required, the way it could weave ambient Qi into a torrential river.

And then finally, it was at Peak Grade.

Not even just Saint Grade, but the absolute pinnacle within that classification.

Its efficiency was not merely a double or tenfold of the old Black Grade formation... instead it was over a hundred times greater.

The blueprint promised to pull Qi not just from the surrounding mountains, but from distant ley lines and even the ambient energy of the stars themselves!

This... this can change everything, the thought sang within him, a counterpoint to the grim reality of the Kingdom's threat.

The smile lingering on his lips was not just for the elders' agreement; it was the fierce, private blaze of a gambler holding the winning hand he had prayed for.

With this formation powering his seclusion... maybe, just maybe... The hope was a fragile, desperate thing, but it burned bright: he could concentrate Qi dense enough to shatter the barrier between Nascent Soul Peak and the fabled Hollow Spirit Realm.

If he could step into that realm... true safety, true power, true freedom from the crushing weight of the Tharz Kingdom might finally be within reach.

It was the first, crucial step off the knife's edge they all walked.

But this ambition, this desperate prayer for transcendence, remained locked behind his composed facade.

He would not burden them with its audacity, nor make promises he could not yet guarantee.

The smile faded, replaced by the Clan Head's stern resolve.

"With that settled," he continued, his voice regaining its steel edge, "let us be clear eyed. The Kingdom will not be pleased by Fang Tian's actions. They will come knocking.

Not 'might' will. And they will demand answers, restitution... Or perhaps even blood." He paused, letting the cold certainty sink in.

"Therefore, my command stands: cultivate diligently with the resources I am going to provide. Use all the resources provided without a question. And aim to break through your bottlenecks. Grow stronger. I will not allow the Fang Clan to be pushed around any longer."

His gaze, sharp and demanding, swept over them one final time. "Is. That. Clear?"

A unified response rose, voices blending into a single, respectful affirmation, punctuated by a deep, synchronized bow from every elder present: "As you say, Clan Head!"

★★★

The oppressive sweetness of decay hung thicker here, a day deeper into the Dark Forest.

Sunlight was a forgotten myth, choked out by ancient, gnarled branches woven into a perpetual twilight canopy.

The air itself felt heavy, resistant, like pushing through cold syrup.

Du Juan picked her way forward, every sense screaming, her worn boots sinking slightly into the loamy, root-tangled earth.

Beside her, a whirlwind of restless energy barely contained within silk robes, Lin Zhaoyue drifted like a ghostly will-o'-the-wisp.

"Are we there yet?"

Lin Zhaoyue's voice cut through the forest's low hum, a plaintive whine that grated on Du Juan's frayed nerves.

It was the seventh time in the last hour.

Or maybe the tenth.

Time blurred in this suffocating gloom.

Du Juan clenched her jaw, the muscles in her neck taut.

She forced her voice into a smooth, respectful cadence.

"No, Matriarch Fang," she replied, her eyes scanning the shifting shadows ahead.

"But we are close. Very close." She pointed towards a denser cluster of colossal, moss-draped trees ahead.

"Just beyond that grove."

Silence reigned for a blissful five minutes.

The only sounds were the squelch of their steps, the drip of moisture from unseen leaves, and the unsettling rustle of things moving just out of sight.

Du Juan strained her senses, relying entirely on the thin, protective veil of Lin Zhaoyue's spiritual qi wrapped around her like a second skin.

Without it, this place would be sensory oblivion, a tomb of darkness and predatory whispers.

Then, like clockwork:

"Are we there now?" Lin Zhaoyue sighed dramatically, plucking at the sleeve of her robe.

She examined a perfectly manicured fingernail with intense boredom. "This forest is dreadfully dull. And it smells. Not like my perfumes at all."

Du Juan took a slow, steadying breath. *Patience. Survival.* "No, Matriarch Fang," she repeated, the title tasting like ash on her tongue, yet wielding its potent magic.

"But it's only a few minutes' walk now. Truly." She quickened her pace slightly, desperate to reach the destination before Lin Zhaoyue's fragile patience shattered completely.

(7/9 BONUS)

Chapter 130: 130- Seven Ring Lotus (BONUS)

They pushed through the curtain of thick, hanging moss that veiled the grove like a funeral shroud.

The air shifted instantly.

The cloying sweetness intensified, almost sickening now, layered with the heavy rot of damp earth and something faintly metallic.

And there, at the heart of a murky clearing fed by a sluggish, black-watered stream... it bloomed.

The Seven-Ring Lotus.

Whole and vibrant, rooted deep into the mud as if it had always been there.

Lin Zhaoyue tilted her head, voice silk-smooth but laced with thorns.

"Didn't you say you dug a hole and hid it?"

Du Juan froze. Her thoughts scrambled.

"I... I'm sure I..." Her words trailed off, caught in the impossible sight.

She turned to Zhaoyue slowly, eyes wide.

"Do you think the beasts... could be smart enough to plant rare herbs?"

The silence that followed felt colder than the swampwater at her ankles.

Lin Zhaoyue's head tilted slowly, like a serpent considering prey.

Her voice slid through the air, a low, melodic purr laced with something unhinged:

"Oh, Little Sister... are you suggesting beasts tend gardens? How delightfully naïve."

She glided forward, each step barely brushing the ground, silk robes whispering like secrets across the damp earth.

Then came the weight.

Nascent Soul pressure unfurled from her like a coiled serpent, silent and suffocating. The air crackled. The black swampwater trembled.

And Du Juan suddenly felt very, very small.

"Plants grow. Beasts hunger. That is the only truth here."

Her fingers brushed a nearby vine, which instantly withered to ash. "But you... you buried a treasure meant for my husband."

Her smile widened, revealing too-perfect teeth.

"Did you think to steal it? To offer it to him yourself? Hoping he'd glance your way? Tch."

She flicked her wrist dismissively. "A weed like you could never bloom in his shadow."

Suddenly, she seized Du Juan's chin, her grip ice-cold.

"But I am merciful. Tell me, truthfully: Where. Is. The. Hole? Or did you leave it unburied... instead inviting thieves?"

Her gaze sharpened, pupils dilating like a cat's. "Speak carefully, Little Cuckoo. Lies taste bitter... and I always know."

Du Juan's heart slammed against her ribs.

Is this woman insane?! The Clan Head sent us to retrieve the Seven-Ring Lotus, the one I buried and risked my life for! What more does she want? Does she think I—

She bit back the panic clawing up her throat.

No.

Don't provoke her. You're still injured. One wrong word and she'll easily be able to snap your neck.

Her lips trembled, but she forced them into a steady line.

Her voice, barely a whisper, came out coated in diplomacy.

"Matriarch Fang," she said, bowing her head slightly, "I... I must've misplaced the spot. This swamp—" she gestured feebly to the mist-choked bog, "—it twists memory. But look!"

She pointed to the lotus blooming beside them, its seven radiant rings glowing faintly in the dim light.

"It's unharmed! Ripe, perfect for you to gift him. Imagine his joy..."

She smiled weakly, praying the matriarch's hunger for favor outweighed her thirst for punishment.

Lin Zhaoyue's grip loosened.

Her eyes lost their edge, softening as they drifted to the lotus.

"...Yes. He'll smile. Just for me."

She released Du Juan like a discarded doll and floated toward the flower, silk sleeves trailing behind her like ribbons of poisoned mist.

"Such a pretty thing... He'll weave it into my hair when we wed."

Du Juan remained frozen, her breath caught in her throat.

In truth, Fang Yuan had already made his decision. That lotus wasn't for love, and certainly not for ceremony.

He would commission Pill King Tushan to refine it into a dantian-repairing pill—

One for Du Juan.

And one for her little sister, whose fragile dantian cracked more each day.

Du Juan's hands curled into fists at her side.

If she finds out the truth... I'm dead. Not just me. My sister too. That flower is our lifeline.

And yet, all she could do was bow her head and murmur,

"Yes, Matriarch. He'll be... overjoyed."

Inside, her soul screamed. But on the surface, she smiled.

Lin Zhaoyue plucked the lotus with terrifying gentleness, as if cradling a promise of love while Du Juan's thoughts tore through her mind like wildfire.

The hole... it never existed?

Her gaze darted to the disturbed earth, perfectly formed, as if someone had just now placed the lotus there.

No. I buried it myself. I marked the ground. I remember the shape of the roots, the tilt of that stone—

But the scene was too pristine. Too precise.

Something unearthed it... and replanted it?

Her breath hitched.

No beast should have been able to do that. No wild beast has that kind of cunning.

Her heart pounded as a new, chilling possibility bloomed:

Was it meant to lure me back? To watch me? To toy with me?

She glanced at the mist curling around the edges of the swamp. It felt too quiet.

Lin Zhaoyue spun back, the Seven-Ring Lotus cradled against her silk robes like a sacred infant.

Her smile was a fractured mirror, radiant, yet reflecting only the jagged edges of her obsession.

"Come, Little Sister! We'll tell my husband you helped me find it! He'll reward you..." She leaned in, her breath a winter kiss against Du Juan's ear, the promise turning venomous: "...if I let you live that long."

Then she was moving, skipping through the murk like a phantom bride, humming a discordant wedding march.

The lotus pulsed in her hands, a captured star promising only Fang Yuan's fleeting approval.

Du Juan remained frozen, knee-deep in dread and sucking mud, her breath shallow rasps against the oppressive silence.

But then, Zhaoyue stopped.

Before her, coiled in the gloom like a fallen constellation, stood a flower.

It dwarfed the lotus in her grasp, its petals radiating an ethereal, hypnotic light, breathtaking and otherworldly.

Yet it wasn't the beauty that froze Du Juan's blood.

The flower was moving.

No... it was slithering.

Thick, root-like tendrils dragged through the mire with eerie silence, propelling the monstrous bloom forward.

Its petals quivered, not in a breeze, but with palpable, unnatural hunger.

Du Juan's throat unlocked in pure, animal terror. "Matriarch Fang—RUN!"

The scream tore through the silence, raw and cracking.

And just at that moment a thought appeared in Lin Zhaoyue's mind.

Why not let it take Du Juan? One less pretty bird fluttering near my Fang Yuan. The swamp swallows everything... who would know?

(8/9 BONUS)