

Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! #Chapter 191- Petty Old Song. - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 191- Petty Old Song.

Chapter 191: 191- Petty Old Song.

Tomb exploration. The words were hardly novel to Fang Yuan.

In his years as clan head, he had led and joined more than a few himself.

Tombs or inheritance caves left behind by powerful cultivators were rarely as glorious as they sounded.

Often, they were nothing more than elaborate deathtraps, empty of treasures, or worse, bait designed to drag the living down into the grave alongside the dead.

Which was why information was everything.

Before risking lives, one had to weigh the worth of entering.

And names, if they could be traced, usually meant the tomb had likely been made by a renown cultivator.

Even so... he had never once heard the name. Pill King Shan Yifeng meant nothing to him.

Shaking his head, Fang Yuan replied evenly, "I don't know who he is, Elder He."

The old man froze.

Slowly, stiffly, Elder He lowered himself back into his seat, staring as if trying to pierce through Fang Yuan's skull to see if he was joking. "You... really don't know?"

"I don't," Fang Yuan answered, unbothered.

At that moment, soft footsteps entered the courtyard.

Felicia returned, carrying a tray with a steaming kettle and two cups, her movements quiet and graceful as she set them on the stone table between the two men.

Felicia placed the tray down with practiced grace, poured the tea without a word, and then bowed lightly before withdrawing.

She left as swiftly as she came, a fleeting presence that left only the rising fragrance of the brew behind.

Elder He Song eyed the cup with the suspicion of a man expecting poison.

After a pause, he lifted it, sniffed, and finally took a sip.

The warmth spread across his tongue, mellow yet invigorating, the kind of taste that lingered pleasantly at the back of the throat.

For the briefest moment, his brows eased in satisfaction.

Then, catching himself, he set the cup down with a faint clack, wearing his usual mask of discontent.

"Hmph. Barely passable." He tapped the rim of the cup with a crooked finger, pretending to find fault. "Now then, Clan Head Fang—tell me truthfully. You truly don't know who Pill King Shan Yifeng was?"

His gaze bore into Fang Yuan, equal parts disbelief and indignation, as if ignorance itself were an unforgivable crime.

Fang Yuan calmly lifted his cup, the steam curling softly against his face.

He took a slow sip, savoring the warmth, and nodded in quiet approval before he set the cup down gently.

His gaze turned back to Elder He Song, calm and unhurried.

"No, I don't," he admitted with complete honesty.

"But Elder He, you are the oldest person I've known in my life. Surely you would know better than anyone who this Shan Yifeng was. Would you please enlighten me?"

There was no mockery in his tone, no hidden edge.

But Elder He Song's ears rang with only one phrase... *"the oldest person I've known in my life."*

His smile stiffened as curses ran wild in his head. *Oldest person? Oldest?! I'm still in my prime! These young brats with their sharp tongues—no, he's doing this on purpose, he must be!*

Outwardly, however, he forced a genial grin, stroking his beard with mock dignity. "Heh, well... since you insist, I shall educate you."

Elder He Song straightened his back, eyes narrowing with the air of a sage about to unveil cosmic truths.

His voice carried the weight of a storyteller who believed his every word should be carved into stone.

"Great Pill King Shan Yifeng... he was no ordinary cultivator. It was said he once walked the void itself to descend into our world. He came, he saw, and then he conquered. For a thousand years, the world stood under one pillar—his."

His hands moved as he spoke, tracing the image of a vast pillar holding up the heavens. "And during that millennium, he reshaped everything in the world. Among his bountiful gifts, the greatest gift he left behind was knowledge, knowledge of realms beyond Golden Core.

Because back in those days, Golden Core was the peak they could achieve. Flight through qi was a rare miracle, mastered only by the heaven's chosen.

Shan Yifeng changed all that. He revealed the path to Nascent Soul. He even spoke of the Hollow Spirit realm above it. Not only that, he shared to the common people on how to cultivate, secrets became common knowledge and the impossible became attainable."

Elder He paused, stroking his beard, clearly savoring the gravity of his words.

"With his teachings, cultivators everywhere surged forward. The world itself seemed to quicken."

Then his tone shifted, lower, darker. "But with growth came hunger. And hunger..." his eyes flickered knowingly, "breeds madness. Resources began to grow scarcer. The great mines and spirit springs were locked and claimed by the sects and were hidden behind the sect walls.

So the desperate turned to the next resource within reach, young and innocent cultivators from the said sects.

Their bodies were carved apart, their blood used as spiritual energy... it was the birth of blood demon cultivators.

Shan Yifeng's brilliance brought not only progress but also calamity. A world uplifted... and a world undone."

He let the silence hang, leaning slightly to study Fang Yuan's face.

To his irritation, Fang Yuan was not only listening, he was completely absorbed, gaze steady, thoughtful.

No feigned interest, no mockery. The boy was actually paying attention.

Elder He coughed, embarrassed by his own dramatic pause, and hurried on.

"The truth is this, the arrival of great Pill King Shan Yifeng marked both the golden age of cultivation and the darkest scourge mankind had ever known."

Fang Yuan tilted his head slightly, his voice calm, measured, yet carrying a quiet edge of doubt.

"Elder He, I fail to see the logic. If this man's legacy birthed so much disaster, why is he remembered with reverence as the Great Pill King?"

"And if he was truly so lofty, so mystical, would such a figure even leave behind a tomb to be discovered by the likes of us? More importantly..."

his eyes narrowed ever so slightly, "...why would the Wu Alliance so readily share this so-called opportunity with my clan? If you were in my position, surely you'd find all this rather suspicious as well, wouldn't you?"

The question struck with polite precision, like a needle through silk.

Elder He's expression froze for the briefest moment before he forced a smile, clearing his throat.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, he replied, "If I were in your position, I wouldn't waste time with suspicion. I'd seize the hand reaching out and take the opportunity before it slips away."

Chapter 192: 192- Old Man.

Fang Yuan raised his cup, sipped leisurely, and said in that same calm tone,

"Continue."

Elder He Song's face twisted, his temper snapping like dry twigs.

"Continue? Do you take me for one of your little slave elders? Hah! You've got cow dung for a brain—"

The insult broke off in a strangled gasp. His knees buckled, his body crumpling to the ground.

He knelt there, suddenly short of breath, arms trembling, unable to move as if invisible chains had wrapped around him.

Fang Yuan calmly set his teacup down, his eyes cool and unreadable as he looked down at the struggling elder.

"You do realize the only reason you're alive is because I deemed you useful, don't you?"

He leaned forward slightly, their faces nearly level, though one was seated and the other brought low.

"The Wu cult, Wu family, Wu alliance—whatever name you are currently calling yourself. I don't feel the least bit threatened by them. The only reason I agreed to meet you today..." his tone softened, almost nostalgic, "was because of something you once did for me when I was a child."

Elder He's eyes widened, confusion flooding his face. His expression all but shouted: *What in the heavens is this boy talking about?!*

Fang Yuan continued, his voice steady, his words precise.

"Do you remember? When I was five, I met you at the Five Clan meeting. You were with a woman at the time. When I came over and asked what was going on, you grabbed my hand, acted as if you studied it, and then told me I'd find my treasure if I jumped off a cliff."

He gave the faintest of smiles. "Of course, I didn't jump. Instead, I climbed down. There, I discovered a hidden cave... and within it, an aged pill.

At the time, I didn't recognize its worth, but it became the key to my rapid progress in cultivation after I consumed it. Only now do I understand what it was, it was a high-quality Bone Marrow Pill. That was the first, and perhaps the greatest, favor you ever gave me."

Elder He blinked furiously, his mind scrambling. He could not even recall such a moment.

To him, it might have been nothing, perhaps even a casual attempt to shoo away a pestering child or even an attempt to take out one of the Fang Family children.

Yet here it was, etched into Fang Yuan's memory.

Fang Yuan's gaze sharpened, his tone shifting.

"Ever since that day, I grew more favorable toward you. But what you just did here, Elder He..." his voice grew firm, almost cold, "was very rude. I am not that little boy anymore. And you should remember—"

His aura rippled, quiet but suffocating, pressing down on the old man like a mountain.

"—I am the Nascent Soul cultivator here. Not you, Elder He. Not you."

Fang Yuan withdrew his divine aura as easily as one might fold away a fan.

Elder He Song collapsed forward, coughing and gasping, his chest heaving violently.

His wrinkled hands clawed at the edge of the stone table, knuckles white, as if anchoring himself to the world.

Sweat beaded across his forehead, and his hunched frame trembled like an old willow battered by storm winds.

For a long moment, the only sound in the courtyard was his ragged, desperate breathing.

Fang Yuan's lips curved into a mild, courteous smile, as though nothing at all had happened.

"Alright now," he said lightly, lifting his cup once more, "I'm sure you'll continue your story. Right, Elder He?"

The elder's eyes darted up, still wild, still searching for air.

Then, seeing that serene face across from him, his heart gave a painful lurch.

He forced himself upright, wobbling back into his seat, his lips twitching into what he hoped passed for a smile.

"Ah—yes, yes, of course... Clan Head Fang," he wheezed, bowing his head low. "I will. I will."

He fumbled for his teacup, fingers still shaking as he tried to disguise his disarray with the motions of civility.

The porcelain rattled softly against the saucer as he brought it to his lips, taking a hasty sip to steady his nerves.

Elder He lowered his cup with both hands, doing his best to disguise the tremor in his fingers.

His smile twitched, crooked, like a cracked mask, but he forced his tone into one of measured dignity.

"Yes... as I was saying," he began hoarsely, "the arrival of Great Pill King Shan Yifeng changed the fate of the cultivation world. He introduced realms above Golden Core, he revealed the existence of Nascent Soul and Hollow Spirit... and yet, his legacy was not only enlightenment, but chaos. The greed he inspired turned disciples into prey, gave birth to blood demon cultivators, and split the world apart."

He coughed into his sleeve, buying himself a breath before continuing.

"And then, after a thousand years of supremacy, he vanished. Some say he ascended, others say he fell. But what matters, Clan Head Fang... is that a tomb bearing his name has now been discovered. The Wu Alliance claims this is no mere rumor. An inheritance cave of such a figure could hold treasures and techniques beyond measure."

He paused, studying Fang Yuan's expression, trying, failing, to read him.

His jaw clenched with the bitterness of humiliation, but his words came smooth, practiced.

"And so," Elder He went on, his voice tightening ever so slightly, "the Wu Alliance extends this opportunity to your clan. A gesture of... sincerity. A path toward mutual benefit."

Across the table, Fang Yuan leaned back slightly, his gaze steady, unreadable.

He swirled the tea in his cup, as though weighing the fragrance more than the elder's words. That faint smile of his never changed.

To Elder He, it felt like being bared open under a blade.

Fang Yuan's lips curved faintly as he set his cup aside.

"What a rushed story," he said lightly, his tone as casual as a remark about the weather. "You'd do a poor job as a storyteller, old man."

Chapter 193: 193- Scared He.

The honorific was gone. The dismissal was deliberate.

He rose slowly to his feet, black robes falling around him like a tide of night.

His gaze never wavered as he added, each word carrying quiet finality, "You may return and tell your superiors this. The Fang Clan has no intention of joining hands in your so-called exploration. As for your 'offer'—you can keep it to yourself."

He turned, already walking away, his steps steady and unhurried.

"I won't see you out," he said over his shoulder, the words delivered with a warmth that stung worse than contempt.

The silence left behind was crushing.

Elder He sat frozen, staring down at the stone table as the weight of the encounter pressed down on him.

His jaw clenched, his hands trembled and then with a snarl, he slammed his palm against the tabletop.

The teacups rattled violently, one tipping over and spilling across the stone.

His face burned with humiliation. Today was the most shameful day of his long life.

In the midst of Fang Yuan's suffocating aura, his body had betrayed him, he had actually wet himself like a frightened child.

He ground his teeth, his expression twisting.

He had thought that being backed by the Wu Alliance gave him the right to posture, to sneer, to push.

But in that moment, he had forgotten who sat across from him.

Not some upstart brat. Not a mere junior.

But a true Nascent Soul cultivator.

A cunning fox who had outwitted the Wu, He, Lin and Zhao families time and time again, dismantling their schemes and turning their plots to ash for ages.

And Elder He, in his arrogance, had stepped into the jaws of that fox... and left with his dignity in shreds.

Southern Pavilion Area:

The Southern Pavilion was alive with the whistle of blades and the faint shimmer of light.

Elder Sun stood in the center of the courtyard, his sword flashing as three brilliant rays split the air, an incomplete star.

Beside him, Elders Yang and Bo struggled to draw out two rays each, their forms sharp but unrefined.

The shape of the star was lopsided, fractured.

Without its full five rays, it looked more like a broken lantern than the dazzling constellation it was meant to be.

"Focus on defense before you chase after attacks," Fang Yuan's voice cut across the pavilion.

Elder Sun, sweat streaking his brow, let out a laugh. "Clan head, attack is the best form of defense!"

Fang Yuan's lips curved faintly. "And avoidance is the best form of attack. I know it sounds like nonsense, but strategy is born from such contradictions. Now, let's leave the sword for later."

His expression turned grave. "I sent you and a few others to search for my younger brother. How did it go?"

The swordlight dimmed as Elder Sun lowered his blade and bowed.

"He was too fast, clan head. We couldn't follow his tracks. But..."

He hesitated, exchanging glances with the others, before adding, "we made an incredible discovery. Do you remember Elder Fang Guo?"

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed, sharp as a drawn blade. "I do. What about him?"

Elder Sun's tone dropped. "He's dead. And from the traces we gathered, he had been working for the Crown Prince after his banishment. Not just him, the other elders who've been banished... they were all tied to the prince."

Silence fell.

Fang Yuan's gaze deepened, unreadable, before he murmured, "So... my brother is hunting down the elders I banished?"

Elder Sun swallowed and gave a slow nod. "Y-yes, clan head."

Fang Yuan stared into the distance for a long moment, his hands clasped behind his back.

"So you're saying Fang Guo is dead?" he asked again, voice quiet, as if to confirm.

"Yes," Elder Sun said, bowing lower. "We could do nothing. I apologize, clan head."

But Fang Yuan shook his head, his expression softening for a fleeting instant.

"No, no. This isn't your fault. If anything, my brother acted for the clan's benefit. Those traitors... deserved their fate."

His tone grew heavier, laced with steel. "But still—"

He paced a few steps, brows knitting.

"It's already likely too late. I should have seen this coming long ago."

His voice dropped to a low, grim murmur,

"Elder Fang Guo was no ordinary man. He managed the clan's finances for years. Every transaction, every resource, every weakness, he held it all in his hands. If he's been feeding the Crown Prince information all this time, then..."

Fang Yuan's eyes gleamed coldly, the gears of calculation spinning behind them.

"Then our enemies already know where to strike."

He stood still, silent for a breath, before muttering almost to himself, "And my brother... it looks like he's cleaning up the mess I should have prevented."

Fang Yuan exhaled softly, as though setting aside the burden in his chest.

"Well, what has happened has already passed," he said, calm but resolute.

"Dwelling on it won't change a thing. What matters now is strength. Focus on growing stronger. And... spread the word."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the pavilion, measuring each elder before speaking the next words.

"The Fang Family Core Cultivation Manual will be made available to all clan members, so long as they contribute enough to the clan."

The courtyard went still.

The sword practice ceased mid-swing. Even the air seemed to hold its breath.

Elder Sun blinked, stunned, his lips parting but no words escaping.

Elder Yang and Elder Bo exchanged wide-eyed looks, their hands trembling faintly around their swords.

The silence was broken by Fang Sun's voice, rising in disbelief, half-shout, half-gasp, "Clan head—! The Low Heaven-Grade Manual... the one only passed down to the clan heads... you mean that manual!?"

The shock reverberated like thunder.

That single manual was the Fang Clan's deepest foundation, the reason the clan had been able to stand tall against greater families for centuries.

To even speak of sharing it was unthinkable, yet Fang Yuan had said it as casually as one might pour tea!

Chapter 194: 194- Golden Core

Fang Sun stepped forward almost in a daze, his words stumbling over themselves.

"Clan head, what do you—why would you—?" He couldn't even finish a sentence.

The weight of what he had just heard left him utterly shaken.

Fang Yuan only smiled, calm as ever.

"You and the other elders are the core pillars of the Fang family. And I intend to bring the clan as a whole into an era where it will stand as the strongest family under heaven. Infamy, tyranny, kindness—it doesn't matter what methods we take. What matters is that, in the near future, when people hear the word Fang, they will either bow... or flee."

The words struck like thunder. Fang Sun froze, speechless.

Fang Yang and Fang Bo, who stood beside him.... were no better, they stared wide-eyed, unable to even breathe steadily.

Then, mid-thought, Fang Yuan suddenly froze. A thought struck him like a spark in dry grass.

Fang Lian.

His expression shifted ever so slightly, and he let out a quiet murmur.

"...Uh oh."

He turned on his heel, his tone brisk again.

"Alright, I only came to verify how my brother was doing. Keep practicing. If your progress is satisfactory, I'll have you spar against my little disciple next."

"Yes, Clan Head! Okay, Clan Head!" the three elders echoed in unison, their voices loud but still trembling faintly.

Without another word, Fang Yuan strode away, his robes trailing behind him, heading straight for Doctor Mu's residence.

He had promised the girl he would return by nightfall to check on her progress.

That had been months ago. Now, he returned not with guidance, but with news of her father's death.

A faint, unfamiliar sensation stirred within him, surprise, at himself. This... reluctance. It was an oddity for a cultivator of his age and power.

He pushed open the door to the small hut, the wood groaning softly.

Inside, Fang Lian sat in the lotus position, her face a mask of serene concentration. The air hummed with gathered Qi.

Then his gaze sharpened.

Seven golden spheres revolved around her in a flawless orbit, each one swift, steady, and precise.

They circled like stars in the heavens—seven golden spheres tracing a flawless orbit, never once colliding, their motion so seamless it defied mere chance.

Fang Yuan's lips curved in the faintest smile, a quiet murmur slipping from him.

"No way... she's already grasped the core principles."

To confirm, he flicked a finger, sending a fine, deliberate thread of his qi drifting toward her.

The moment it neared, the seven spheres flared, converging as one and intercepting it in an instant.

He felt a sharp sting rebound against him, like being pricked by a needle.

His brows rose and then he chuckled under his breath, quietly astonished.

He hadn't even shown her the third form yet, only the first and second stages of the Golden Shell Armor and here she was, already getting the gist of the third technique on her own.

Fang Yuan did not interrupt her meditation. Instead, he stood silently for a long while, watching.

Pride gleamed openly in his eyes, a warmth rare for him.

At last, he pulled out a set of formation flags and placed them carefully around her.

Immediately, the surrounding spiritual qi surged, funneling toward her like a tide.

A Spirit-Gathering Formation.

Satisfied, he cast one final glance at her serene figure. His smile deepened.

But just as he was about to turn away, his sharp instincts pricked.

Something suddenly felt amiss.

His gaze snapped back to her and his eyes narrowed in disbelief.

She was... breaking through.

For a heartbeat, exhilaration surged through him. A third golden core for the Fang family?

The thought flashed like lightning across his mind, and for an instant he felt the thrill of glory.

But the excitement died as quickly as it came.

Her body was trembling, veins glowing faintly under her skin as though fire had been forced into fragile glass tubes.

Her meridians swelled grotesquely, pushing toward collapse. The seven spheres around her spun erratically, no longer the graceful orbits of moments ago, but a chaotic storm.

She was compressing her qi far too quickly.

Driven not by steady cultivation, but by sheer, reckless desperation.

Raw energy lashed out from her body in violent sparks, each ripple carrying the weight of self-destruction.

This wasn't a breakthrough... it was suicide wrapped in brilliance.

Fang Yuan's expression hardened, a knife-edge of focus slicing through the moment.

No... she hasn't prepared anything! She'll destroy herself before she even takes the step forward!

He extended a single finger.

With the precise control of a Hollow Spirit cultivator, Fang Yuan pushed out a thread of divine sense thinner than a hair and sharper than a blade.

It pierced into the raging chaos of her dantian.

When it came into contact, the effect was instantaneous.

The maelstrom of wild Qi, moments from tearing her apart, froze as if the heavens themselves had issued a command.

What had been a storm threatening to shred her meridians suddenly found direction.

The spiraling currents bent, curved, and locked into a rhythm dictated by his will.

Like a tyrant king setting order to a riot, his divine sense forced equilibrium where there had been none.

The violent Qi shuddered once... twice... and then collapsed inward.

A silent shockwave burst from her core, gentle yet absolute, washing across the hut in a ripple of power.

The fractured sphere in her dantian, once unstable and splintering, drew together under his invisible hand.

Cracks vanished. Rough edges smoothed.

What remained was no longer fragile, but radiant, spinning with the majestic glow of a perfect golden core.

The oppressive aura that had threatened to annihilate her body vanished in an instant.

What replaced it was profound, steady, and alive. Fang Lian's breathing calmed.

The grotesque swelling in her meridians receded as golden light trickled through her veins, healing what had been moments from rupture.

Her flesh hardened, her spirit tempered, her foundation solidified, all automatically, guided by the rhythm of her new core.

Fang Yuan lowered his hand, his face as impassive as a mountain.

Yet in the depths of his eyes, an ember of approval flickered.

She had done it.

At last, her eyes fluttered open.

They were no longer the eyes of a trembling novice.

They carried weight, depth, and a golden sheen that echoed the perfect core now residing within her.

Chapter 195: 195-

Her eyelids trembled before opening fully, golden light flickering faintly within her gaze.

The first thing she saw was him, Fang Yuan standing there right in front of her, unmoving and absolutely still.

Her breath caught, her newly tempered core thrumming with awe and pressure under his presence.

She quickly pressed her palms together and bowed low, her voice carrying a mix of shock, reverence, and lingering disbelief.

"Master...!"

The word slipped out sharper than she intended, edged with the weight of her sudden breakthrough and the realization that he had witnessed it all.

Fang Yuan studied her quietly, his expression unreadable save for the faintest trace of a smile tugging at his lips.

His gaze swept over her, measuring not only the golden core now pulsing within her but the steadiness of her bearing.

"You've crossed a threshold," he said at last, his tone calm yet resonant, carrying both judgment and approval.

"But do not mistake fortune for mastery. The core may be perfect, but the cultivator must still rise to meet it."

Fang Lian bit her lip, nodding quickly, the fire in her heart stirred higher by both his words and his silent approval.

For the first time, she felt she had not just followed in his shadow, she had stepped onto the path where she could one day stand tall beside it.

From the side room of the hut, the sound of a stool scraping across the floor broke the silence.

An old man in plain hemp robes shuffled out, his back slightly hunched but his eyes still keen with clarity.

His steps were slow but steady, each one carrying the calm of a life long lived outside the struggles of cultivation.

Doctor Mu.

He glanced between Fang Yuan and Fang Lian, a knowing smile tugging faintly at his weathered lips.

"Ah... so noisy in here. Sit, both of you. I'll brew some tea."

Fang Yuan inclined his head faintly, preparing to excuse himself. "There's no need, Doctor Mu. I've business to attend to, so I'll be on my—"

"Nonsense." Doctor Mu cut him off with a wave of his hand, his tone as natural as breathing. "If the heavens didn't collapse while you were gone, they won't collapse in the time it takes for a pot of tea. Sit."

Fang Yuan paused, then let out a small breath, the corner of his mouth quirking.

He lowered himself onto the nearby wooden bench with the composure of someone indulging a mortal whim.

Fang Lian, still trembling slightly from her breakthrough, scrambled up to her feet. "Teacher Mu, allow me to help—"

The old physician shot her a look that silenced her instantly.

"Girl, sit down. Your veins are still hot from tempering. You'll spill more tea on the floor than in the cups. Let these old bones handle it."

Chastened, Fang Lian sank obediently onto the bench beside her master, her head bowed, though a faint smile betrayed her relief at the old man's familiar scolding.

From behind the thin partition, the muted clatter of crockery and the faint sound of water being poured drifted out.

Soon, the comforting aroma of roasting leaves wafted through the hut, curling warmly into the air.

Doctor Mu emerged a moment later, balancing a clay teapot with the ease of long habit.

He shuffled over to the low table and set it down with a soft clink, the steam rising lazily from its spout.

He poured the amber liquid into three chipped cups, the fragrance of the tea wrapping the small hut in a warmth that seemed almost fragile against the lingering weight of cultivation.

The old man set the pot down, straightened, and then, instead of returning immediately to his stool, he gave Fang Yuan a long, measured look.

Slowly, he sat across from them, his knees creaking faintly as he settled.

"Fang boy," he began, his voice rasping with age but carrying a tone sharp enough to cut. "Do you know how long this girl stayed outside over the past two months?"

Fang Yuan's hand froze over the cup he had just lifted. His brows furrowed slightly. "Surely not... not the full two months?"

"Oh yes." Doctor Mu nodded gravely, before giving a sharp, humorless chuckle.

"A full two months. Day and night. Rain, cold, sun—it didn't matter. She sat like a stone statue."

Before Fang Yuan could respond, the old man's hand shot out with surprising speed for his age, and he pinched Fang Lian by the ear.

"Ah! Ow—ow!" Fang Lian winced, her eyes widening, but she didn't push his hand away. Instead, she sat rigid, her expression caught between shame and helplessness.

"I told her, again and again, 'come inside before you catch a cold.' But did she listen? No." Doctor Mu gave her ear an extra tug for emphasis, his tone halfway between exasperation and affection.

"These old bones can't keep up with such stubbornness anymore."

Finally, he released her.

Fang Lian immediately drew her shoulders back and let out a sigh of relief, rubbing the reddened tip of her ear.

Doctor Mu snorted, "Hmph. Whatever you're feeding this child, Fang boy, it's turned her into a hot-headed rock."

Doctor Mu lifted his cup with steady hands and took a slow sip, letting the warmth settle in his chest.

When he set it down again, his tone shifted, no longer the lighthearted grumbling of a village physician, but measured, deliberate, and respectful.

"Clan Head Fang," he said with a polite nod, "there is something I would request of you."

At once, Fang Yuan straightened, his casual air hardening into the dignified bearing of a leader. His gaze sharpened as he inclined his head.

"Doctor Mu, you are a benefactor to the Fang Clan. Speak freely. Whatever it is, I will do everything within my power to see it done."

The old man met his eyes, unflinching despite the pressure of Fang Yuan's presence.

After a pause, he exhaled softly and spoke the words that weighed on him.

"Clan Head Fang... I wish for my grandson to become your personal disciple."

Chapter 196: 196-

"Your grandson?" Fang Yuan's brows rose, genuine surprise slipping through his composure. "I didn't know you had a grandson."

The fact that a benefactor of the Fang Clan had a family of his own, a family he had never once been told about, caught even the clan head off guard.

Doctor Mu chuckled, the lines on his weathered face deepening. "I adopted one a while ago."

Fang Yuan tilted his head, studying him with curiosity. "Adopted a grandson... but you didn't bring him here to live with you?"

The old physician's eyes gleamed with dry amusement. "Hah. That boy refused. Said he had no wish to stay in a cramped hut with an old man."

Fang Yuan's lips twitched in a half-smile. "Which is precisely why I've told you again and again to move into the core area and accept a proper mansion."

But Doctor Mu only waved him off with a soft laugh. "No, no. I like this place. I like this hut. Too much noise in the core."

The clan head glanced around the modest, worn room, then exhaled a long breath through his nose.

He clicked his tongue softly in defeat.

"...Hmph. True enough. This place is more peaceful."

After a pause, he nodded, resolve firming in his tone. "Very well, then. I'll take your grandson in as my personal disciple. But I expect him to be genuinely dedicated. He must have an eagerness to learn... and the willingness to listen."

Doctor Mu's grin widened, mischief sparking in his aged eyes. "Don't worry about that. If he doesn't listen, you can even beat him."

Fang Yuan was mid-sip of tea and nearly choked.

He coughed, sputtering as a spray of tea escaped him, startling Fang Lian who had been sitting in polite silence until now.

Doctor Mu leaned back smugly, stroking his beard as if he had planned the moment. "and if, just in case you break a bone or two from that boy, it's fine. I'm a doctor for a reason."

Fang Yuan set his cup down with deliberate calm, though his eyes still held a glint of amusement.

"Surely you jest, Doctor Mu. I do not strike juniors, unless it's during battle."

Doctor Mu lifted his own cup and sipped leisurely, his smile sly.

"And every day is a battle, Clan Head Fang. Every single day." He repeated it, nodding to himself as though imparting a life truth.

Fang Yuan arched a brow at the old man's dramatics, then turned toward Fang Lian.

She was cradling her cup in both hands, sipping carefully. When she noticed his gaze, she blinked up at him in mild confusion.

"Worry not, disciple," Fang Yuan said, his voice steady, almost solemn. "No matter what happens, I will never raise my hand against you."

Doctor Mu barked out a laugh before she could respond. "And you had better not! Lay even a finger on her, and I'll make sure you regret it!"

His words were blunt, but his eyes were filled with the warmth of an old man protecting his own blood.

For Fang Lian, it was nothing new.

Doctor Mu had raised her as though she were his own daughter, teaching her medicine, crafts, and the small, steady skills of survival long before cultivation had entered her life.

She ducked her head quickly, hiding the small smile tugging at her lips as she took another sip of tea.

"So," Fang Yuan said at last, his tone dry, as though confirming the absurdity he'd just heard, "it's acceptable to strike the boy... but not the girl?"

Doctor Mu snorted. "Of course! That boy's skin is thick enough to take a beating. But this one..." he gestured at Fang Lian, his eyes softening as they landed on her, "how could anyone even think of laying a hand on such a fragile girl? Hah! The very idea is outrageous."

Fang Lian flushed faintly, lowering her gaze to her tea.

Fang Yuan fell silent, caught between exasperation and amusement. For once, words failed him.

He could only shake his head, utterly speechless before the old man's shameless partiality.

Doctor Mu leaned back with a mischievous grin, the lines on his weathered face deepening.

"What's this, Clan Head Fang? You act as if you've never tasted a good scolding. Didn't your elders thrash you when you were a brat?"

Fang Yuan's lips curved ever so slightly.

He set his cup down with care, his gaze distant for a breath.

"During my youth," he said evenly, "I was already ahead of the elders in cultivation. Even if they wanted to hit me, they couldn't."

For a moment, silence fell.

Then Doctor Mu threw his head back and laughed, the sound rich and unrestrained, filling the little hut like rolling thunder.

"Hah! No wonder you turned out like this! The heavens really are unfair."

Fang Lian blinked between the two men, caught between awe at her master's casual statement and amusement at Doctor Mu's mirth.

Doctor Mu shook his head, chuckling as he sipped his tea.

"Mm, then I suppose I'll just have to make sure my apprentice here isn't spoiled in the same way. If she grows up half as arrogant as you were, Fang boy, I'll drag her back to this hut myself."

Fang Yuan's lips curved into a faint smirk.

"Heh... I'm not arrogant. In fact, I'm the most humble person you'll ever meet. Don't worry—your favorite and only apprentice will learn humility from me, better than anyone else."

Doctor Mu froze for half a breath before bursting into raucous laughter, nearly spilling his tea.

"You truly are humble, humble enough that you need to declare it aloud! Hah! Now I'm suddenly worried for poor Fang Lian."

He let out a long, exaggerated sigh, though the glimmer of mirth in his eyes betrayed it for the act it was.

Beside them, Fang Lian lowered her cup, blinking between master and doctor with exasperation bubbling in her chest.

(...Hey. Do I not get a say in any of this?)

Chapter 197: 197-

After a few minutes had passed, the two rose from the low bench, setting their cups aside. Fang Yuan inclined his head in farewell while Fang Lian bowed deeply.

"Take care of yourself, Doctor Mu," Fang Yuan said simply.

"Hmph. Just don't ruin my apprentice, Fang boy," the old man replied with a crooked grin, waving them off.

The hut door creaked shut behind them, and the air met their faces, cool, carrying the faint scent of pine.

They walked in silence for a time, the only sounds their footsteps on the narrow path.

At last, Fang Lian glanced up, worry soft in her eyes.

"Master... Doctor Mu doesn't look well. Is it really for the best that we leave him alone?"

Fang Yuan's gaze stayed forward, unreadable.

"...It isn't. But I don't know why—he's drunk."

"Drunk?" Lian tilted her head, puzzled. "Then...?"

He exhaled slowly, as though bracing himself.

"I have news for you."

Her brows knit, sensing the weight in his tone. "News?"

Fang Yuan stopped walking. For a moment, the wind rustled the trees, filling the silence he left.

His lips parted, then pressed shut again. At last, he drew a deep breath, his eyes dark.

"...Your father."

The words caught in his throat. He couldn't finish.

Fang Lian's steps faltered.

She looked at him, her voice trembling though she tried to keep it steady.

"My father? What... what happened to him?"

Fang Yuan's lips pressed into a thin line.

He stood there for a long while, the silence stretching taut between them. Finally, he spoke:

"Your father is dead."

The words dropped like a hammer, heavy and final.

Fang Lian did not cry at once. She simply stood still, her eyes wide, unblinking.

Then, in a voice so calm it startled even herself, she murmured,

"Ah... I see."

Her lips quivered faintly. She forced them into a curve that resembled a smile, but it trembled, brittle as glass.

"He... he had it coming, right, Master? Please... please tell me he did something wrong."

Her voice cracked as tears welled and spilled, sliding down her cheeks unchecked. "Tell me he was wicked, tell me he was a criminal—anything. So I can hate him instead of... instead of..."

The words dissolved into sobs.

Before she could collapse under the weight of her grief, Fang Yuan's hand moved. He grasped her head firmly, pulling her against his chest.

His arms, so often crossed in command or clasped behind his back in detachment, now wrapped around her with quiet finality.

"Master..." she stammered, her body trembling as though the question itself were tearing her apart.

"Please... please tell me he was a criminal. Please."

Her tears soaked into his robes, her small hands clutching the fabric as if her grip alone could anchor her against the storm.

Fang Yuan's gaze lifted to the horizon, unreadable, his hand tightening on her shoulder.

Fang Yuan's voice was low, steady, almost too steady.

"Your father... was not a bad man. But he stood against me. He and several elders formed a faction, trying to strip me of authority, even seeking to impeach me. When I defeated them, I did not take their lives. I allowed them to walk free, under one condition—that they leave the Fang Clan and never return."

His eyes darkened as he continued.

"Later, I learned they chose to work under the Crown Prince. But understand this—betrayal is not always born of malice. Sometimes it is fear, or pride, or simply a different vision for the clan's future."

Fang Lian trembled, her lips parting. "But, Master... what you've said—it sounds like treason. Doesn't that... warrant death?"

Fang Yuan placed a hand on her shoulder, his expression heavy but calm.

"Perhaps. But remember this, disciple: judgment is not so simple. A man can stand against me without being a criminal. A father can make mistakes without being a monster. Do not let your grief twist into hatred—it will poison you faster than any enemy."

Fang Yuan's voice softened, carrying none of the weight of politics, only that of a master speaking to his disciple.

"Your father was not wicked, child. He stood against me, yes—he sought to challenge my rule, perhaps out of pride, perhaps because he thought he was right."

His gaze lingered on her tear-streaked face, and his hand rose, resting gently atop her head.

"I will not lie to you and call him a hero. But neither will I stain his memory with false crimes to make things easier.

He was simply... a man who made choices. And now, he is gone."

Fang Lian's shoulders quivered, her breath hitching. "So... I can't hate him?"

"You don't need to," Fang Yuan murmured. His thumb brushed away a tear at the corner of her eye. "Hate is heavy, and it binds tighter than chains. Mourn him if you must. Miss him if your heart calls for it. But do not let sorrow fester into poison."

Slowly, her trembling eased. The tears did not stop, but her breathing steadied. She leaned into his palm, her voice faint but steady.

"...Yes, Master."

For a moment, the world was quiet, only the sound of their footsteps on the dirt road, master and disciple walking forward together, carrying both grief and hope in equal measure.

Fang Yuan's hand lingered as he brushed away the last of her tears. His voice gentled, steady as stone.

"Lian'er... listen well. I have already recalled the bodies of our fallen elders who were banished. Their remains rest once more beneath Fang soil. And those families who left with them... I am calling them back, too."

Fang Lian blinked at him, her eyes still red but sharp with surprise. "...You're bringing them back? After everything?"

He nodded, expression unreadable. "The Fang Clan has lost too many pillars to keep bleeding itself with old grudges. The dead deserve rest, and the living deserve a home. If we keep pushing them away, we will have no family left to protect when true enemies come."

Her lips parted, conflicted. "But Master... will they not resent you? Will they not bring the same betrayal again?"

Fang Yuan's gaze turned distant, the weight of centuries flickering in his eyes.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps grief has tempered their pride. Either way, hatred will only rot us from within. I would rather risk their resentment than let our clan be divided forever."

He looked down at her, his voice low but certain.

"This is not about kindness. It is about survival and unity. The Fang Clan must rise as one, or it will fall as many."

Chapter 198: 198- Hypocrite [1]

The air in the ancestral hall was thick with the scent of incense and unshed tears.

Twelve urns, carved from dark jade, sat in a solemn row upon the high altar.

Each bore a name, a reminder of what it once was.

Fang Yuan stood before the assembled mourners, his figure a pillar of stark black against the grey stone.

His voice, when it came, was not loud, but it carried through the cavernous hall with the weight of finality, echoing off the tablets of countless ancestors who bore witness.

"Fang Guo," he intoned, the name hanging in the air. "Fang Shen. Fang Lo. Fang Rin." He did not rush.

He gave each name its due, a somber bell tolling for the departed. "Fang Wu. Fang Shi. Fang Kyu."

He continued, until all twelve names had been called.

"These elders... they met a tragic end, not at the hands of outsiders, but at the hand of my very own brother. To stand here and hold a funeral for them, some may see it as hypocrisy. Perhaps they are right.

But I will speak plainly. Ever since those elders left the Fang Clan, we have faced hardship after hardship. And in those months, I often found myself questioning... was the choice I made then truly the right one?

I did not expect their journey to end like this. I did not expect their lives to be cut short outside these walls, under my brother's hand."

A silence followed, heavier than before.

"We have bled enough," Fang Yuan said, his gaze sweeping over the small cluster of widows and their relatives.

Their faces were etched with grief, fear, and a bitterness that had festered during exile.

"The grudges of the past have cost us our pillars. Your husbands, these elders, their journey began with a choice against me. It ended in a tragedy far from home. But they were Fang, in blood and in spirit. Their place is here, with their ancestors. And so is yours. I urge you to lay down your resentment. Come home. Rejoin your family."

For a moment, there was only the sputter of a candlewick.

Then, a woman at the front snapped. Her face, pale and drawn, contorted with raw fury.

"Home?" she shrieked, the word tearing from her throat. "You and your brother are a murderer! You think we are fools? You think we don't know what you truly want? To finish what your brother started? Think again!"

The accusation hung, sharp and poisonous. Fang Yuan did not flinch.

He merely watched her, his expression unreadable, his calm a stark contrast to her hysterics.

He offered no defense, no denial. His silence was a void that swallowed her anger whole.

Another woman rose. Older, her movements slow and staggering, her eyes raw from crying.

She did not look at Fang Yuan but at the urn that held her husband.

"Oh, great Fang Clan Head," she whispered, her voice raspy with exhaustion. "For what reason do you truly call for us? We are so tired. We have lost our husbands to the machinations of your own blood. If... if it is to nip the problem in the bud..."

She finally lifted her gaze, her eyes pleading for an end to the torment. "Then please, make our ending swift. Let us rest in peace alongside them."

From the side, Lin Zhaoyue shot to her feet, her patience evaporating.

"Nip the problem in the bud?" she scoffed, her voice cutting through the hall.

"You think we're blind enough not to notice none of you brought your children? You hid them away, thinking us monsters! Besides, killing you or your child would do us neither good nor harm, so at least speak with—"

"Zhaoyue." Fang Yuan's voice was a low command, a blade of ice that severed her sentence.

It was the only sign of his will imposed upon the scene. He did not look at her, but his tone brooked no argument.

She clicked her tongue, the sound loud in the quiet, and sat back down, crossing her arms tightly.

Fang Yuan's attention returned to the widows.

The brief flicker of emotion that had surfaced at the woman's wish for death, a deep, profound regret was gone, smoothed back into a mask of somber resolve.

"Then there is nothing more to say," he said, his voice even, devoid of anger or persuasion.

"If none here wish to rejoin the Fang family, I will grant you this final opportunity. Take your husbands' ashes. Leave this place. And from this day forward, you and your lines will no longer bear the Fang name. The protection and wrath of this clan will never touch you again. You will be free."

The older woman who had spoken first was the one to move.

Without a word, she walked slowly to the altar, her steps echoing. She paused before an urn, her trembling hand resting on the cool jade.

Then, she gathered it carefully into her arms, clutching it to her chest as if it were the last warmth in the world.

She did not look back as she walked out of the ancestral hall, out of the Fang family's history.

One by one, the others followed. A silent, grieving procession.

They came forward, collected the urns, and turned their backs on their ancestral home.

They chose freedom over a fractured unity, isolation over a peace they could not trust.

Fang Yuan stood motionless, watching them go. He did not stop them.

He did not speak again. He simply let them leave, each departure a quiet failure, a ghost he would have to learn to live with.

The heavy doors of the ancestral hall groaned shut, sealing away the sight of the retreating widows.

The silence they left behind was profound, broken only by the whisper of burning incense.

Of the twelve urns, eight had been carried away into self-imposed exile.

The four that remained did so not out of loyalty, but out of a fear so potent it had kept their families from even daring to attend the funeral.

Their absence was a louder, more damning statement than any screamed accusation.

Fang Yuan stood with his back to the remaining urns, his gaze fixed on the intricate carvings of the clan's history on the far wall.

He had offered them peace. He had offered them unity. They had answered with fear and silence. The Chapter of reconciliation was closed.

The soft click of heels on stone echoed as Lin Zhaoyue stepped forward.

The frustration she had been forced to swallow earlier was gone, replaced by a cold, razor-sharp focus.

She came to a stop beside him, her posture straight, her voice low and devoid of all sentiment.

It was the voice of a general reporting readiness.

"Husband," she said. "I'm ready on my side."

Fang Yuan did not turn immediately.

He let a final moment of silence hang over the empty hall, a quiet funeral rite for the hope that had just died.

Then, he slowly turned his head to regard her. The somber regret that had clouded his features during the proceedings had vanished, smoothed into an expression of chilling calm.

"Good," he replied, his voice equally low, equally devoid of warmth. "Let's make a quick sweep of the Wu pests then."

With that, he turned his back fully on the ancestral altar, on the four abandoned urns, and on the failed diplomacy of the day.

Chapter 199: 199- Hypocrite [2]

Fang Chen was stunned by what Fang Yuan had just said.

He rose to his feet, trembling slightly, and started toward Fang Yuan who was already about to leave.

But before he could take more than two steps, a slender figure blocked his path.

Lin Zhaoyue.

Her gaze was calm, her poise effortless, yet her presence weighed on him like a mountain.

"Uncle Chen," she said lightly, her lips curving into a faint smile, "wait. What do you want?"

"I need to speak with my nephew." Fang Chen forced his voice steady, his jaw tightening as he took another step forward. "Step aside."

The smile on Lin Zhaoyue's face deepened, but her eyes... her eyes sharpened like blades.

"Here, let's play a game, if you move, you can go."

Before Fang Chen could answer, her sleeve flicked ever so slightly.

In the next instant, his entire body froze where he stood.

His muscles strained, golden core Qi roaring within him as he tried to break free but it was useless.

It was as though invisible chains of iron had wrapped around his limbs, nailing him to the floor.

Lin Zhaoyue's expression did not change. She leaned forward, her voice dropping into a deliberate cadence, each word heavy as though pressing into his bones.

"You lost so, you do not need to speak to my husband anymore."

Fang Chen's eyes widened. Veins bulged on his neck as he tried to move, his teeth grinding audibly.

Sweat beaded on his forehead from the sheer pressure pressing down on him.

Fang Chen reeled. "What? What do you mean, no? I am his uncle! I have the right—I am his blood!"

His voice rose, half outrage, half desperation.

"I know," Lin Zhaoyue said, her smile widening by a fraction.

"You are his uncle... I know that," she continued, her tone as sharp as earlier.

His breathing grew ragged, his Qi thrashing desperately against the invisible force pinning him. His face twisted, half rage, half fear.

"And I also know... what it is you want to know."

Her words fell slowly, deliberately, like thunderclaps in the silence.

Fang Chen's lips parted, but no sound came out. His throat felt locked, his body trembling from the suffocating weight of her Nascent Soul aura.

Lin Zhaoyue tilted her head, her smile returning but her eyes never softened.

"Here. Let me give you a hint."

She leaned in closer, her voice a whisper that cut deeper than a shout.

"My husband... never really cared about the merger."

The invisible weight on Fang Chen lifted in the next instant, and she turned her back on him, walking out as though nothing had happened.

Fang Chen collapsed to one knee, his chest heaving as he gulped down air, shaken to the core.

Despite still being a Golden Core cultivator, he realized the truth with burning clarity, before Nascent Soul monster, he would be as helpless as an insect.

Fang Jingyi rushed forward and caught her brother before he could collapse to the ground.

But Lin Zhaoyue's voice drifted back, cold and imperious, echoing in the air like a lingering shadow.

"Don't bother my husband with unnecessary things."

The last trace of her aura faded, and she was gone.

After a while, beneath the Phoenix Soul Pavilion.

The stench hit Fang Yuan the moment he reached the stairwell.

Thick, cloying, and rancid, the unmistakable smell of rotting flesh. He paused at the entrance, his silhouette framed against the faint torchlight, his expression unreadable.

Then he stepped inside.

The air grew heavier the deeper he went.

In the corner of the dim, stone-walled chamber lay a pile of dead animals, twisted and half-decayed, their bones jutting grotesquely from torn hides.

Beside them, in a rusted cell, a young man clutched his stomach, retching violently as if his body could no longer bear the stench.

Across the chamber, another cell housed an old man who sat slumped against the wall, his eyes dull, the fire of resistance long extinguished.

Fang Yuan's voice, low and steady, broke the silence as he approached.

"Gu Jian. Gu Lanyue. So this... is what you've been reduced to."

He stopped at Gu Jian's cell, his gaze piercing the younger man.

"Gu Jian, are you ready to talk now?"

The prisoner's bloodshot eyes snapped open, burning with hatred.

He spat onto the floor and snarled, his words laced with venom.

"May your dao heart shatter to dust. May your soul be severed from reincarnation itself. May your cursed bloodline be erased from the great cycle of heaven and earth!"

Fang Yuan did not flinch.

Instead, he lowered himself into a crouch, his expression calm, almost indifferent.

"After today, the Gu family will be no more. I don't blame you for their deaths, it was my choice. So don't trouble yourself with guilt. I'm only telling you this... so you can die in peace."

Gu Jian's composure cracked instantly.

His eyes widened, and he pressed against the bars in desperation.

"Wait! No! Please—please, I'll speak! I'll speak! I'll tell you—why your parents died!" His voice broke, tears spilling down his face as panic took hold.

Fang Yuan rose smoothly, already turning away. His tone was flat, almost weary.

"I am no longer curious. If you wish to speak... do so when you meet them in the afterlife."

Gu Jian's cries rose in desperation, but Fang Yuan ignored him, stepping instead toward the other corner.

His eyes fell upon Gu Lanyue.

The old man lifted his head weakly as Fang Yuan drew near.

Fang Yuan's gaze was unreadable.

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper, one that slithered into the cell like poison.

"I'll make sure to tear out every tendon from your body... and weave them into a crown. Then I'll place it upon your son's head."

Gu Jian's frantic shouts from behind echoed through the chamber, but Fang Yuan stood unmoving, his attention fixed on Gu Lanyue alone.

Gu Lanyue's lips were pale, his breathing shallow, yet his voice still carried a thread of steel.

"Young Fang... what do you gain from all this?" He coughed, a wet, rattling sound. "What meaning is there in torment?"

For a long moment, silence hung between them.

Then Fang Yuan exhaled slowly, straightening his robes with measured calm.

His expression remained impassive, but his words fell heavy.

"Why? ...Hmm maybe because I am bored."

With that, he turned and strode toward the exit.

The cries, the curses, the desperate pleading behind him clung to the damp stone walls, but Fang Yuan never once looked back.

Chapter 200: 200- System [1]

Back in his office, Fang Yuan sat alone with his gaze fixated on a long, lacquered box.

Its surface practically gleamed faintly, the royal seal burned into the wood like an ever-watchful eye.

His fingers tapped the desk once before he leaned forward, sliding the box open.

Inside lay a sword, old, weathered, its blade rusted almost beyond recognition.

Another rusted sword.

Fang Yuan's lips curved faintly as he muttered,

"Du Juan's sword was the same when I found her. Rusted, worn down... discarded."

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing.

"Is rusted sword getting popular lately?"

The words had barely left his mouth when the sword trembled violently.

—BAAM!

A blinding radiance burst forth, a pillar of light shooting straight through the roof.

The heavens themselves seemed to split, and for an instant, the brilliance was no less than that of a true Heaven-grade weapon's awakening.

Except it was not one.

Fang Yuan's expression twisted cold, venom dripping from every word as he glared into the torrent of light.

"So this was your plan all along, Crown Prince. To stage the birth of a Heaven-grade weapon here, in my territory, then let the greed of cultivators and opportunists descend to strike me down.

And when the dust settles, you unveil the true Heaven-grade treasure you've been cultivating in secret. The world calls you its savior while their resentment festers against me."

His voice dropped lower, sharper.

"Because cultivating a Heaven-grade weapon is not glory, it is a crime against humanity itself. It demands blood. Endless blood. Wherever one manifests, it is always built upon mountains of corpses."

His eyes burned crimson as the realization deepened.

"That was your design. To brand me as a blood-path cultivator, to paint me the villain. You strike me down, play the hero, and bask in the worship of the masses."

His teeth clenched, the fury in his gaze almost tangible.

"Very good. Very good! Then I am glad my brother seized that blade instead of you. Better it rests in his hands than be tainted by yours."

The furious light raged for several heartbeats before fading, leaving silence in its wake.

Fang Yuan's expression never wavered, cold and furious on the surface.

But within, a sly smirk curled in the depths of his mind.

Tsk. Did you really think I wouldn't see through your little scheme, Qin Hai? I know you're watching me right now, listening through that cursed sword of yours. Go on, then. Why don't you guess why I have never opened this 'gift' of yours until today.

None of it reached his lips though.

Outwardly, he maintained his mask of anger, storming out of the chamber with heavy steps.

The moment the door shut behind him, the fury drained from his face.

His expression returned to that of a calm and then he lifted a hand and swiped the air.

A golden screen shimmered into existence before him.

[System Status]

Host: Fang Yuan

Realm: Initial Hollow Spirit Realm

Root: Heavenly Root

Hidden Physique: None

Martial Techniques:

Swift Step Footwork (Low-grade Black)

Golden Shell Armor (Mid-grade Earth)

Tyrant's Light Sword (Low-grade Black)

System Points: 7,400

Faith Points: 46,000

[Faith System – Heavenly Mandate Scripture] (Saint Rank)

Current Rank: 1 / 9

Faith Exp Needed for Level 2: 100,000

Current Faith Exp: 12,666 / 100,000

Unlocked Abilities:

Authority Domain (Passive) – Foes within one meter will be instantly identified and locked under your cultivation aura.

[Fang Clan]

Head: Fang Yuan (Strongest cultivator in Coldwind City)

Vassal: Lin Clan

Clan Faith in Their Head: 75% (Medium)

Daily Generation: 600 Faith Exp, 4,000 Faith Points

Exceptional Believers (Faith > 99):

Fang Chen – 500 Faith Exp, 1,000 Faith Points daily

Du Juan – 500 Faith Exp, 1,000 Faith Points daily

The golden screen shimmered before his eyes.

[Congratulations, Host. Reward for reaching Level 1 has been unlocked.

Would you like to claim now?]

Fang Yuan tapped *Claim*.

A heartbeat later, his knees buckled.

He crashed to the ground, his body wracked with agony.

An unbearable weight bore down on him, as though mountains pressed against his very bones.

As someone in a hollow Spirit Realm, he should have been granted inhuman pain tolerance, yet this pain tore past all defenses.

For two long minutes, he endured. Every breath was fire, every twitch of muscle a blade.

And then, release.

Gasping, drenched in sweat, Fang Yuan forced himself back to his feet.

His body trembled, but his eyes sharpened.

Something was different. His frame felt... lighter. Not weaker, lighter and free.

The golden screen pulsed once more.

[You have been infused with the Faith Dao Bone.]

Fang Yuan froze.

"...Wait. What?"

Dao Bone.

His breath hitched. *A Dao Bone? In me?*

And then he felt it, his dantian quivered, expanding and contracting as though it were a living lung.

His meridians burned, yet not with fire, this was something different, as though every vessel in his body was being carved anew by unseen chisels.

A vibration thrummed deep in his marrow, resonating with his very skeleton.

It was not spiritual qi, nor blood essence. It was something stranger, weightless yet oppressive, formless yet absolute.

Faith.

The collective belief of thousands, the intangible force he had been harvesting, now condensed into bone, becoming part of him.

His frame felt lighter, yes, but also unshakable, as though his body itself could anchor heaven and earth.

Every breath pulled with it whispers, not words, but echoes.

The faith of his clan.

Their reverence, their trust, their worship... it was flowing through him.

His hand trembled slightly as he lifted it before his eyes.

For the first time in his life, Fang Yuan felt the absurd illusion that if he willed it, the world would listen.

"...So this is the Faith Dao Bone." His voice was low, tinged with awe, but his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"The system truly plays with things beyond mortal comprehension."

The golden screen slowly faded away.

Fang Yuan exhaled, his lips curling into a faint smirk as he muttered,

"I wonder what the other rewards will be like... if the reward for level one was this amazing."