

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

#Chapter 131- Lin Zhaoyue Face off. [1] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 131- Lin Zhaoyue Face off. [1]

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

But then, another image flashed in her head, Fang Yuan's face.

Not the indulgent smile she craved, but a look of profound disappointment.

Cold and even calculating.

The look (which she imagined) he reserved for failures, for those who wasted his resources... or brought him damaged goods.

Imagine Du Juan, mangled and lost on a simple retrieval mission, a mission he entrusted to them both.

Lin Zhaoyue could practically hear Fang Yuan's smooth voice, laced with disappointment: "My dear wife Zhaoyue... did the swamp swallow your wits along with my handpicked slave? How... careless."

She blushed at the thought of being called a wife and then she immediately felt hatred.

Not for Du Juan or being called wife, she loved that, instead it was for the idea of Fang Yuan's hatred directed at her.

The potential loss of even a sliver of his already fractured regard was a blade twisting deeper than any beast's fang.

Du Juan's death would not secure his love; in fact it might even push her apart, he might even brand her as incompetent.

Unreliable and even a liability.

And if she let something happen to Du Juan, will he ever find it in him to trust her again?

A sharp, frustrated sigh escaped Lin Zhaoyue's lips, a sound utterly devoid of warmth, more like the hiss of steam escaping a cracked vessel.

The dreamy obsession in her eyes shattered, replaced by icy, pragmatic fury.

She couldn't afford the luxury of letting Du Juan die, not today.

"Tch. Annoying," she muttered, the words clipped.

In a blur, Lin Zhaoyue appeared just beside Du Juan.

Her hands immediately shot out, fingers like talons digging into the flesh of Du Juan's shoulder with bruising force.

Du Juan gasped, pain flaring bright and sudden.

"My little sister," Lin Zhaoyue hissed, her voice devoid of any sisterly affection, laced instead with pure, venomous resentment. "You're really lucky today."

Before Du Juan could react, Lin Zhaoyue yanked.

It wasn't a lift; it was a violent haul upwards.

Du Juan cried out as her feet left the sucking mud, her body wrenched through the air.

The world spun and then, jarringly, her boots hit rough bark.

Lin Zhaoyue had flung her onto a thick, gnarled branch high in a skeletal cypress tree overlooking the clearing.

Lin Zhaoyue released her grip instantly, leaving Du Juan scrambling for balance on the precarious perch.

She wobbled, heart hammering against her ribs, her shoulder throbbing where Lin Zhaoyue's fingers had bitten deep.

Angry red marks, already darkening towards bruises, stood out starkly against her pale skin.

She clutched the branch, knuckles white, but dared not utter a sound of complaint.

Her eyes, wide with residual terror and fresh pain, snapped downwards, trying to act normal.

"Matriarch Fang," Du Juan whispered, her voice tight with fear and the effort of controlling her breathing.

She tore her gaze from the horror below to look at Lin Zhaoyue, who stood poised on the branch beside her, robes undisturbed, eyes fixed on the predator. "Is that... what I think it is?"

Lin Zhaoyue didn't look at her.

Her gaze remained locked on the slithering bloom, her expression a mask of cold recognition and simmering fury.

She gave a single, sharp nod.

"Yes," she confirmed, her voice flat, dangerous.

"It's the Nascent Soul Realm Viper Seduction Flower we didn't find when we destroyed that brood yesterday. Good timing."

Du Juan's breath hitched.

We? Du Juan's thoughts screeched to a halt, fixated on that single syllable. What does she mean, 'we'?

The words hung in the damp air, absurd and terrifying. Du Juan blinked, certain she had misheard.

But before her thoughts could solidify, Lin Zhaoyue's voice cut through the haze.

"I'm going down there to fight it."

Lin Zhaoyue didn't wait for a reaction.

Her gaze, fixed on the colossal vipers tail disguised as a luminous flower, held a terrifying mix of fury and manic determination.

"You what?!" Du Juan choked out, the bruise on her shoulder pulsing in time with her frantic heartbeat.

Lin Zhaoyue didn't hesitate.

With a contemptuous flick of her silk sleeve towards Du Juan, a gesture that screamed 'stay put, insect', she simply stepped off the high branch.

She stepped into the void, plummeting towards the colossal, luminous predator below.

Du Juan's breath seized.

Her fingers dug into the rough bark, knuckles white against the throbbing pain in her shoulder.

Madness! Utter madness!

Fighting a Nascent Soul beast alone? That was madness. Suicidal.

Spirit beasts were, by nature, stronger than cultivators of the same realm. It often took ten well-prepared cultivators to bring down a single beast of equal rank!

Even a fellow Nascent Soul cultivator wouldn't engage without extreme caution, preparation, or overwhelming advantage.

Du Juan, though stripped of her Nascent Soul cultivation, still carried the instincts and clarity honed at that peak.

And from what she saw, Lin Zhaoyue charging headlong into battle there would be no graceful clash of power, no elegant display of mastery.

Only a swift, brutal, and messy death.

Lin Zhaoyue fell with terrifying speed, the wind tearing her elaborate hairstyle apart, sending dark strands whipping around her face like angry serpents.

Du Juan hadn't even registered the movement, but Lin Zhaoyue's jade hairpin was suddenly clutched in her hand, transformed from ornament to weapon, its tip blazing with condensed, virulent green energy.

Below, the source of the hypnotic light became horrifyingly clear. It wasn't the beast; it was the beast's bait.

A breathtaking, ethereal bloom, radiating mesmerizing light and cloying sweetness, crowned the tip of a thick, sinuous tail that rose from the murk.

As Lin Zhaoyue plummeted towards the lure, the hidden head shifted almost imperceptibly.

A low, rumbling hiss vibrated through the swamp, thick with malice and anticipation, the sound originating not from the flower, but from the darkness where the true fangs waited.

Lin Zhaoyue hit the ground just meters away from the swaying, luminous tail-flower, landing with unnatural lightness that barely disturbed the mud. She didn't stop to take a pause.

Her arm snapped up, the hairpin pointed like a conductor's baton towards the base of the thick tail, just below the seductive bloom.

Her voice cut through the hiss, clear, cold, and laced with annihilating power:

"Heavenly Timber: First Form – Wood Explosions."

Chapter 132: 132- Lin Zhaoyue Face off.[2]

The virulent green light at the tip of Lin Zhaoyue's hairpin flared, not like fire, but like concentrated, decaying life.

As she uttered the incantation, "Wood Explosions" the energy didn't shoot outwards.

Instead, it pulsed downwards, through the saturated earth, a silent, devastating command.

The ground beneath the Viper Seduction Flower's thick, sinuous tail heaved.

Not a tremor, but a violent upheaval.

Mud, water, and tangled roots exploded upwards in a geyser of filth.

But it was the roots themselves, drawn by Lin Zhaoyue's Heavenly Timber technique, that were the true weapon.

Thick, gnarled swamp roots, saturated with Lin Zhaoyue's corrosive wood-element Qi, erupted inside the tail segment just below the impossibly beautiful bloom.

They didn't pierce; they detonated.

CRACK-BOOM!

The sound was muffled, wet, and sickeningly final.

A section of the armored tail, thicker than Lin Zhaoyue's torso, simply bulged and then burst apart in a spray of dark ichor, shattered scales, and pulped flesh.

The force wasn't concussive outwards, but inwards, focused devastation.

And through the gore, tumbling end-over-end like a discarded jewel, flew the Viper Seduction Flower.

Lin Zhaoyue's eyes, cold and furious just a moment before, locked onto it.

Time seemed to slow. It was beautiful.

Ethereal. Its luminous petals, untouched by the filth of the explosion, radiated pure, hypnotic light even as it arced through the air.

A perfect, deadly jewel severed from its monstrous anchor... Now gone.

A surge of vicious satisfaction, intertwined with a strange, fleeting appreciation for its doomed elegance, washed over her.

Her focus on the falling flower was absolute, almost rapturous in its destructive triumph.

But her body, honed by instinct and battle-lust, was already moving.

She had known the strike would come.

The rumbling hiss from the darkness became a shriek of pure, unadulterated agony and rage.

The swamp itself seemed to recoil as the hidden head, massive and triangular, streaked from the murk like a black lightning bolt.

Fangs, longer than swords and dripping viscous venom, aimed unerringly for the spot where Lin Zhaoyue stood, seemingly mesmerized by the falling flower.

She wasn't.

Even as her gaze traced the flower's descent, her free hand had already swept up.

The silk of her sleeve flowed like water, but beneath it, her forearm was rigid, layered with dense, emerald-green spiritual energy that solidified instantaneously into overlapping plates of hardened wood, Ironwood Bulwark.

The third form of Heavenly Timber.

It was not a shield held aloft, but an integral armor formed seamlessly along her arm and shoulder.

THUD-CRUNCH!

The viper's strike hit with the force of a collapsing mountain.

Mud and water erupted in a ring around the impact point.

The sound was brutal, bone-jarring.

Lin Zhaoyue's boots sank several inches into the muck from the sheer force transmitted through her guard.

Cracks spiderwebbed across the surface of the Ironwood Bulwark, venom sizzling where it splattered, but it held.

She hadn't tried to dodge; she'd anchored herself, braced, and absorbed the blow meant to obliterate her.

The impact jarred her, snapping her head back, her dark hair whipping wildly.

Yet, her eyes never left the falling flower.

She watched it hit the churned mud a few yards away, its light flickering once, twice, like a dying star, before dimming completely, swallowed by the filthy water.

Only then, as the beautiful lure was extinguished, did her gaze snap back to the source of the agony.

The viper's head recoiled slightly, stunned by the resistance.

Its vertical pupils, burning with pain and fury, fixed on the small figure who had just maimed its tail and blocked its killing strike.

The hypnotic light was gone, leaving only primal rage and the stink of blood and swamp.

Lin Zhaoyue lowered her cracked, smoking Ironwood Bulwark arm slowly.

She didn't flinch at the venom burns on her sleeve or the ache in her bones.

Her jade hairpin was still held ready in her other hand, its tip glowing faintly with residual green energy.

Her expression was no longer coldly furious, but chillingly calm, a predator assessing wounded prey.

A thin trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her lip where the impact had bitten her tongue, stark red against her pale skin.

"Annoying," she breathed again, the word barely audible over the viper's pained hissing and the swamp's settling turmoil.

Her eyes, cold and calculating, locked onto the enraged serpent's head.

The chilling calm in Lin Zhaoyue's eyes sharpened into razor-edged focus as the viper recoiled, its massive head weaving in agony and fury.

The raw power of the strike had been immense, but... unrefined.

The rage was primal, the movements powerful but lacking the cold, calculated lethality of an ancient Nascent Soul beast.

This wasn't a seasoned predator; it was a newly ascended powerhouse, drunk on its own strength and lashing out blindly.

A predator's smile, thin and devoid of warmth, touched Lin Zhaoyue's lips.

Her hands moved in a blur of contrasting motions.

The jade hairpin in her right hand swept through the air in a wide, graceful arc, trailing not destructive energy, but a cloud of shimmering, iridescent dust, Heavenly Timber: Second Form – Sleep Dust.

Simultaneously, her left hand, still bearing the cracked Ironwood Bulwark, slammed palm-down onto the churned mud.

Virulent green energy pulsed into the earth once more, not towards the ruined tail stump, but snaking unseen beneath the muck towards the massive head itself, Heavenly Timber: First Form – Wood Explosions.

The newly ascended viper, blinded by rage and pain, inhaled the shimmering Sleep Dust.

Its furious hiss faltered, becoming a confused gurgle.

Its weaving head slowed, the burning intensity in its vertical pupils dimming, replaced by a sudden, unnatural heaviness.

It was still powerful, still dangerous, but its reactions were sluggish, its mind clouded by an overwhelming urge to simply... rest.

It never got the chance.

The roots, guided by Lin Zhaoyue's precise malice, erupted inside its skull.

SPLUTCH.

The sound was sickeningly wet and contained.

The viper's massive head didn't explode outward.

Instead, it bulged grotesquely for a split second, scales straining, before collapsing inward like a deflated sack.

Dark ichor, brain matter, and shattered bone erupted from its eyes, nostrils, and gaping maw.

The colossal body, still coiled in the swamp, shuddered violently once, then went utterly, terrifyingly still.

The rage, the pain, the nascent power... all snuffed out in an instant.

Silence descended, heavy and thick, broken only by the settling mud and the frantic beat of Du Juan's heart high in the cypress tree.

Lin Zhaoyue straightened, lowering her hands. The Sleep Dust shimmer dissipated harmlessly.

She looked down at the ruined head, then at the still-gleaming, but now lifeless, flower lying half-submerged in the muck nearby.

Without ceremony, she stepped towards the massive carcass and plunged her hands into the gruesome ruin of the viper's skull.

There was a wet, squelching sound, a brief search through gore and bone fragments, and then she withdrew her arm.

Clutched in her fingers, slick with dark blood but radiating a potent, swampy green light, was a core the size of a goose egg, the core of a Nascent Soul Realm spirit beast.

Warmth pulsed against her palm, a tangible prize.

She lifted it slightly, the glow illuminating her face, highlighting the streak of blood at the corner of her lip and the cold triumph in her eyes.

I'm sure husband would be very pleased with this.

The core was very valuable. This victory was valuable.

Proof of her competence, her ruthlessness, her worth.

But just as her fingers tightened around the warm core, intending to inspect it more closely, the hair on the back of her neck prickled.

The heavy silence shattered.

Not from the carcass but from the surrounding swamp.

GRRR...

Chapter 133: 133- Cultivation Cave [1]

A week had crawled by since the last clan meeting.

Now, within the quiet stillness of his study, Fang Yuan let out a long, weary sigh.

Before him loomed a mountain of scrolls stacked like a fortress of ink and obligation.

His gaze swept across the paper walls rising on either side of his desk.

It felt less like administration and more like siege warfare.

Despite everything, one sliver of good news remained.

The Tharz Kingdom had yet to make any move against the Fang family.

No messengers from their side had arrived and not a single inquiry about Fang Tian and the kidnapped princess.

On the surface, it seemed like a blessing.

But in truth, it was a curse wrapped in silence.

Because when your enemy made no sound, you couldn't measure their intent.

In times like these, open confrontation would have been almost comforting.

At least it would reveal their hand.

This silence, however, was a coiled serpent in the grass... unseen, unreadable, and infinitely more dangerous.

Still... it was extra time.

And time was something the Fang family desperately needed to prepare.

Fang Yuan wasn't truly optimistic about the situation, but optimism was a mask he wore for the clan.

They needed confidence from their leader.

The faith system remained frustratingly opaque.

It showed him who believed, even letting him glimpse their stats, but not how much faith points each person provides.

This new ability, useful as it was, also rendered the family heirloom ring clutched in his hand almost redundant, useless.

Just in time, a soft knock echoed in the office.

"Come in," Fang Yuan called.

Felicia entered, her smile warm yet respectful. "Clan Head. Elder Joshua reports the cultivation caves are fully prepared."

Fang Yuan gave a slow, approving nod.

Pushing back his chair, Fang Yuan rose.

"Show me," he said, gesturing for Felicia to lead the way.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy, painting shifting patterns on the stone path as Fang Yuan walked beside Felicia towards the ravine.

He consciously relaxed his shoulders, letting a practiced, easy smile settle onto his face, a mask for the clan's sake.

Passing the archives, the scent of old parchment and cedar drifted out.

Old Man Geng stood framed in the doorway, his usual stern expression softening almost imperceptibly as Fang Yuan approached.

The archivist didn't speak, but offered a slow, deliberate nod, his knuckles whitening slightly where they gripped a worn ledger.

It was a gesture of profound respect, heavy with unspoken loyalty.

Fang Yuan returned the nod, warmth briefly touching his eyes before the mask settled back.

[Faith: 87]

Further along, the rhythmic slap of wet cloth on stone announced Mistress Lan's domain.

Steam curled from large basins as laundresses worked.

Seeing Fang Yuan, Mistress Lan paused mid-wring of a heavy robe, her round face instantly brightening.

"Clan Head!" she beamed, wiping damp hands hastily on her apron.

"Fine day for progress, isn't it?"

Her cheer was genuine, infectious.

Fang Yuan chuckled lightly.

"It is indeed, Mistress Lan. Keep the inner halls shining."

Her answering smile widened, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

[Faith: 92]

Near a riot of newly pruned spirit-peony bushes, Young Fei, barely taller than the shears he wielded, spotted them.

"Clan Head Fang Yuan!" the boy called out, abandoning his task to scramble onto the path.

He waved energetically, dirt smudged on one cheek. "Look! The Moonwhisper buds are opening!"

He pointed proudly.

Fang Yuan stopped, genuinely charmed. "So they are, Young Fei. Fine work."

He ruffled the boy's hair lightly, drawing a delighted grin.

The pure, uncomplicated admiration in the boy's eyes was a tangible thing.

[Faith: 95]

★★★

The chiselled entrance to the new cultivation caves stood stark against the mountain face near the spirit pond.

Elder Joshua surveyed his handiwork, rows upon rows of meticulously carved caverns, clustered together like a honeycomb built by overzealous bees.

He scratched his beard, the familiar knot of confusion tightening in his gut.

Why build cultivation rooms without the formations? The thought was a constant, irritating buzz.

A cultivation cave without a spirit-gathering array was just... a hole in a rock. A fancy, labor-intensive hole.

And clustering them so densely? Near the ravine's limited ambient energy? It felt less like strategic planning and more like inviting a spiritual famine.

Survival of the fittest? he scoffed internally. *More like 'who can meditate hardest on disappointment.'* Utterly daft.

Still, orders were orders. He had finished building them.

Just as Elder Joshua mulled over what the clan head might be planning, he spotted Fang Yuan approaching along the stone path, Felicia trailing a respectful step behind.

Straightening instinctively, Joshua smoothed his robes and stepped forward, offering a deep, formal bow.

"Clan Head. The caves have been completed, just as *you instructed*."

The words were proper, respectful. But the subtle emphasis on "*as you instructed*" carried a trace of restrained curiosity... perhaps even the faintest hint of skepticism, polished smooth by etiquette.

Fang Yuan returned the greeting with his usual calm demeanor.

"Elder Joshua. The work appears impressive. How went the construction?"

"Swiftly, Clan Head," Joshua replied, his voice dry as mountain dust.

"Very swiftly. When I said they would be paid by the chisel strike, not the hour, the masons were motivated."

He paused, a flicker of pragmatic disapproval crossing his weathered face. "Can't say I see the wisdom in expending resources on... empty caverns... during times like these." He cleared his throat.

"But. They are built. The job is done. So. I won't complain." He delivered the last sentence with the solemn gravity of a man stating a profound, self-evident truth.

Fang Yuan regarded the elder, his expression perfectly neutral. Inside, his thoughts were wry: *Ah, Elder Joshua.*

Your definition of 'not complaining' remains uniquely... expansive. That entire speech sounds like complains to my ear but I'll forget about it.

Outwardly, a genuine, almost mischievous smile replaced the neutrality.

"Elder Joshua," he said, his voice light, "your restraint is... commendable."

He let the compliment hang, knowing Joshua would hear the gentle tease.

Chapter 134: 134- Cultivation Cave [2]

Then, with a fluid motion that seemed entirely natural, Fang Yuan subtly focused inward, summoning the system interface only he could perceive.

To Felicia and Joshua, he simply paused, his gaze turning momentarily distant, a faint, knowing curve still playing on his lips.

The two attendants exchanged a brief, silent glance but remained respectfully still, accustomed to their Clan Head's moments of contemplation.

Fang Yuan navigated the ethereal menus with practiced ease, bypassing stats and logs to land squarely in the Faith Shop.

His eyes scanned the options before settling on the item:

[Minor Resource Well] – 100 FP

Create a spiritual spring in designated land. Enhances cultivation speed in a small area.

Perfect. The missing piece for the clustered caves.

A slow, satisfied smile spread across his face, brighter and more purposeful than the polite one before.

He closed the interface and refocused on the skeptical elder.

"Come, come, Elder Joshua," Fang Yuan beckoned, his voice now laced with playful anticipation.

He gestured towards the dense cluster of cave entrances.

"Don't just stand there looking like you've swallowed a particularly sour spirit plum. Let me show you why empty holes can be... profitable investments. Prepare for a little demonstration of black magic."

A glint flickered in Fang Yuan's eyes, part challenge, part secret delight inviting Elder Joshua to bear witness as folly bloomed into foresight.

"Come. Follow me," he said, turning with casual authority as his robes stirred the dust.

A quiet smile tugged at his lips as he walked, recalling the shimmering figure glowing in his mind's eye:

13,500 Faith Points.

A staggering sum.

It pulsed like captured starlight behind his gaze, radiant and heavy with possibility, as he approached the clustered mouths of the newly carved cultivation caves.

Felicia glided a precise step behind, her presence a silent shadow absorbing every detail.

Elder Joshua matched his stride, radiating a palpable aura of skepticism barely contained by duty, his thin lips pressed into a tight line.

As they rounded a large, moss-streaked boulder near the edge of the ravine, Elder Sun bustled into view, his round face crinkling beneath a wispy beard like a cheerful harvest moon.

"Clan Head! Joshua!" he called out, his voice booming with warmth and echoing faintly off the stone walls.

Reaching them with surprising energy, he spotted Felicia and brightened further. "Ah, it's the little girl! How are you?"

Felicia offered a courteous smile, bowing slightly. "I'm well, thank you, Elder Sun."

He chuckled. "Good, good."

Then, with a glance between the others, he asked, "So, where are you all headed?"

Fang Yuan answered easily, "The cultivation caves. They're finally completef so I'm going over to add the finishing touch."

"Ah, the ones old Joshua here kept muttering were a waste of resources," Elder Sun said with a grin, elbowing the other elder. "Mind if an old man tags along to see this so-called waste?"

He winked, mischief twinkling in his eyes and aimed squarely at Joshua, who replied only with a grunt and a beard-ruffling flick of his fingers.

"I'm sure you'll have plenty to say," Joshua muttered under his breath.

Fang Yuan smiled, eyes glinting faintly.

"Of course, Elder Sun, you're welcome to come with us."

They arrived at the central clearing, where the dense array of cave mouths yawned open before them, dark and still, like silent eyes watching from the stone.

The air here was cooler, heavier, thick with the scent of moss and still earth.

Fang Yuan came to a quiet stop, his gaze sweeping over the terrain but his mind turned inward.

He said nothing.

Without a word, he opened the system interface within his consciousness.

The familiar golden screen shimmered into view, welcoming him with that faint, almost divine hum.

His focus narrowed to the Faith Shop.

With practiced ease, he navigated the list, eyes locking onto the entry he wanted: Minor Resource Well.

He selected a location inside one of the caves, just deep enough for seclusion, yet close enough for convenience.

Cost: 100 Faith Points.

A single thought confirmed the choice.

Instantly, the points vanished and the air directly in front of the central cave entrance shimmered.

Not with heat haze, but with a sudden, viscous concentration of spiritual essence, thickening the light.

The earth itself seemed to breathe, a soft, subterranean sigh.

With a gentle pop like a cork releasing, and a rush of cool, ozone-scented air that lifted the hairs on their arms, a small, perfectly circular wellspring bubbled into existence.

Crystal-clear water, faintly luminous like liquid moonlight, welled up, filling a simple stone basin that hadn't been there a heartbeat before.

A gentle, pervasive energy radiated from it, immediately thickening the ambient Qi into something almost syrupy.

"HOW?!" The raw exclamation tore from both elders simultaneously.

Elder Sun's jaw dropped open, slack as an unhinged gate, his eyes bulging.

Elder Joshua stumbled back a full step, his weathered face blanching bone-white beneath his tan, disbelief warping his features as he frantically scanned the unbroken ground where solid earth had just been.

"Clan Head! What... what manner of... sorcery is this?" His voice rasped, thin with shock.

Fang Yuan chuckled, a low, rumbling sound of deep satisfaction.

"Consider it a Fang Yuan secret, Elders," he said, his eyes glinting with dangerous amusement.

"One must always keep a few aces up the sleeve. Never know when someone might try to impeach a Clan Head over... say... building empty holes in mountains."

Elder Joshua's face drained of every last drop of color so fast Felicia instinctively shifted her weight, ready to intervene.

"C-CLAN HEAD!" he spluttered, his voice cracking like dry kindling.

He waved his hands frantically before him, fingers clawing at the air as if trying to physically shred the very notion.

"Impeach you? Preposterous! Utter madness! Look!" He jabbed a trembling finger first at his own chest, then at the still-stunned Elder Sun.

"We're barely scratching Qi Transformation! Dust beneath the chariot wheels! You stand at the pinnacle of the Nascent Soul realm! Who in their right mind...? Who would even dare...?"

Chapter 135: 135- Cultivation Cave [3]

He clutched his chest dramatically, his knuckles white, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"Please, Clan Head... such jests... they... they are bad for an old man's heart!" Genuine terror flickered in his wide eyes.

Elder Sun, finally wrenching his gaze from the miraculous well, took one look at Joshua's panicked, parchment-pale face and erupted.

"HAHAHA!" His booming laughter shook his ample frame, tears squeezing from the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, Joshua! Your face! Priceless! Look at you, flapping like a plucked goose dropped in a snowdrift! The Clan Head was clearly yanking your chain, you old pessimist!" He slapped his thigh, his laughter echoing louder than his initial greeting.

Fang Yuan chuckled and finally let the laughter fade, his expression softening into something more sincere.

"Ah... haha, I'm sorry. Truly, Elder Joshua," he said, inclining his head slightly, "It's always been fun teasing you, but I suppose I went a little too far this time."

His voice lowered, warm and earnest.

"Please forgive this junior for his mischief. I meant no harm."

Joshua sucked in a deep, shuddering breath, the violent tremor in his hands slowly subsiding.

Color seeped back into his cheeks, leaving blotchy patches.

He managed a weak, profoundly embarrassed nod, unable to meet Fang Yuan's eyes directly.

"O-Of course, Clan Head. It's... all forgiven. Just... please, by the ancestors, no more talk of impeachment. It's... unsettling." He shuddered visibly.

"Agreed," Fang Yuan said, his smile softening.

He gestured toward the cave where the faintly pulsing well shimmered in the shadows, its waters casting a cool, ethereal glow that danced across the stone walls.

"I suppose it's time we return to the real reason we came here," Fang Yuan said with a calm smile. Then he turned to Elder Joshua, his gaze respectful but edged with quiet anticipation.

"Elder Joshua, would you do us the honor of stepping inside that cave and evaluating whether the spiritual energy within meets your expectations... or not?"

His tone was light, but the invitation carried weight, like a challenge wrapped in courtesy.

Eager to escape his humiliation and burning with renewed, intense curiosity, Joshua nodded sharply, his spine snapping straight.

"At once, Clan Head." He strode purposefully towards the dark maw.

As he crossed the threshold, his body jolted.

A sharp, audible gasp ripped from his throat.

He took two more steps into the gloom, his silhouette freezing just inside the entrance.

The trip watched him raise both hands slowly, palms cupped upwards as if trying to hold the very air, his fingers visibly trembling.

"The density..." Joshua's voice drifted back, thick with reverence, stripped of all skepticism.

"It's... remarkable! Thicker than the ambient Qi outside by leagues, richer even than near the spirit pond itself! This... this alters everything! The cultivation potential..." Wonder saturated every syllable.

He stood transfixed for several heartbeats, head tilted back, basking in the invisible torrent.

Then, slowly, deliberately, he turned back towards the light.

The awe on his face didn't vanish, but it fractured..

His brow furrowed, carving deep lines.

He looked down at his still-trembling hands, clenching and unclenching them, then swept his gaze back out at Fang Yuan, the solitary cave with the well, and the dozens upon dozens of other dark cave entrances crowding the mountainside like hungry mouths.

The wonder was still there, but now it was buried under a heavy, dawning realization.

A deep frown etched itself onto his face, disappointment settling like dust.

"But Clan Head..." Joshua's voice cut through the lingering warmth, sharp with renewed, practical concern.

He stepped fully back into the sunlight, his troubled eyes flickering from the single, modestly glowing wellspring to the vast, silent array of caves.

"...The spirit energy is concentrated, yes. Wonderfully so, in this one spot. But..."

He raised a hand, sweeping it slowly, almost despairingly, across the multitude of entrances.

"...the amount being drawn... can it possibly be enough?"

The unspoken question hung thick and heavy in the suddenly still air: *Enough for all of them?*

His gesture encompassed the impossible scale of the need.

Fang Yuan's response came with a smile.

There was amusement in his eyes, sharp and glinting like a blade hidden beneath silk. "Oh please, Elder Joshua," he said, his voice smooth and low, carrying just enough gravity to command attention. "You think too small."

He gestured lazily toward the glowing spring, its radiance pooling like liquid starlight. "I intend to place one of these wells in every single cultivation cave you've built. No exceptions."

A pause. His grin widened, tone light but unmistakably deliberate.

"After all... I'm not running a retreat. I'm cultivating a clan."

The words rang out, calm and resolute—yet beneath their simplicity pulsed a quiet thunder.

Elder Sun let out a sharp gasp, as if the weight of the statement had knocked the breath from him.

And Elder Joshua's head snapped around so fast it cracked the stillness like a whip.

His weathered face tightened, the deep lines etched into his brow seeming to deepen all at once.

"That's a waste—!" he blurted, the words harsh and instinctive, flung out like a shield.

It was the cry of a man who had spent decades pinching every grain of spiritual sand, fighting for every scrap of cultivation resource.

The idea of scattering precious wells into every cave struck him like heresy against practicality.

But the words died on his lips, choked off by the sheer, impossible reality of the wellspring beside them and the serene confidence radiating from his Clan Head.

He saw Fang Yuan's unwavering gaze, the absolute certainty in his posture.

Joshua's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him like air from a punctured bladder.

He took a slow, deliberate breath, the lines around his eyes softening from outrage to weary acceptance.

A faint, almost rueful sigh escaped him.

"I... suppose," he conceded, his voice rough but calm now, "the old generation should really be stepping down... and watch the younger generation truly lead."

He glanced at the miraculous well, then back at Fang Yuan, a complex mix of resignation and dawning respect in his eyes.

Chapter 136: 136- Cultivation Cave [4]

Fang Yuan chuckled—a warm, rolling sound that seemed to ripple through the air like heat off stone. "Oh no, Elder Joshua," he said, grinning, "you don't get to retire from yelling at me just yet."

He spread his arms wide, encompassing both the mountain of faith behind him and the absurdity of it all. "Trust me, the younger generation's still a mess. Just look at me."

His words carried the weight of a Nascent Soul cultivator.

"I still need you and the others to keep kicking me in the right direction. Leave me unsupervised for a day and I might vanish into the night. Start a sect. Conquer a city. Who knows. I for sure, don't know myself."

The elders blinked.

His smile turned fox-like, sharp, glinting with mock menace. "And don't think I'm doing all this for the clan out of pure selflessness either."

He leaned in slightly. "Oh no. I fully intend to work every one of you to the bone. Just so I can take longer naps."

Elder Sun, who had been watching this exchange with bright, shrewd eyes, let out another booming laugh, this one tinged with genuine delight and a hint of challenge accepted.

Beside him, Fang Joshua's initial shock melted away, replaced by a slow, genuine smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, the first truly unguarded expression he'd shown since the well appeared.

The two elders, polar opposites in temperament yet united in loyalty, exchanged a look.

In perfect, resonant unison, their voices rang out, steady, earnest, and laced with a strange, almost gleeful anticipation:

"Clan Head, we sincerely hope you'll assign us even more responsibilities."

It was both declaration and challenge, spoken not out of duty, but with pride.

The weight behind those simple words was immense.

Ten years ago, when disaster struck the spirit mine, a sudden collapse that took dozens of life.

It was Fang Yuan, then barely more than a youth, who stepped forward while others faltered.

The situation was delicate.

The collapse had been caused by neglected formation upkeep, a task that had been the responsibility of a specific elder.

The facts were clear, the blame obvious.

Everyone expected Fang Yuan to do the logical thing: pin the blame where it belonged, offer a few words of regret, and perhaps arrange token compensation to appease the mortal workers.

That was standard. The mortals, after all, could do little more than grumble in silence.

But instead, Fang Yuan bowed.

He bowed deeply and publicly, his forehead touching the dust as he took full responsibility for the failure, not as a formality, but with heartfelt sincerity.

He apologized. Not as a superior placating inferiors, but as one human to another.

It stunned the clan.

That moment became a turning point—dividing the elders into two camps.

One group, stiff-necked and prideful, whispered that his actions had shamed the clan.

That a clan head should never grovel before mortals. That it was a stain on the Fang name.

But the others, elders like Joshua and Sun saw something different.

That day etched itself into their bones.

In the boy who bowed, they saw a leader with the strength to shoulder the blame, the courage to protect even those at the bottom, and the wisdom to bind a wounded clan through humility rather than fear.

They had followed him ever since, not out of obligation, but with quiet reverence.

Because Fang Yuan didn't simply bear the weight of the clan, he made them want to carry it with him.

Fang Yuan wasn't sure what thoughts stirred behind the calm expressions of the two elders, but seeing their quiet satisfaction was enough. With a faint smirk, he clapped his hands together.

"All right, no time to waste," he declared. "I still have to go work my magic on all the caves our dear Elder Joshua personally dug out with his bare hands."

Joshua snorted and waved a hand. "Tsk. Don't pin that on me. I'm not shameless enough to steal credit from the mortals. I have some dignity left."

Elder Sun erupted into laughter once again, his mirth rolling like distant thunder, and the group resumed their march.

Felicia moved in step, trailing a respectful half-step behind Fang Yuan, her presence silent and composed—a watchful shadow in motion.

Her sharp eyes never left the Clan Head as they approached the next cave mouth.

She watched as Fang Yuan lifted his hand once more, the air around his fingers shimmering subtly with focused intent.

There was a soft pop, a sound like a bubble gently bursting and then the air shifted.

A cool pulse spread outward, thick with spiritual essence.

The earth responded, and before their eyes, another flawless stone basin took shape, its water glowing faintly like starlight caught in stillness.

Fang Joshua watched each creation with widening eyes, speechless awe.

With each new well, his respect for his Clan Head deepened, solidifying into something akin to reverence.

Fang Sun, however, had given up trying to fathom the *how*.

His round face was alight with a different kind of fervor.

His fingers twitched slightly, his eyes darting speculatively from cave entrance to cave entrance, already mentally cataloging the best cave to claim as his.

A small, calculating smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

I really need to come up with a good reason to reserve one of these caves for personal use, he mused, trailing behind the group as he watched Fang Yuan summon yet another glowing spiritual well into existence, each one as seamless and potent as the last.

Soon, they arrived at the final cave.

As the faint hum of condensed spiritual energy settled into the air, Fang Sun finally stepped forward, clearing his throat.

But Fang Yuan was already a step ahead.

"If you want to use a cultivation cave," he said casually, not even turning around, "you'll need to use merit points."

Fang Sun blinked. "Even elders need to earn merit points?"

Fang Yuan turned, flashing a brilliant, knowing smile. "Obviously. Everyone deserves to be treated equally, right?"

Fang Sun opened his mouth to argue, something, anything but no words came.

Every argument died before it reached his lips.

There was logic in Fang Yuan's words, but more than that, there was conviction.

Fang Yuan laughed, the sound easy and unbothered. "Oh come now, I wouldn't cheat my dear elders. You're the pillars of this clan, I need to treat you accordingly."

He paused, glancing up at the cloud-streaked sky.

His voice dropped slightly, almost thoughtful.

"Fairness in the cultivation world..." he murmured. "Everything is fair, you just have to be strong enough to reach out and take it."

Chapter 137: 137- Good News [1]

The faint hum of the final spiritual well settling into the stone basin faded, leaving a profound stillness thick with potent energy in the cave.

Fang Yuan dusted his hands with a crisp clap, the gesture light, almost theatrical, as if sealing the final stroke on a masterwork.

"Well," he said, turning with an air of smug satisfaction, "that's the last of them. These should serve as more than adequate temporary replacements for our usual cultivation formations."

His gaze flicked to Elder Joshua, a teasing glint in his eye.

"Care to give your expert opinion now?"

Joshua, still visibly impressed despite the effort to compose himself, crossed his arms.

His tone was gruff, but the respect underneath was impossible to miss.

"No need, Clan Head. It's impressive. Too impressive, really." He cleared his throat, nodding firmly.

"With your leave, I'll begin organizing the assignments immediately. Last thing we need is the juniors clawing at each other over the best spots like half-mad spirit hounds."

As he said this, he cast a sharp side-eye at Elder Sun, pointed and unspoken: and that includes certain elders.

Fang Yuan's laughter came soft and rich, a low ripple in the charged air. "By all means, Elder Joshua. Make it orderly, make it fair and if possible, try not to terrify the juniors too much."

Joshua straightened, his expression turning saintly.

"Oh, please, Clan Head," he said smoothly. "You can trust me not to terrify them."

The overly polite tone was so at odds with his usual bark that even Fang Yuan cracked a grin.

With a final respectful nod, Joshua turned on his heel and strode from the cave mouth, already mentally drafting rosters and evaluations.

His boots echoed off the stone floor in a steady rhythm.

The moment he disappeared around the bend, Elder Sun stepped forward, eyes alight with mischief barely contained.

"Clan Head," Fang Sun began, his voice uncharacteristically smooth, "while Elder Joshua sees to the caves... might you have any other urgent tasks requiring attention? Something perhaps... requiring a more... discerning touch?"

He puffed his chest out slightly, the picture of eager service, though the calculating gleam in his eyes betrayed his underlying motivation: merit points.

Fang Yuan regarded him for a moment, a slow smile spreading across his face.

He laughed, the sound warm and knowing. "Eager to earn your cave privileges already, Elder Sun?"

Sun opened his mouth, perhaps to feign offense or offer a justification, but Fang Yuan held up a hand, still chuckling.

Then, his expression shifted, a spark of realization lighting his eyes. He tilted his head, gaze turning momentarily distant, as if sifting through old memories.

He tapped his chin thoughtfully, a faraway look settling into his eyes.

This talk of merit points... it stirred something. A memory, faint and half-buried beneath years of cultivation and duty.

Long ago, when he was still a brat loitering around the clan archives, annoying scribes and pretending to read scrolls beyond his years, he had stumbled across a peculiar reference.

A token.

Not a mere trinket, but a specially enchanted artifact used within the clan long before his time. It had served as a physical ledger, tracking contributions, debts and favors essentially.

A tangible representation of one's standing. Slipped into robes, worn like a badge, glowing faintly with ever-shifting numerals.

He blinked, and the memory clicked into place with a quiet finality.

Of course.

His father had used that system.

A slow, wry grin curved Fang Yuan's lips, chasing away the distant look in his eyes.

It felt like finding a puzzle piece from his childhood, long thought lost beneath the weight of adulthood.

His gaze snapped back to Elder Sun, eyes sharp now, gleaming with a renewed purpose... and just the faintest flicker of mischief.

"I think," Fang Yuan said, his voice dipping into a tone that was both conspiratorial and unmistakably commanding, "we're going to need to dig up that old family token."

Elder Sun straightened slightly, sensing a shift in the air.

"It's probably gathering dust in some vault no one's opened in a generation," Fang Yuan continued.

"But it's time we brought it back. We'll need someone to locate it and more importantly, to begin crafting new ones. Functional and proper tokens. Something that can store and display the merit points clearly."

Fang Yuan's grin sharpened, the glint in his eye unmistakably sly.

He turned squarely to face Elder Sun.

"Seems like just the kind of task for a discerning elder," he said, his voice rich with amusement, "one who truly understands the value of... infrastructure."

He hadn't even finished the sentence before Fang Sun practically leapt forward, his eyes alight, his round face glowing with unrestrained enthusiasm.

"I'll do it! I'll do it, Clan Head!" he boomed, the declaration bouncing off the cave walls and sending a few startled pebbles clattering down from above.

He rubbed his palms together like a merchant about to make the deal of a lifetime. "Locating ancient artifacts, overseeing the crafting process—this isn't grunt work. This demands finesse. Historical insight. Impeccable taste!" He gave a theatrical sniff, lifting his chin with mock arrogance. "Frankly, I'm the only one qualified."

His eyes were already darting, scanning the distance like a strategist on a battlefield. "The central archive, perhaps? No—wait—the old treasury annex! That's where they kept ceremonial artifacts from the pre-restructuring era. Yes, yes, that's the place to start—unless it was relocated after the flood in the fifth year of..."

He trailed off into muttered calculations, already halfway turned toward the exit, fingers twitching as though they were rifling through phantom scrolls.

Fang Yuan simply raised a brow, biting back a laugh. Elder Sun had taken the bait with such speed and gusto, it was almost too easy.

Fang Yuan turned to Felicia, his expression softening as the echoes of Elder Sun's enthusiasm faded behind them.

"Well," he said, brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve, "we should get going too."

Felicia gave a silent, graceful nod, her steps falling in rhythm beside his as they began to walk away from the eastern ravine.

Chapter 138: 138- Good News [2]

The crisp mountain air felt lighter after the cave's earthy stillness as Fang Yuan and Felicia walked the winding path back towards the clan's central compound.

Felicia, ever the quiet shadow at his side, surprised him.

Her voice—calm, low, and edged with thoughtful curiosity—broke the gentle rhythm of their footsteps.

"Clan Head," she said, eyes forward, tone even, "regarding the wells you create... will they endure? Or will their power fade over time?"

Fang Yuan glanced at her, a flicker of approval passing through his gaze. It was a sharp question—measured, observant. Just like her.

He answered without missing a step, his tone as casual as if he'd long since calculated every detail.

"They'll hold for about a month if left untouched, natural dissipation will eventually set in. But if a cultivator actually uses the cave, draws from the well directly... a week. Maybe a little more, depending on their core strength and absorption rate."

He spoke with the calm confidence of someone who had tested it himself, tone level, gaze distant.

Fang Yuan had gotten the details from the system, of course, but he had no intention of revealing that.

As far as anyone else was concerned, this knowledge was his own: the product of experience, intuition, and deep cultivation insight.

Felicia nodded, absorbing this. After a few more steps, she asked, "And the points... Juniors can be impulsive. What prevents a stronger disciple from simply... taking another's earned points? Or bullying them out of their share?"

A thoughtful hum escaped Fang Yuan. "Ah. A valid concern. I hadn't fully articulated it, but the answer lies in the design."

He paused, choosing his words carefully to avoid hinting at the 'system' as an external entity.

"Points will be of two kinds. 'Locked' points, allocated regularly by the clan itself, perhaps based on standing or basic needs. These cannot be traded, only used by the recipient for essential resources: cave access, basic cultivation materials.

Then there are 'Earned' points, gained through specific tasks, achievements, or trades. Those can be exchanged, gifted, or... unfortunately, potentially coerced.

But the locked points ensure no one is completely deprived of the clan's foundational support, even if they are lazy or... bullied."

He gave her a wry look. "It creates a safety net beneath the meritocracy."

Felicia's third question was the sharpest, her gaze steady. "And if an Elder tasked with distributing points... were corrupted? Favored some, neglected others?"

Fang Yuan stopped walking.

He looked out over the clan lands bathed in afternoon light, then back at Felicia, his expression grave but resolute.

"That," he said, his voice low and carrying absolute conviction, "is a vulnerability in any system. I can only tell you this, Felicia: I have absolute trust in the integrity of the Elders who stand with me now. Vigilance is always needed, but for now, the foundation is sound."

Felicia absorbed his answers.

A small, genuine smile touched her lips, a rare expression that softened her usually watchful demeanor.

It wasn't just acceptance; it looked like quiet approval.

Fang Yuan tilted his head, genuinely curious. "You rarely ask questions, Felicia. What prompted this... interrogation?" A curious note entered his voice.

Her smile lingered as she met his gaze, steady and sincere.

"I've served you for at least seven years now, Clan Head. I've seen you burdened, resolute, sharp... even furious." She paused, her eyes narrowing slightly—not in suspicion, but in thought. "But today?"

A small shake of her head, and the smile softened, warming like sunlight slipping through clouds.

"Today, I saw something different. A cheerfulness I hadn't quite seen before. You looked... engaged. Genuinely content in the challenge of building something, not just managing crisis after crisis."

She glanced away briefly, as if weighing whether she should've said so much, then looked back, her voice quieter.

"I suppose I just wanted to see how deep that satisfaction ran. So I thought... I might as well ask."

"You're still a little child, Felicia," Fang Yuan said gently, a teasing note in his voice, though his gaze softened. "Next time you have a question... don't hesitate to ask."

Her words had struck something in him—unexpected and quietly profound. For a moment, he'd felt a flicker of surprise... then a warmth, deep and familiar, like the echo of a truth he hadn't fully acknowledged until now.

The weight of leadership was always there—ever-present, heavy, inescapable.

But this, shaping the clan's future with his own hands, breathing life into ideas, turning vision into structure...

It was more than duty. It was satisfying. It was his.

And somehow, without knowing it, Felicia had put it into words.

Just then, a cry shattered the calm like glass.

"CLAN HEAD! CLAN HEAD!"

The desperate, ragged voice tore through the quiet afternoon, raw and urgent, sending birds scattering from the treetops.

A Fang disciple staggered into view down the winding path, his form barely upright. His robes were torn and streaked with dirt, one sleeve hanging by a thread.

Blood stained the fabric at his side, and he clutched his ribs with one trembling hand, every step a visible struggle.

His face was ashen, twisted in pain and sheer panic.

He took two more staggering steps and then his foot caught on a gnarled root.

He fell.

The impact was hard and unforgiving, a dull thud against the earth. But even that didn't stop him.

With a hoarse gasp, he began dragging himself forward on his elbows, dust clinging to his skin, breath ragged, eyes locked, desperate on Fang Yuan.

Felicia was instantly poised, a hand drifting towards her dagger, her watchfulness snapping back into razor focus.

Fang Yuan moved faster than thought. One moment he was on the path; the next, he was kneeling beside the fallen junior, a blur of motion that left the air humming.

Gently but firmly, he helped the boy sit up, supporting his shoulders. "Easy. Breathe. What happened?"

His voice was calm, but an undercurrent of steel ran beneath it.

The junior gasped, blood trickling from a split lip, his chest heaving as he struggled to speak. His eyes, wide, wild with terror locked onto Fang Yuan.

"Clan Head... it's... it's Elder Ruì... and Fang Lian..."

He choked on the words, sucking in a ragged, agonized breath.

His voice came out low and strained, thick with pain and burning with barely contained fury.

"The Lin family... they've taken them. Kidnapped them both."

Chapter 139: 139- Lin's Family Plan [1]

Lin Estate, Coldwind City.

In a dimly lit chamber within the heart of the estate, shadows clung to the high walls like watching spirits.

Around a polished obsidian table, a group of elders had gathered, faces tense, voices rising in sharp, overlapping waves.

"You tampered with the main branch's mission, Lin Xi!" one elder barked, his fist slamming onto the table with a crack that echoed like a warning bell. "What were you thinking? Interfering with a sanctioned escort?"

"You've endangered everything we've built," another snapped, his voice tight with fury. "The main clan will not let this stand. This... this isn't just bold, it's suicidal!"

"Our name will be ashes," a third hissed, face pale beneath her painted forehead.
"You've doomed the entire family!"

Matriarch Lin Xi sat at the head of the table, her posture regal and unmoving, hands folded with surgical precision.

Her sharp eyes flicked between each speaker, silent and cold, cutting through their outrage like a blade through silk.

Just then, like a candle snuffed by an unseen wind, the argument died mid-sentence.

An overwhelming force, an invisible crushing weight slammed down on the room.

It wasn't physical pain, but a suffocating pressure that seized the mind and spirit, locking breath in throats and freezing tongues.

Lin Xi alone remained upright, her knuckles white on the armrests, her spine ramrod straight against the onslaught.

Around her, the elders didn't merely slump; they fell, collapsing onto the polished floor like puppets with severed strings, unconscious or paralyzed.

Divine sense.

Raw, immense, and utterly focused, pinning the whole room down like a butterfly beneath glass.

It was cold, precise, and radiated with controlled fury.

Lin Xi didn't have to guess who did it.

There was only one presence in Coldwind City capable of this... and only one reason could explain why it would be directed at her with such lethal intent.

The confirmation came faster than thought.

BOOM!

The intricately carved ceiling didn't just shatter; it vanished.

Tons of stone and timber didn't fall, they were hurled upwards and outwards in a cataclysmic eruption of dust, splinters and screaming air.

Daylight flooded the ruined chamber, harsh and exposing.

Through the swirling debris, a figure descended.

Not with the usual flamboyant arc of sword-flight Fang Yuan was known for, but on a column of pure, roiling qi.

He dropped like a meteor given human form, landing silently amidst the wreckage on the cracked floor, his boots not even disturbing the dust settling around them.

Fang Yuan stood there.

His sword in his hand, yet the air around him hummed with a sharper edge than any blade.

His expression was granite carved by a glacier, utterly devoid of the rare cheerfulness Felicia had glimpsed hours before.

His eyes, dark and fathomless, locked onto Lin Xi with an intensity that felt like physical daggers pricking her skin.

The sheer, unadorned power radiating from him was terrifying.

Lin Xi's throat constricted. Her earlier composure evaporated.

A single, reflexive gulp traveled down her dry throat, audible in the sudden, ringing silence that followed the explosion.

The cold sweat that beaded on her brow felt like ice.

Danger wasn't just present; it had shattered her world and stood amidst the ruins, waiting.

Then, his voice cut through the settling dust.

"Tell me," Fang Yuan commanded, the words dropping like stones into the abyss of her fear, "how do you wish to die?"

The crushing pressure of Fang Yuan's divine sense held the ruined chamber in a vice.

Lin Xi's mouth opened, a silent gasp then snapped shut, jaw clenched against the terror.

With a visible, shuddering effort, she forced words past the constriction in her throat, her voice cracking like dry timber: "Clan Head Fang Yuan! Can I talk to you?!"

Fang Yuan expression remained carved from ice.

Slowly, deliberately, he raised his sword.

The air around the blade hummed, gathering a light so intense it seemed to bleach the color from the world.

His lips barely moved, but the words echoed with chilling finality.

"Tyrant Light Sword. First Form – Divine Line."

A thread of pure, annihilating light coalesced along the blade's edge, aimed unerringly at Lin Xi's heart.

Death was a breath away.

"FANG RU!" Lin Xi screamed, the raw sound tearing her throat. "She's alive! I swear it! She's unharmed and in perfect health!"

The blinding thread of light twitched.

And it deviated, avoiding her outright.

It lanced through the prone forms of the unconscious elders where they lay scattered on the cracked floor.

There was no sound, nor explosion. It just dissipated into the air.

Five lives, snuffed like candle flames in a hurricane.

The air filled with the faint, acrid smell of ozone and something charred.

Fang Yuan's sword lowered a fraction. His eyes, colder than the void between stars, locked onto hers.

"Where. Is. She?"

Lin Xi scrambled to her feet, limbs trembling like saplings in a gale.

Sweat plastered strands of hair to her temples, her fine robes clinging damply.

Peak Golden Core? Before a nascent soul realm master, she was less than dust.

"Please," she rasped, gesturing frantically towards a side passage, "follow me, Clan Head!"

She led him on unsteady legs through the smoke-choked ruin of her hall, down a corridor, into her private chambers.

The air here was thick with the scent of sandalwood.

There, on a low divan, peacefully and breathing softly, lay Fang Rui.

Fang Yuan's gaze snapped from the girl to Lin Xi, a flicker of genuine surprise tightening his features for a microsecond.

This chamber... was able to shield from my divine sense? The implication hung unspoken but potent.

Lin Xi, misinterpreting his sharp look as condemnation, babbled, dropping to her knees.

"Clan Head Fang Yuan, spare me! I knew nothing of the main branch's attack! I swear! I only found her... I hid her here... I saved her!"

Her eyes darted back towards the ruined hall. "The elders... they wanted to hand her over! That's why we were arguing! That's why—"

Chapter 140: 140- Lin's Family Plan [2]

Fang Yuan strode past her kneeling form towards Fang Rui.

His voice cut through her desperate justification, flat and final: "I'm aware."

Lin Xi's head jerked up, stunned. He knew? He knew I saved her? Then why... why the destruction? Why the execution? Why point that sword at my heart?! The injustice screamed silently in her mind, a tempest of fear and fury.

As if reading her very thoughts, Fang Yuan paused beside the sleeping girl.

He didn't turn, but his words fell like stones into the silence, answering her unvoiced plea: "You breathe only because you stood up for yourself."

Lin Xi's breath hitched.

Before she could process the chilling meaning, before she could even blink, Fang Yuan and Fang Rui were gone. Vanished.

Only a faint displacement of air and the lingering scent of ozone remained.

The immense pressure vanished.

Lin Xi collapsed forward, forehead pressing against the cool stone floor.

A ragged, shuddering sob escaped her as she gulped air she hadn't realized she had been holding.

Relief warred with the bone-deep terror still vibrating through her.

She pushed herself up onto her knees, trembling violently.

And then she felt it. The cold, spreading dampness soaking through the silk of her inner robes.

The sharp, undeniable tang of urine cutting through the sandalwood.

A choked, hysterical laugh bubbled up, dying instantly in her throat.

Shame, hot and scalding, flooded her face.

She squeezed her eyes shut, not against the destruction outside, but against the utter humiliation within.

"Hah..." The sound was hollow, broken.

She, Matriarch Lin Xi, Peak Golden Core cultivator... had pissed herself in pure terror.

Fang Yuan, on the other hand, was flying, holding In his arms, Elder Ruì who lay unconscious but uninjured.

Without pause, Fang Yuan continued to soar through the sky, a streak of silver light cutting across the horizon, before landing directly on the balcony of his personal chambers.

The moment his feet touched stone, his voice rang out, firm and commanding:

"Felicia."

She appeared almost instantly, as if summoned by instinct rather than sound.

Fang Yuan turned and gently laid Elder Ruì on the cushioned divan inside his chambers. "She's unharmed, but unconscious. See to her recovery."

Felicia's gaze flicked up to meet his, steady and sharp but silent.

She simply nodded once, then turned, already issuing quiet, precise orders as she disappeared into the inner halls with the elder cradled in her arms.

Fang Yuan didn't watch her go.

He was already turning, his cloak flaring behind him as he strode out of the estate without a word, heading north.

Straight toward the main branch.

The journey north was a blur of screaming wind and burning meridians.

The familiar landscapes of the Fang territory vanished beneath him in a streak of distorted colors.

He wasn't flying; he was hurling himself through the air, qi blazing from his core like a comet's tail, scorching pathways normally traversed in weeks down to mere, agonizing hours.

The strain etched lines of exhaustion onto his face, but his eyes remained fixed, glacial chips of obsidian reflecting the rushing ground far below.

He landed hard on the outskirts of Phungrei City.

Without pause, he ripped open the System Shop interface hovering in his mind's eye.

A Nascent Soul Realm pill materialized in his palm, radiating potent energy.

He crushed it between his teeth, the surge of raw spiritual power flooding his depleted reserves like a tsunami, washing away the fatigue but doing nothing for the cold fury simmering beneath.

He then pushed his divine sense outwards, a vast, invisible net seeking a specific, fragile thread of consciousness, Fang Lian's.

The scene that he witnessed was brutal.

Images slammed into his mind and a sharp, involuntary wince tightened his features. Rage, pure and wild, flared hotter than the pill's energy within his core.

He then vanished from the snowy ruins.

★ ★ ★

Lin Estate basement, Phungrei City, Northern Region:

The air in the basement hung thick with the coppery tang of blood and the sickly-sweet stench of burnt flesh.

Four guards, faces flushed with sadistic glee, surrounded the slumped figure chained to a central post.

"Still playing the silent martyr?" sneered one, prodding her bruised ribs with a boot. "Tell us where your master has kept our young mistress, little bitch!"

"You claim you're the disciple of that Fang Yuan?" another jeered, lifting a branding iron glowing cherry-red from the coals.

"Where's your mighty master now, eh? Saving someone important?" He pressed the searing metal against her bare shoulder.

A hiss, the smell of cooking meat, but Fang Lian only gritted her teeth harder, a low, animal groan escaping her clenched jaw.

Her eyes, though clouded with pain, burned with unbroken defiance.

Lin Clan Head's daughter? Who was she? The thought was a distant, bitter echo in her fogged mind. *Even if I knew... would they stop?* The answer was a cold certainty. Survival meant nothing here; only defiance remained.

A third guard slapped her hard across the face, snapping her head back.

"Wake up! What, dreaming of rescue? Dreaming of him?" He laughed, a harsh, grating sound.

The leader, a man with eyes like chips of dirty ice, smirked. "Enough games, lads. She's not talking..."

He let the pause hang, heavy with vile implication. "Maybe she just needs... proper motivation."

His gaze raked over her battered form, lingering.

The others caught his meaning instantly. Sleazy grins spread across their faces as they stepped closer, hands reaching out, eyes glinting with predatory intent.

Suddenly, the air thickened, heavy and oppressive.

In the next instant, everything fell silent, utterly, unnaturally so.

A silence so absolute it devoured breath and thought alike.

The leering grins froze in place.

Reaching hands halted mid-air, fingers still curled.

Even the oppressive heat from the brazier vanished, replaced by a bone-deep, suffocating cold that coiled around the chamber like a noose.

And then, without flash, flare, or warning. It happened.

All four guards ceased to exist.

One moment they were living, leering threats, thick with bloodlust and arrogance.

The next, they were crimson mist—flesh, bone, and sinew pulverized into a splatter of gore that painted the stone walls in streaks of red and dark.

There was no scream nor a reaction, it was instantaneous, total annihilation.

In the space they once occupied, amidst the raining gore, appeared Fang Yuan.