

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

#Chapter 181- Xiao Pei [1] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 181- Xiao Pei [1]

Chapter 181: 181- Xiao Pei [1]

Fang Yuan's lips barely moved as he whispered back, his tone steady, almost reproachful.

"She's an elder of the clan, Zhaoyue."

The soft rebuke was quiet enough that only she could hear it.

Lin Zhaoyue's lashes fluttered, and her smile faltered. Disappointment flickered across her face, settling into something small and wounded.

She looked down, her hands folded neatly in her lap, but the sadness in her eyes lingered like a shadow cast too long.

Fang Yuan didn't linger on it. He turned away, his voice rising to address the hall once more.

"Right now, our clan is not in its brightest state and so we must not forget the sleeping dragon at our borders. Tell me, have the royal family sent any words regards my younger brother?"

"No, Clan Head," one of the elders replied swiftly.

Fang Yuan nodded, his expression unreadable.

"Then it remains as we all thought. The royal family is likely still waiting, hoarding their army even. It's a shame they're still under the pretext that my younger brother kidnapped the third Princess... when he did no such thing."

At that, Fang Mei rose from her seat, her movements abrupt and trembling. Her voice, when it broke through the air, carried the edge of a sob she tried in vain to hide.

"But... if he truly did not, then why is he still in hiding? Why—" her voice cracked, her eyes glistening, "why is he not here with us?"

Her hands balled into fists at her sides as though she could anchor her emotions, but tears still welled, spilling despite her will.

Hastily, she lifted her sleeve and wiped her eyes, bowing her head under Fang Yuan's gaze.

Fang Yuan slowly rubbed his temples, a faint, almost imperceptible smile playing on his lips.

"About that," he began, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone that hooked every single soul in the hall. "Before he was forced to depart, I had my younger brother hold on to a specific communication talisman. And guess what message he sent me the last time he used it?"

The hall was utterly silent. Not a rustle of silk, not a cleared throat.

Every elder, from the most senior to the newest, was leaning forward, their breaths held.

Fang Yuan's grin widened, a flash of triumphant brotherly pride.

"He wrote... that he has officially stepped foot into the Nascent Soul Realm!" Fang Yuan announced, his voice ringing with genuine awe. "Amazing, isn't it?"

For a long, suspended moment, the entire hall was frozen in pure, unadulterated disbelief. The silence was absolute.

They knew their Clan Head would not lie.

Not about something like this, not when it was easy to verify.

But the news was so monumental, so utterly world-shattering, that their minds simply refused to process it.

Fang Tian? Nascent Soul?

Memories flashed for almost every elder present: of the boy stuck for years at Qi Condensation, the subject of pitying sighs; the young man whose potential was always overshadowed by the blinding sun of his genius older brother.

They had believed in their hearts that the clan's luck had been hoarded by one son, leaving the other with only scraps.

And then, this very year, he had begun to soar.

And it all started after his engagement was broken with the prodigy from the Gu family, it felt as if he grew wings of his own.

But to go from the foundations of cultivation to the peak of what they once considered legend, the Nascent Soul realm, in under a year?

It was beyond incomprehensible. It defied all laws of cultivation, all reasoning in their heads.

They had only just begun to reconcile with the fact that their Clan Head was a Nascent Soul expert, a being of myth who had redefined the peak of power in Coldwind City.

No, not just Coldwind City, the entirety of Tharz Kingdom!

And now, they were being told that the "unlucky" younger son had also reached that same mythical realm.

The shock on their faces was a mixture of awe, joy, and utter shock.

Jaws were slack.

Every elders were all thinking the same thing: The Fang Clan didn't have just one once-in-a-millennium genius. It had two. And they are siblings!

Fang Chen did not let the moment slip past.

Rising to his feet, he cupped his hands and bowed deeply toward Fang Yuan.

His chest swelled with pride, and when he spoke, his voice carried warmth and sincerity,

"Both brothers... like dragons soaring across the heavens. It makes one wonder, truly, just how wondrous your parents' bloodline must have been."

There was no jest in his tone, only reverence. Fang Yuan's father was his elder brother, after all, he spoke not just as an elder, but also as family.

Fang Yin, ever guileless, tilted her head, her voice soft yet tinged with innocent wonder.

"But... it's such a pity your parents passed away, Clan Head." Then, as if caught by a whimsical thought, her lips curved into a wistful smile. "If they were still here, we could also have a third genius too! Ah... how wonderful it would be if that genius was a girl as well!" she added, her voice laced with a dreamy, wishing tone.

Her words, so thoughtlessly pure, fell like stones into still water.

The hall turned silent. Breath caught. The weight of her remark sank deep into every heart.

Fang Yuan's eyes flickered in surprise, stunned for but a heartbeat.

Then, to the astonishment of all, his lips curved, and laughter spilled out,

"Indeed... indeed. But Elder Yin, who is to say the next dragon must be my sibling?"

The tension eased as his smile grew. His gaze swept the hall, steady, luminous.

"Perhaps... the next dragon may rise from among our own clan's children."

Fang Yin's eyes widened, shimmering with starlight.

"Really? That's possible?" Her voice brimmed with wonder, like a child catching sight of fireworks.

Fang Yuan's chuckle was warm, reassuring.

"Really. And perhaps, with the right resources, even you, or any one of the honored elders seated here, could soar to become that very next dragon. The third pillar of the Fang clan."

Chapter 182: 182- Xiao Pei [2]

Fang Yin clasped her hands together, her face alight with innocent excitement.

"Wow!" she breathed, her delight infectious.

Fang Yuan shook his head with faint amusement before his smile returned, bright and unshakable.

"Alright then. I'm sure you all remember my dear brother... Xiao Pei?"

A wave of nods swept through the chamber.

Of course they remembered. Xiao Pei, the quiet benefactor who had solved so many of their troubles.

The one who had given generously when the Fang clan teetered on the edge, lifting burdens both financial and personal.

His name alone carried the weight of gratitude and reverence.

Fang Yuan's expression softened with warmth before brightening once more.

"With his help..." he began slowly, each word measured, deliberate, "I was able to procure... a few more resources."

The elders leaned forward ever so slightly, breath strained, waiting.

Fang Yuan inhaled, holding the silence, savoring their anticipation.

His eyes swept the council, meeting gaze after gaze, letting the tension coil tighter, heavier.

Then, his voice dropped, low, almost a whisper, yet clear enough to reach every ears present.

"...A hundred Golden Core Pills."

The words struck like lightning.

For an instant, the hall seemed to shatter. Elders jerked upright, eyes widening so far they threatened to tear.

A few mouths opened, then snapped shut, unable to form words.

The sheer weight of the revelation crashed over them like a tidal wave, leaving only stunned silence in its wake.

A hundred...?

That number was absurd. Even unthinkable.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly, savoring the shock etched on every elder's face.

If only they knew, he mused, his expression betraying nothing. That I also have a hundred Nascent Soul Pills... no, better yet, the ten Hollow Spirit Pills in my hands. Hah... their eyes would pop clean out of their sockets. They'd even think I'd been possessed.

Meanwhile, at the exact same moment, far to the south of the Tharz Kingdom—

"Achoo!"

The sneeze rang out suddenly.

"Shhh! Not a sound," came a woman's gentle, lilting voice.

It carried both amusement and warning, like silk brushing against glass.

On a low bed lay none other than Xiao Pei.

His robes were open, chest bared, the lamplight catching the taut lines of his muscles.

Seated beside him, a woman traced her fingers across his chest with infuriating leisure, her touch both feather-light and deliberate.

"Is th-that... r-really... n-necessary?" Xiao Pei stammered, his usual composed voice breaking into an embarrassingly squeaky tone.

"Oh, yes," the woman replied with a slow, charming smile, her eyes glinting with mischief.

"After all... I'm your nurse right now. And a patient should listen to his caretaker, shouldn't he?"

Her hand wandered again, deliberately teasing along his chest.

Xiao Pei shut his eyes tight, jaw clenching as his lips pressed into a thin line.

Just then, the doors creaked open and an old hunched figure shuffled in, his head bowed over a flickering spirit-jade tablet.

"Interesting... interesting..." the old man muttered, the words a dry rustle of leaves.

His fingers, stained with ink and powders. "Most peculiar..."

The nurse was instantaneous. Her seductive looks vanished and in one fluid motion, her exploring hands snapped back, and she snatched a cloth from a basin nearby.

She began dabbing at Xiao Pei's chest with brisk, clinical efficiency, her previous smolder replaced by a mask of professional detachment.

And then another woman stepped through the doorway, and it was as if the gloom itself parted for her.

Her hair was a cascade of pale moonlight, a stunning, silvery white that seemed to glow against the room's dark wood and shadowy corners.

She brought with her a sense of cool, serene authority.

Xiao Pei's head jerked up. A wave of palpable relief washed over his face, tightening his throat.

His eyes, wide with a mixture of desperation and hope, locked onto her.

"Du Juan, I—" he began, his voice choked with emotion.

She cut him off, her voice calm yet firm, like silk gliding over stone.

"Please bear with it for a while. Matriarch Fang wishes for the best for you." Her gaze, however, was not on him.

It settled on the muttering old man, her expression unreadable.

The strange little doctor finally looked up, his beady eyes sharp and bright behind spectacles.

"It is exactly as you have speculated, milady" he chirped, pointing a bony finger at Xiao Pei.

"The blood of his... it's indeed special. ah! If only I could have him permanen— Aha!" He exclaimed, as if struck by a brilliant idea, and swiveled his head to stare at Du Juan with unabashed greed.

Eyes locking onto Du Juan with a startling intensity.

"How much," he rasped, the words not a question but a demand, "for the human?"

Du Juan's expression did not change, but the air around her grew several degrees colder.

"He is not for sale," she stated, her voice flat and final, like a slab of granite.

"Oh ho ho ho!" The doctor's laugh was a dry, rattling sound. He waved a dismissive, ink-stained hand, his confidence unshaken.

"Everyone has a price. Everyone. Name it." His grin returned, wider and more presumptuous, utterly convinced that his wealth could claim even this extraordinary specimen.

Then, he saw the change in Du Juan. Her luminous eyes seemed to capture all the light in the room, glowing with an otherworldly intensity.

Her smile widened, a beautiful, terrifying curve of her lips that promised nothing good.

Xiao Pei, from his place on the divan, felt a cold dread that had nothing to do with his ailment.

"You've gone senile, old man," she said, her tone almost conversational, yet each word dripped with glacial contempt.

"We came here for a solution," she continued, the polite pretense shattering, "not to get rid of the problem."

The shift was instantaneous.

A pressure descended upon the room so immense it felt like the ceiling had dropped.

It was not a physical force, but a spiritual one, a suffocating, weight that spoke of an insurmountable gap in power.

The doctor's smug grin vanished, replaced by a mask of shock and agony.

His knees buckled with a sickening crack of protesting joints, and he crashed to the floor, his spectacles skittering away.

A strangled gurgle was all he could manage.

Chapter 183: 183- Nascent Du Juan

The nurse began to scream, like a short, sharp thing, ripped from her throat by pure, unadulterated terror.

The sound jolted Xiao Pei into action.

He scrambled off the low bed, his earlier embarrassment gone and replaced by the primal instincts to be clothed.

His fingers fumbled with the ties of his robes, his movements hurried and inelegant as he tried to shield himself from the terrifying atmosphere and the unfolding chaos.

Du Juan didn't so much as spare the screaming woman a glance.

And without her needing to make a move, the woman's head rolled to the floor, her voice cut off as though it had never existed.

She turned her focus back on the old doctor groveling on the floor.

The air around him warped, and the wooden planks beneath his knees let out a soft, agonized groan.

"Old man," Du Juan's voice resounded in the quiet room. "I'm going to let you live just this once because you know the Matriarch."

The pressure intensified for a fraction of a second, drawing a wet, choked gasp from the doctor.

"But try and defy me again," she continued, her tone conversational yet dripping with venom, "and I'll make sure this entire place falls down into ruin, with you buried at the very bottom of it."

And as swiftly as it had descended, the immense pressure vanished.

She turned to Xiao Pei, her expression smoothing into one of cool impatience. "Let's go."

Xiao Pei, finally securing his last robe tie, ran over to her side, his eyes wide with excitement. "Sister Du Juan, what was that? That was so amazing! You—"

Tap.

A single, cool finger pressed lightly against his lips, silencing him as effectively as a blade at his throat.

"Shhh..."

The sound was no more than a breath, soft and fleeting, yet it cut through the air with finality.

For a heartbeat, the chamber was still, until the quiet was broken by the sharp rhythm of boots against stone.

It was the sound of a collective hurried footsteps drawing closer.

Du Juan's eyes half-lidded, her expression unchanging.

She drew in a slow breath, then released it in a sigh that carried with it something ancient, weary, and dangerous.

"I wonder..." Her voice was calm, almost lazy, though each syllable dripped with disdain. "...just how stupid a person can be."

As the final word left her lips, a strained, pain-racked shout echoed from the chamber behind them, tearing through the hallway.

It was the doctor's voice, but now it was a ragged thing, frayed with agony and fury.

"Cough! Get them! Get the boy! Cough— Kill the girl! At all cost! Cough-cough— I want that boy alive!"

Hearing the voice, a cold, cruel smile touched Du Juan's lips.

"Well," she murmured, the words for herself alone. "This does make it easier for me."

She closed her eyes for a single moment and then when they opened, she released her divine sense.

It was an instantaneous flood as it travelled everywhere at once.

It poured through every corridor, seeped under every door, and filled every room of the decrepit clinic.

In an instant, the entire building was mapped within her mind, every scurrying rat, every hidden guard drawing a sharp, surprised breath, every trembling leaf on a dying plant outside, she perceived it all.

She felt the doctor's raging, pain-filled consciousness like a pustule of hatred, and she felt the dozen or so spiritual signatures of his guards beginning to converge on their position.

She looked down at Xiao Pei, her smirk a beautiful, dangerous thing. "It's best we teach fools what a Nascent Soul realm cultivator is capable of, shouldn't we?"

Xiao Pei gulped, the sound audibly dry in his throat.

She raised her hand, her fingers elegant and poised. Her thumb and middle finger came together.

Snap.

The snap was not loud.

It was a small, clean, almost delicate sound. But its effect was absolute.

It was as if the world itself had been muted.

The thudding of boots charging down hallways ceased instantly.

The labored, angry coughing from the doctor's room was cut off.

"Good. That's it." Du Juan said, her voice unnaturally clear in the perfect stillness.

She turned her head, her moonlit hair shifting like a silver waterfall, and gazed with certainty down a specific dark hallway.

"Follow me," she commanded, already beginning to walk without a single glance back to see if he obeyed.

Xiao Pei instantly followed, his steps silent on the now-muffled floorboards, his wide eyes taking in the terrifying, awe-inspiring stillness.

There were no more sounds of footsteps rushing toward them.

There was only the quiet, confident click of Du Juan's heels and the frantic beating of his own heart.

The silence was the loudest thing he had ever heard.

It was.... as they passed the first open doorway that he saw it.

His steps faltered.

Just inside the room, a man in guardsman leathers was frozen in a half-crouch, one hand reaching for the sword at his hip.

The pose was perfectly captured, but the man was utterly still.

And his head... was not where it should have been.

It lay on the floor several feet away, tilted back as if staring at the cobwebbed ceiling.

There was no blood spray, only a single, clean, impossible cut.

Xiao Pei's breath hitched. He stopped, his eyes wide, fixed on the ghastly scene.

Ahead of him, Du Juan did not turn. "Do not linger on the scenery," she said, her voice a flat, undisturbed pond. "It is beneath your notice."

She continued walking, her footsteps echoing softly in the profound quiet.

Swallowing hard, Xiao Pei forced his feet to move, tearing his gaze away from the headless guard only to have it fall upon another. And another.

It was the same in every room and corridor they passed.

A nurse slumped over a table, a tray of medical instruments spilled beside her still hand.

An alchemist frozen in the act of pouring a vial, his body upright at his workbench, his head resting neatly beside the beaker he would never fill.

Chapter 184: 184- Save your head.

The heavy door swung shut behind them, sealing away the nightmare. The transition was jarring.

One moment, they were in a tomb of silent, brutal death... the very next, they were plunged into the chaotic, vibrant life of a night market.

The alley was a canyon of noise and shadow. Lanterns strung between ramshackle stalls cast a warm, flickering glow on a throng of people.

Vendors shouted over one another, hawking dubious-looking spirit herbs, shimmering talismans, and sizzling skewers of mystery meat.

The air, once thick with the scent of blood, was now a competing mélange of spices, incense, and the faint odor of damp stone.

Xiao Pei took a deep, shuddering breath, the normalcy of the scene feeling utterly surreal.

It was then that the ground gave a low, deep groan.

A tremor ran through the cobblestones, silencing the haggling for a split second. Heads turned.

Then, with a sound like a mountain sighing, the entire building they had just exited collapsed in on itself.

Walls folded, roofs splintered, and the structure plummeted downward, not with a violent explosion, but with a deep, final crunch of settling earth and shattered timber.

A great cloud of dust billowed up, briefly swallowing the nearby stalls before settling to reveal a gaping, dark sinkhole several meters deep.

She hadn't been lying earlier.. she had meant every word spoken and she truly buried him.

The market fell completely silent, then, as one, the crowd shrugged.

A building collapse in a place like this was just Tuesday.

The shouting and haggling resumed, slightly more subdued, flowing around the new landmark as if it had always been there.

Xiao Pei stared at the ruins, his stomach churning.

He found his voice, though it was small and strained. "Sister Du Juan... don't you think you're being too much?"

Du Juan, who hadn't even glanced back at the destruction, stopped walking.

She turned to face him, her expression unreadable in the lantern light, though her voice was cool and even. "I gave him a clear warning, and he did not listen. Every actions have their own consequence."

"But what about the others?" Xiao Pei pressed, his conscience aching. "The guards... the... others. Surely they had families? They didn't all deserve that."

Du Juan went very still. Her luminous eyes, which usually held the distant cold of the moon, seemed to sharpen, focusing on him with a new, piercing intensity.

A muscle in her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Listen here," she said, her voice dropping, losing its coolness and gaining a sharp, almost brittle edge.

"I don't know what you see in that nurse who was pawing at you, but I am not going to sympathize with people who choose to work for a monster who experiments on living humans."

The words 'pawing at you' were laced with a frosty distaste that felt personal.

"You should be thanking me for sparing you a look at his trophy room. The walls were lined with the heads of his previous 'special' patients. So, no. I do not think it was 'too much.'"

Before Xiao Pei could form a reply, she spun on her heel storming off into the crowd, leaving him standing alone by the gaping hole.

Xiao Pei hurriedly followed, his questions and protests dying in his throat.

Du Juan soon slowed to a purposeful stride as she wove through the crowds, her sharp eyes scanning the stalls.

Xiao Pei followed from behind as he watched her gaze slid over shimmering talismans and glittering artifacts without a flicker of interest.

Instead, she paused before stalls piled high with dried herbs, twisted roots, and bundles of bark, her fingers occasionally lifting a specimen to examine its color and scent before dismissing it with a barely perceptible shake of her head.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, his voice careful.

"Some roots and a bark," she replied without looking at him, her attention on a particularly gnarled piece of timber being hawked by a vendor with three teeth.

Xiao Pei stopped for a second, his brows knitting before he asked, voice laced with curiosity, "Surely not Spiritual Bitterness Root and Molten Elderleaf Bark... right?"

Du Juan's hand, which was reaching for another sample, froze in mid-air.

She slowly turned her head to look at him, her expression one of genuine surprise.

"How do you know—?" she began, then cut herself off.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as understanding dawned. "Of course you would. You two are sworn brothers. You've probably brewed tea with the stuff."

A bold, almost impulsive thought leapt into Xiao Pei's mind.

A faint, teasing smile touched his lips. "So... you're in love with him, too?"

The effect was instantaneous. Du Juan recoiled in an instant and her composure shattered into pure, unadulterated alarm.

"Are you insane?" she hissed, her voice low but vehement.

She glanced around as if expecting an assassin to materialize from the crowd. "I very much love my head attached to my shoulders, thank you. No!"

She leaned in until her breath brushed against his ear, her luminous eyes glimmering with a fear that was painfully real.

"It's the Matriarch who asked me to get them. Keep your lips shut tight before you get me into trouble."

Her voice cracked like a whip, low and urgent, before softening into something almost trembling. "The Matriarch sent me to see you killed... so be grateful I'm helping you instead of driving a knife into your back."

Xiao Pei held up his hands in a placating gesture, his teasing smile vanishing. "Understood. I won't mention it again."

Du Juan stared at him for a second longer, before straightening up and smoothing her robes.

"Good," she stated flatly. "Now, stop asking foolish questions and help me look. The real ones should feel cold as ice and faintly smell of sulfur, even through the preservation seals."

Xiao Pei nodded and then he suddenly stopped, his brows shooting up as the words finally sank in.

"Wait... hold on. What do you mean the Matriarch sent you to see me get killed?"

Chapter 185: 185-

Xiao Pei opened his mouth to press her for the question but Du Juan just turned away from him, her attention seamlessly captured by the gnarled stall owner.

"Forget I just said that," she said quickly, the words tossed over her shoulder like a discarded wrapper.

Her entire demeanor shifted as she leaned over the stall's counter, her eyes scanning the bizarre array of roots and barks. "Now, what do we have here? A spiritual bitterness root, and is that... molten elderleaf bark? Excellent! Just the things I'm looking for."

She carried on chatting lightly, pointing things out on the shelves, asking questions as though Xiao Pei hadn't spoken at all, derailing his urgent thoughts with casual ease.

"Du Juan, hey! this is important," he pressed, his voice tight. "I need an answer."

Du Juan released an exaggerated sigh, finally turning back to him.

Impatience flickered in her eyes for a brief nanosecond before her expression smoothed again.

She tipped her chin toward the shopkeeper, who was busy wrapping the two items she had selected.

"Do you mind?" she murmured, her tone cool but edged, as though daring him to keep pushing in front of an audience.

Xiao Pei followed her gaze to the attentive stall owner and understood.

"We'll talk about this in private," he muttered, clamming up and shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Thank you," Du Juan said, her voice regaining its elegant composure.

She accepted the small packet and raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "And how much for these treasures?"

"Two spirit stones, ma'am," the owner said, flashing a gap-toothed grin that was more predatory than friendly.

Du Juan's smile slipped, her expression cooling into sharp displeasure as she fixed the shopkeeper with a look that could have cut glass.

Then, with deliberate calm, she spoke, each word dripping with disdainful finality.

"Two? That's daylight robbery." Her eyes narrowed, and the corners of her lips curved in the faintest mockery of a smile.

"How about this, I'll give you half a spirit stone. Not a copper more."

The stall owner's grin vanished, replaced by a scowl.

He slammed a hand on the counter, making the vials rattle. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? You think you can scam me so openly?"

Unfazed, Du Juan ignored his outburst. Her fingers danced over another specimen, plucking a twisted, dirt-caked root that vaguely resembled a ginseng.

She brought it to her nose, gave a delicate sniff, and immediately recoiled, her beautiful features twisting into a mask of pure disgust. "Ugh! What in the heavens is this... thing?"

"That? One and a half spirit stones. And—" his fingers tapped the counter as if sealing a bargain—"I'll even throw in the other two from earlier. A special price, just for a discerning customer like yourself."

"You drive a hard bargain," she retorted, holding the root between her thumb and forefinger as if it were a dead insect.

"What even is this herb that you think it's worth a single spirit stone, let alone more?" She dangled it, watching his reaction closely.

"

"It's a magical herb! Cures every disease! Take the lot for one and a half, my final offer!" the shopkeeper blustered, puffing his chest.

Du Juan clicked her tongue, her words laced with a lilting cadence that carried a faint, mocking drawl. "Tsk, cures every disease, ya say? Hah, ya think I'm some wide-eyed fool?"

Without waiting for him to sputter a reply, her hand darted forward with lightning speed, plucking another odd, twisty weed from the display.

She held it up between two fingers, grinning as if she'd found treasure.

"This one's comin' with me too. Looks delightfully weird, don't it?"

This time, the owner moved quickly, snatching it back from her hand and examining it with sudden suspicion.

"What d'you need all these for, anyway?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Aye, since when is my business yours?" she retorted, placing a hand on her hip.

Before he could form a reply, she leaned in conspiratorially, her voice dropping to a confidential whisper.

"Whatever," she drawled, waving her hand dismissively. "I'm just an apprentice alchemist, aye? My master sent me out huntin' for some... interesting herbs to play with."

Her eyes gleamed, "So, what d'you say, old coot? You hand me all this for free, and I'll drop a few good words in me master's ear. His patronage's worth more than a couple o' shabby spirit stones, don't ya think?"

The owner studied her for a long, silent moment, his greed warring with his skepticism.

Finally, he shoved the herbs back toward her. "Flattery won't fill my purse. That'll be three spirit stones."

"Tsk! What a greedy old codger ye are," she scolded, shaking her head as if in mock disappointment. "I'll do ye two an' a half."

Then, as if the words had slipped wrong from her tongue, her eyes went wide,

"No, no! I mean two! Two, I said!"

Seeing his opening, the owner pounced. "Two and a half it is! If you don't want it, don't take it."

Du Juan clicked her tongue again, a sharp sound of feigned exasperation.

With a show of great reluctance, she reached into her pouch and produced two and a half spirit stones, holding them out.

But as her other hand darted to grab the herbs, the owner yanked the packet back, his gap-toothed grin returning in full force.

"My bad, esteemed alchemist," he said, oozing false apology. "I meant three."

In a flash, Du Juan snatched her spirit stones back.

Her polite facade shattered, replaced by icy fury. "Ya think yours is the only stall with weird weeds? Hah! Good luck with your business!"

She turned on her heel and delivered a sharp, sideways kick to Xiao Pei's shin. "Come on, let's go!"

As they turned to storm off, the stall owner's bravado crumbled like wet paper.

What he had smugly marked as easy prey was slipping through his fingers, his "sure sale" vanishing with every step they took down the street.

"Okay! Okay!" he called out, desperation cracking his voice. "Two and a half! A fair price!"

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Du Juan stopped dead. She turned slowly, her expression glacial. "Two. Take it or leave it. You've thoroughly spoiled my mood."

The owner deflated, throwing his hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright! Two it is. Here."

With a flourish, Du Juan tossed the two spirit stones onto the counter.

They clinked together, a final, dismissive sound.

She snatched the packet of herbs, clutched it to her chest, and stormed off without a second glance.

"You greedy old vulture!" she called back over her shoulder, the insult hanging in the air.

Xiao Pei silently fell into step behind her, his own troubles momentarily forgotten.

He could hear the stall owner muttering to himself, a mixture of annoyance and excited glee at having made a sale.

The two moved, not slowing their pace until they had left the bustling market district and entered a quieter, slightly shabbier network of alleys.

"Let's get a room first," Du Juan announced, not bothering to consult him. She strode towards a inn with a creaking sign.

The inn was dim and smelled of stale wine and damp wood.

Inside, a portly woman in a grease-stained apron was bent over a battered table, scrubbing away at a stubborn stain.

Du Juan stepped forward, her tone even, "Innkeeper," she called, "we'll need one of the big rooms. Payment will be one spirit stone."

The woman stopped her work, her eyes lifting slowly to scrutinize the new arrivals.

A grunt escaped her lips before she rummaged under the counter and tossed a tarnished brass key through the air. "You'll get the usual."

Du Juan snatched the key with practiced ease and headed for the stairs.

Xiao Pei was a step behind when the innkeeper's voice, low and raspy, followed him. "Don't get wrung dry by that one, young man. You look like you got lots of potential. Don't ruin it for a moment's pleasure."

Xiao Pei stumbled on the first step, a hot flush instantly scalding his cheeks and burning the tips of his ears.

He spun around, waving his hands frantically.

"N-no! No, it's nothing like that! It's... it's business!" His voice came out as an embarrassed squeak.

The woman merely chuckled, a deep, knowing sound, and returned to her scrubbing.

Mortified, Xiao Pei scrambled up the stairs.

They arrived at a door tucked into the corner of the second-floor hallway.

The room was as sparse and utilitarian as the inn below, a simple bed, a worn table, and two chairs.

Without a word, Du Juan slipped her hand into her spatial ring and drew out a set of slender formation flags.

One by one, she moved with deliberate grace, planting them at precise points around the room.

A subtle hum filled the air as a noise-repellent formation settled over the room, followed by a shimmering veil that blurred the walls and door, an invisibility formation that would hide their presence from prying eyes and ears.

Only then did she relax, settling at the table and laying out her earlier purchases.

She produced a basin of water and began the meticulous process of cleansing the strange herbs.

Xiao Pei leaned forward, eyes narrowing as he watched her deft hands move over the herbs.

His head tilted slightly, curiosity written plain across his face.

"You're... going to wash them?" he asked, half-intrigued, half-baffled.

Du Juan didn't even glance up from her task. Her tone was light, but the edge beneath it was unmistakable.

"Oh? So you're more curious about my rinsing leaves than the Matriarch ordering your death? Your priorities are fascinating."

"Ah!" The reminder hit him like a physical blow, jolting him from his stupor.

He practically fell into the chair opposite her, leaning forward urgently. "Tell me! What did you mean? Matriarch Fang sent you to watch me get killed? Was that whole speech from her about wanting to help me, about figuring out my hidden physique... nothing but a lie?"

Du Juan nodded absently, her focus on scrubbing the dirt from the gnarled ginseng-like root. "Mhm."

"Why?" Xiao Pei asked, his voice a mixture of surprise and genuine confusion. "What did I ever do to her?"

"Well, you know how the Matriarch can be... weird sometimes, right?" Du Juan said, as if discussing the weather.

She held the root up to the light, examining its peculiar veins. "She said Clan Head Fang Yuan once told her, straight to her face, when she confessed her love, he just replied, 'I'm gay.'"

Xiao Pei's jaw went slack. "What?! Are you joking?"

"Definitely not! Brother Fang is not gay!" Xiao Pei blurted out, his defense instinctive, almost protective.

Du Juan gave a slow nod, her expression thoughtful, lips quirking with wry amusement. "I believe so too," she admitted.

Then her eyes narrowed slightly, a sardonic gleam slipping through. "But I don't have the guts to tell her that him saying he was gay... was just another way of rejecting her."

Du Juan continued calmly, moving on to the next herb. "She also told me that before this grand revelation, she had already spread rumors that the Clan Head was gay. A preemptive strike, you see? To ensure no other women would dare approach him except for... well, presumably her."

Xiao Pei listened, his mind reeling.

He slid from his chair to sit on the floor beside her, needing the solid ground. "How come you know all this?"

"I'm stuck with her nearly twenty-four hours a day," Du Juan said flatly, the bitterness in her tone impossible to miss.

"She once suspected the Clan Head and I had... something. When she realized that wasn't true, she started clinging to me instead while calling me her 'little sister' and then she drags me into every little scheme of hers. Whether I like it or not."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and she let out a sharp exhale through her nose.

"Worst of all? She never shuts up about Fang Yuan. Constantly. I'm now a walking vault of secrets I never asked for and never wanted to know."

Xiao Pei, curiosity getting the better of his fear, leaned closer. "You mean secrets like his habits? His desires and stuff?"

She looked up from her work, her intense eyes locking with his.

A sly, almost imperceptible smile played on her lips. "Don't ask me. The Matriarch once gloated about seeing the Clan Head take a bath. In person."

She let that horrifying image hang in the air for a moment. "Makes you wonder how she managed that when the Clan Head is a Nascent Soul realm cultivator. He should be able to sense a fly on the wall a mile away."

Xiao Pei groaned and let his head thump back against the leg of the table, staring at the dusty ceiling.

"Should I be glad I'm still alive," he muttered to the rafters, "or worry about being alive now?"

Du Juan finished her cleansing ritual, the herbs now gleaming faintly with a purified aura.

She stood up, brushing off her robes. "Definitely be glad. Stick close to the Clan Head, and you're likely to remain... intact."

And with that cryptic piece of advice, she turned and swept out of the room, leaving Xiao Pei alone on the floor.

Chapter 187: 187-

"The meeting is adjourned," Fang Yuan declared, his tone calm but decisive.

One by one, the elders rose from their seats. Robes rustled, heads bowed low in respect, and they filed out of the chamber in solemn silence until the vast hall was nearly empty.

Only when the last elder slipped through the door did Lin Zhaoyue rise gracefully. Her steps were light but purposeful as she crossed the room, her silk sleeves trailing like flowing water.

"Husband," she purred softly, slipping her arm through his with practiced familiarity. Her lips curved in a teasing smile as she leaned against him. "Do you and the elders always waste time like this?"

Fang Yuan blinked at her, head tilting ever so slightly. His eyes were steady, his curiosity genuine as he asked, "What do you mean?"

"In our Lin family," Zhaoyue began, her tone light but edged with authority, "the elders only convene if it's truly a matter of life and death. And if it isn't, if it's something that merely threatens the family's livelihood then they would gather, discuss, and hammer out a solution together."

Her fingers idly traced the sleeve of Fang Yuan's robe as she spoke, her voice steady. "After that, they present the matter formally to the Clan Head, along with a representative elder to explain it. That way, the discussion isn't weighed down by the Clan Head's presence. They can speak freely, even criticize if necessary."

Her eyes flicked up at him, keen and deliberate. "Think about it. It saves time. And it spares the Clan Head from listening to every petty squabble while still making sure the real problems and your own flaws are brought to light."

Fang Yuan drew in a long, measured breath before speaking. "I'll consider it," he said evenly. Then, almost as an afterthought, he glanced at her. "Would you like to accompany me to see the cultivation caves?"

"Yes!" The word burst out of Zhaoyue like an arrow loosed from a bow. Her eyes lit up, her entire body leaning into his as though she might drag him there herself.

And then, in the next heartbeat, she caught herself. Her lips pressed together, her lashes lowered, and she softened her tone into something carefully demure. "...I would love to."

But the act couldn't hide the truth from Fang Yuan.

Her grip on his arm had tightened, trembling with suppressed excitement, the faintest shiver betraying how desperately she wanted to go with him.

Inwardly, Fang Yuan allowed himself a small thought. I suppose I should make the effort to know her better. She's certainly trying her best. As long as she doesn't harm anyone in the clan...

With that quiet resolution, the two of them set off.

Walking.... because Lin Zhaoyue had firmly shaken her head when Fang Yuan suggested they fly to the Eastern Ravine.

Her hand tightened on his arm, her smile sweet and unwavering.

"Flying would make us arrive too quickly," she had said, tone light and innocent.

As the two left the Fang family pavilion, the noise of a quarrel drifted through the street.

A crowd had gathered around a small stall, their faces tense with nervous curiosity.

Fang Yuan's gaze flicked over, sharp and assessing.

It wasn't hard to see what was happening. The local gang, swaggering in worn armor and crude weapons, was circling the stall like wolves around a rabbit.

Their so-called "protection" was nothing more than extortion.

At the heart of it, an old stall keeper knelt on trembling knees, clutching at the hem of a rough cloth sack.

His face was wet with tears, his voice raw as he pleaded, "Please... I have to feed my family at least... my grandchildren, they're still so young... just give me a few more days..."

One of the goons sneered, jabbing the butt of his spear into the ground inches from the old man's hand. "Days don't feed us, old man. Pay up, or we'll take it outta your hide."

The stall owner flinched, shoulders shaking as he pressed his forehead to the dirt.

Lin Zhaoyue, walking beside Fang Yuan, noticed the direction of his gaze.

She tilted her head slightly, her voice soft and laced with something almost eager. "Husband... do you want to go over?"

Fang Yuan's eyes lingered on the scene for a moment longer before he exhaled, his voice low and steady. "As much as I dislike it, I can't prevent it from happening. If I stop them this once, they'll only come back with more men tomorrow. People like that... they're cockroaches. Hard to be rid of completely."

At his side, Lin Zhaoyue's head tilted ever so slightly, a soft smile curving her lips as her grip on his arm grew tighter, almost clinging.

"Husband," she murmured, voice velvet over steel, "I don't know this cockroach you speak of... but you and I, we are in the Nascent Soul realm. If you willed it... if I willed it..."

Her eyes darkened, that gentle smile sharpening into something dangerous.

"No one would even dare to breathe without our permission."

Before Fang Yuan could even form a response, Lin Zhaoyue's voice cut in, low and fervent, her eyes shining with an unsettling light. "Husband... you want to be the kind king, the benevolent ruler who leads with love and fairness. That's who you are."

Her grip on his arm tightened, trembling. "But even a kind king needs someone beside him, someone who can be cruel when he cannot. Someone who can do what must be done."

She leaned closer, her tone soft, almost reverent, yet edged with a dangerous promise.

"Let me be that queen for you. Let me be the tyrant in your shadow. So when you stretch out your hand to help them... they will weep with gratitude, because they'll know just how merciful you truly are."

Fang Yuan reached out and *flicked* her forehead with a sharp snap.

"That's manipulation," he said evenly.

Lin Zhaoyue winced, her free hand flying up to rub the sore spot.

Chapter 188: 188-

Lin Zhaoyue's lips curved into a pout, but her other hand never loosened its grip on his arm, clinging as though she feared he might slip away.

Fang Yuan's expression softened at the sight, a faint sigh escaping him.

He turned his gaze forward and spoke, "I don't need to act kind if I want to be kind. And I don't care to be some 'kind ruler' or saint."

He took a step forward, pulling her gently along with him.

"The world can burn forever if it wants. I won't interfere as long as I have a safe haven for myself and my family... that is enough."

Lin Zhaoyue tilted her head, her eyes glinting with dangerous delight.

"Then husband," she asked sweetly, "can I do as I want too?"

Fang Yuan halted mid-step. He turned to look at her, his lips tugging into a faint, indulgent smile.

"Sure."

The answer had barely left his mouth before she slipped free of his arm, skirts flaring as she shot into the air like a streak of light, straight toward the gang of thugs.

Fang Yuan's eyes widened as realization struck.

"No killing!" he called sharply after her.

Lin Zhaoyue landed with the grace of a predator among prey.

The air around her warped as her aura surged outward, an invisible mountain crashing down on the goons.

They buckled instantly, knees slamming into the dirt, gasping as though the very act of breathing had turned into torture.

Her eyes were cold, her smile serene.

"Bold of you all... to behave like this in Fang territory."

One of the goons, veins bulging against the crushing weight of her presence, forced out a hoarse growl, his voice breaking under the strain:

"Wh—who are you! This... this is White Wolf territory!"

Lin Zhaoyue's laugh was light, almost musical, but laced with venom.

She leaned closer, her voice soft yet carrying like thunder. "Hah. White Wolf? Do you curs have a single Nascent Soul cultivator who can fight me?"

Her gaze sharpened, every word dripping with lethal promise.

"If not, shut your mouths, and crawl back to whatever hole you came from. This land belongs to my husband. Defy him, and you defy me. And I promise you... I'm far less forgiving."

The thugs trembled, sweat dripping down their temples as her aura pressed heavier, bones creaking under the strain.

One of them collapsed fully, face pressed into the dirt, choking back a sob.

She turned back to the thugs, her aura crushing them flatter still, her voice a razor wrapped in silk.

"Now. Crawl. Crawl away and remember this day. The Fang Clan is not to be touched. Ever."

The gangsters scrambled back like beaten dogs, some tripping over each other, too terrified to even look up.

Lin Zhaoyue walked back to Fang Yuan with unhurried steps, her eyes ignoring the stall owner and bystanders who bowed, thanked, and even wept in relief.

Their gratitude meant nothing to her.

Once she reached his side, she slipped her arm possessively through his again, tilting her head up with a soft smile.

"Husband," she asked sweetly, "what do you think?"

Fang Yuan began walking, his gaze straight ahead, "Unnecessary. That old man likely lives in the slums. What happens when they come for him there? What happens if they kill him? Maybe not just him, maybe his whole family. His grandson, too."

Lin Zhaoyue paused to think, her eyes narrowing briefly before she gave a little shrug.

"Mmn... then it's a pity we lose a potential taxpayer," she said airily, her tone almost playful.

"But he's old anyway. The new should replace the old. That's how the world works, isn't it?"

Fang Yuan turned to look at her, studying her face for a long moment.

Then, without a word, he shook his head and kept walking.

They traveled in silence until the looming shape of the Eastern Ravine rose before them, bathed in the pale silver of the moon that now sat directly overhead.

At its heart was a vast, empty plot of land, carved deep into the earth like a giant's bowl.

"Wait here," Fang Yuan said, rising into the air.

Lin Zhaoyue instantly followed, and he glanced at her before adding, with the barest flicker of amusement, "Or... follow me, then. Sure."

He raised his hand, his expression focused, though only he could see the gooden system tab before him.

[Minor Resource Well Reservoir — 10,000 FP]

'Buy', he thought as he tapped the screen.

A flash of light erupted.

"Boom!"

The ground trembled as the massive hollow basin below them surged with power.

In an instant, crystal-clear water gushed forth as though the heavens themselves had overturned an ocean.

The entire ravine filled, waves lapping against the carved walls until, at last, a vast shimmering pond stretched out beneath the moonlight, radiating spiritual energy so dense it made the air hum.

Lin Zhaoyue's lips parted, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"Is that...? Did you just create a spirit pond?"

Her voice trembled in awe as she stared at him.

Fang Yuan descended into the ravine, landing at the water's edge.

Up close, it truly looked like a genuine spirit pond, its surface shimmering faintly under the moonlight, rippling with threads of spiritual energy.

"Hmm... now that you mention it," he murmured, thoughtful, "it does look like one..... leaving it exposed will only invite troubles then."

He flicked his wrist, summoning a handful of formation flags from his spatial ring. With a precise motion, he cast them outward.

They landed at calculated points around the pond, sinking into the earth as runes flared briefly.

A subtle hum filled the ravine before the entire area wavered and vanished, swallowed behind a veil of invisibility.

Lin Zhaoyue drifted down beside him, her gaze sweeping the now-hidden pond.

A small smile curved her lips.

"Husband, why not add an illusion formation as well?" she suggested softly.

Fang Yuan turned to her and then gave a single nod.

"I don't have one on hand," he admitted evenly, "but I'll make sure to acquire one later."

Chapter 189: 189-

The next day, Fang Yuan sat in his office, brush in hand, sorting through the endless stack of paperwork.

Before him hovered the faintly glowing system screen:

[Task: Clean the water in the koi pond.

Merit Points: 20

Risk: None.]

A small task, like many others, that he copied neatly onto a slip and set aside for the clan to complete.

Even after his two-month absence, the clan had managed to run smoothly.

The merit system had kept them standing, though the exchange of points had stalled.

The pills once offered in exchange were long depleted, and without spirit energy, the cultivation caves had become useless.

But now, after last night, the minor resource wells were restored and he had refilled the exchange of cultivation pills, everything was slowly returning to order.

Fang Yuan leaned back, stretched, and allowed himself a rare, quiet smile. *The clan... it's starting to move like normal again.*

A knock interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened, and a girl in crisp maid attire entered.

She carried herself with refined politeness, her voice soft as she bowed.

"Clan Head, the Wu Alliance has sent an emissary."

"Oh?" Fang Yuan set his brush aside. "Are they here already?"

"Not yet, Clan Head. He's at the gates. Shall I let him in?"

"Him?" Fang Yuan arched a brow, curiosity flickering. "Only one?"

"Yes, Clan Head. He said his name is Elder He Song."

"He Song... He Song..." Fang Yuan muttered, tapping his finger against the desk before his eyes lit with recognition.

"Ah, I remember that old fox. He's an old senior. Very well.. send him in. Have him meet me at the east courtyard. But be sure to treat him a little bit gently, he's one of the few elders I respect from the He family."

"Understood, Clan Head." She bowed again and turned to leave.

"Oh, and—Felicia," Fang Yuan called, stopping her. "Go call Brother Xiao Pei for me. I haven't seen him since I came out of seclusion."

Felicia paused, tilting her head. "Didn't Matriarch Fang tell you?"

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed slightly. "...Matriarch Fang? Why? What did she do?"

Felicia blinked, momentarily puzzled. "Nothing unusual, Clan Head. From what I've heard, she sent Guardian elder Du Juan and Great Benefactor Xiao Pei on a mission to the Southern Region."

"...Eh? Oh. I see." Fang Yuan rubbed his forehead with a helpless sigh. "Alright, thank you. I'll look for her later, then."

Felicia dipped her head once more before gliding out, leaving him alone.

For a moment, Fang Yuan sat in silence, tapping the desk absentmindedly.

Then—

[Quest Completed: Get a girlfriend for your brother Xiao Pei.]

[Reward: Access to Weaponry.]

Fang Yuan blinked.

"...Oh my. So he's still alive after all."

The humor barely touched his lips before his attention snapped to the new tab now unlocked on his system screen.

At once, he opened it... and **baam!**

He was met with a dazzling display of weapons that nearly stole his breath.

Blades, spears, halberds, bows, rows upon rows of armaments, each gleaming with the condensed aura of power.

And among them, there were no grade-one trinkets nor grade-two scraps.

The system had likely discarded them outright, deeming them unworthy.

The very first item listed was already leagues above the sword he carried.

And the further he scrolled, the more his heart pounded.

Each weapon outshone the last, divine craftsmanship and ruthless lethality woven into every piece.

Fang Yuan could only allow himself to grin foolishly. He had avoided glancing at the prices for good reason, subconsciously, perhaps.

Meanwhile, at the Fang clan gates, stood an old man. Though his hair was silvered and his back slightly bent, his frame was sturdy—healthy as a warhorse.

At the moment, however, Elder He Song was locked in a heated argument with a little boy.

"Old bone! Old bone!" the boy shouted, laughing as he darted just out of reach.

"You damn brat—!" Elder He Song's beard bristled as he shook a trembling finger at him. "Call me 'old bone' again and I'll drag your father out by the ear and make him kneel and apologize!"

The boy only stuck out his tongue before running off, leaving the elder sputtering in indignation.

Just then, Felicia arrived.

At once, Elder He Song straightened his robes, smoothed his beard, and attempted to recover his dignity.

When the gates opened and Felicia gestured politely, she said, "Elder He, please, come in. The Clan Head awaits you in the east courtyard."

But Elder He Song puffed out his chest, voice dripping with grievance.

"Hmph! I cannot believe this is how the Fang family treats emissaries! Do you have any idea? You made me stand out here for hours!"

Felicia blinked once, her expression unchanging. "Elder, it was only a few minutes at most."

"That's because you're young!" Elder He Song retorted, his tone righteous, as though proclaiming a profound truth. "But I'm not! A minute to you is an hour to me!"

Felicia was left momentarily speechless, utterly flabbergasted. In the end, she chose silence.

Without another word, she turned and began leading him toward the east courtyard.

Elder He Song followed, muttering under his breath about "ungrateful juniors" and "a complete lack of respect for elders."

By the time they reached the east courtyard, Fang Yuan was already there waiting.

He stood from his seat as they entered, his midnight-black robes flowing with a subtle weight of authority.

The silver trim along his cuffs and collar shimmered faintly in the sunlight, making his presence feel even more commanding.

With a warm, welcoming smile, Fang Yuan inclined his head slightly.

"Ah, Elder He. Welcome. I must say, it's remarkable, you still look so healthy despite your age."

Elder He Song froze mid-step.

His back stiffened, his beard quivered, and for a brief moment silence hung in the air.

Then, with an exaggerated sigh and a sharp squint of his eyes, he turned half aside and muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear,

"On second thought... I think I've come to the wrong house."

Chapter 190: 190- He Song.

"Elder He, surely you jest. Here, come and take a seat," Fang Yuan said warmly, rising with a practiced smile.

Yet the warmth only made Elder He Song's skin prickle.

To his eyes, this youth in front of him was a vessel brimming with trouble and even if it wasn't trouble, then Fang Yuan himself was a ticking bomb, waiting to go off.

Still, He Song reminded himself of his duty.

He gave a stiff snort, dragged out a chair with unnecessary noise, and sat heavily.

Fang Yuan returned to his seat and gestured. "Felicia, bring us the tea my aunt favors. Thank you."

Felicia dipped into a bow.

Her polite smile didn't hide her relief, she was more than happy to excuse herself and slip away, leaving the two alone.

Now the east courtyard was quiet, just Fang Yuan and Elder He Song beneath the pale light.

The elder's sharp gaze wandered over the space before finally clicking his tongue.

"So this is the east courtyard?"

"Yes, indeed it is."

He Song leaned back and waved dismissively.

"Tsk, what a child. I distinctly remember you declaring you'd plant the Blossoming Thunder Orchid gifted by the Lin family here on your thirtieth birthday. And yet—" he swept his arm at the courtyard, where dry grass clung to barren soil, "—not even its shadow exists. Look at this place! The grass itself is dying. Tsk, tsk. This is why you're despised by so many elders. At the very least, we maintain our pride and don't lie."

His words dripped with superiority, smug satisfaction building in his chest.

Fang Yuan, however, wasn't offended, instead his expression softened, even agreeing. "You're right about that, Elder He. But tell me... is that important right now? You know—"

"It is important!" He Song cut in, seizing momentum, his voice swelling with relish.

"If I cannot verify your sincerity, if I cannot measure whether you're trustworthy, then how could I possibly proceed with the information I'm going to share? Hmph! This is precisely the cliff you stand on."

Fang Yuan nodded and said. "I see. I'm still young... while you're old."

That last word struck Elder He Song like a blade to the ribs.

His lips twitched before curving into a smile that was far too stiff. Inside, his thoughts roared. *Old? Me? Do you have any idea, boy? A Golden Core cultivator lives two hundred years at least! I'm only a hundred and fifty, still in my prime! A young stallion compared to mortals! I still have fifty good years left!*

Fang Yuan, oblivious or perhaps deliberately ignoring the storm in the elder's heart, continued smoothly. "And because of that, I trust you'll be able to judge clearly. At this stage, it isn't about whether we can 'trust' one another. That's already past us. Instead, it's about negotiating terms that benefit both sides."

"You're right—no, you're wrong!" Elder He Song suddenly blurted, leaning forward with a jab of his finger.

Fang Yuan blinked, a little caught off guard by the abrupt outburst, but his tone remained calm. "Oh? And what do you suppose then, Elder He?"

The elder harrumphed, crossing his arms with a self-satisfied nod.

"I'm saying you should start learning how to get along with others. Hmph, no wonder people bristle at the mention of your name."

He glanced down at the stone table between them, drumming his knuckles against its bare surface.

Then, with a sharp click of his tongue, he added, "Tsk! You don't even prepare tea for your guests. Is this how the Fang clan entertains emissaries?"

Fang Yuan's gaze rested on him for a moment, steady, unreadable.

Earlier, in Elder He Song's presence, he had instructed Felicia to bring them some tea.

That alone was enough.

This elder was clearly fishing for a reaction, probing or even trying to agitate him.

His lips curved into the faintest of polite smiles, but he offered no retort, no defense. Silence hung in the air.

The elder shifted, slightly irritated by Fang Yuan's refusal to rise to the bait.

Elder He Song leaned back, waving his hand dismissively. "Kid, I hate wasting my time, so I'll get straight to the point. We want you to stop ambushing our caravans and burning down our warehouses."

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed slightly, his tone still measured. "We didn't do any such thing."

The old man shook his head with the weary indulgence of a master chastising a slow-witted pupil.

"Tch... you don't even know how to lie. Aside from your lack of manners even your lies lack soul.

Listen here young man, a hollow word is no different from air, it scatters at the slightest wind. If you wish to deceive, then let your tongue bear weight, let your words carry spirit.

Only then will falsehood become indistinguishable from truth."

With a self-important flourish, he raised a finger, as though inscribing some eternal law of heaven and earth into the air itself, utterly convinced his pronouncement would carve itself into Fang Yuan's heart.

Fang Yuan only sat in silence, but his thoughts stirred sharply.

Since we didn't touch their caravans, then who did and what could be gained if they did? The merchant alliance?

That would be too reckless, they'd risk exposure the moment words reached us... unless they wanted it to look obvious.

Or... it could also just be a ploy by the Wu alliance themselves. Sow distrust and then swoop in with 'sincerity.'

His suspicions grew heavier when Elder He leaned forward, lowering his tone, voice dripping with drama. "And to show the Wu alliance's sincerity, we offer your entire clan the chance to explore a special tomb."

He paused, letting silence draw tight around the courtyard before leaning closer, voice dropping to a grave, almost spectral whisper.

"The Tomb of great Pill King Shan Yifeng."

"Pill King... Shan Yifeng?" Fang Yuan repeated, brows slightly furrowed as he looked at Elder He Song.

The elder, who had been bracing himself for awe, perhaps even greedy excitement, froze when all he saw was mild confusion.

His face stiffened, then twitched.

"You—! How can someone not know the great Pill King Shan Yifeng?!"

Elder He Song shot to his feet, his beard quivering.

He looked personally insulted, as though Fang Yuan's ignorance were a deliberate slight against him.

"Are you mocking me, boy? Pretending ignorance to save face? Hah! I've met beggars on the roadside with more respect for history than this!"